ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY AND IDENTITY CONFLICTS IN UNIVERSITY RESIDENT ASSISTANTS

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Introduction

“Tap,” “tap,” “tap.”

I roll over, and check my phone. It’s 3:00 a.m. on what is technically a Thursday morning.

“Tap,” “tap,” “tap.”

Who could be knocking on my door?

I almost ignore the noise and fall back asleep before I remember that I am on duty. I tumble out of bed, only having slept for two hours due to the amount of homework I had to finish for the next day. I grope for my glasses in the dark. Grabbing them from under my pillow, I peer through the peephole into the hallway of the residence hall to see who is knocking.

I see one of my residents nervously looking off to the side. I open the door squinting into the intrusive light of the hallway.

“What’s wrong?” I ask concerned, but groggy. I can sense her anxiety, which helps to wake me up.

“Um, there’s a naked guy in my bed.”

What? “What?”

“A naked guy came into my room and crawled into my bed.”

Stunned I ask, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she responds more relaxed now. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“Well, let’s go see,” I say as I leave my room for hers. I wrack my brain for a way to handle this situation.
I walk to her open door and peer into her unlit room. From the light in the hallway I can see the silhouette of a boy, who is, in fact, nude except for a blanket covering his more sensitive areas. I pause. What am I supposed to do? I know I have to act confidently. I am in charge in this situation. I am the Resident Assistant (RA); it is my job to handle emergency situations and resident issues amongst many other duties. But, I have no clue what I should do.

Maybe I should check on him? He is probably drunk. But what if he’s violent? I’m a girl. Will I get in trouble for seeing him naked? I really do not want to see that. No one is awake. Should I wake someone? Is he breathing?

I pause, peering into the room to see if I can see his chest bloat with that tell-tale sign of life, squinting so I do not have to actually enter the room.

Yes. Okay. He’s alive.

I have no clue what I am doing.

I’ll call the police.

“I’m going to call the police.”

“Ohay,” she says, and we wait in tired, flustered silence for the campus police to arrive.

The officers show up, and start asking the questions I should have asked from the get-go. What happened? What is his name? Is he drunk? Does he live in this hall? After thirty more minutes of questions and the police arresting the very
drunk boy who keeps claiming he is in the right room, I stumble back to my room to file the necessary report. It is 5:30 a.m. when I finally get back to sleep.

As an RA, I faced multiple occasions where my identities were in conflict. In this scenario I was supposed to be the leader, the counselor, the emergency contact, and the police liaison, but I was also a student who needed sleep for class the next day, a college kid who did not want to call the police on a peer, and a woman who was scared to enter a room with a potentially dangerous, naked man. I experienced those multiple salient identities all at once, and in making the decision to call the police I was not able to express all of my identities.

I found out later that the student had finished a fifth of whiskey earlier in the night, and this was not the first time he had nakedly crawled into a female student’s bed. He ended up leaving school to avoid sexual harassment charges. I still feel partially responsible.

My experience as an RA revealed the difficulty and complexity of this role. I left this position after one semester for many reasons, one being the constant identity conflicts. I am defining identity conflicts as a conflict that arises when an individual must give precedence to the values associated with one identity, therefore prohibiting the expression or validation of another identity the individual may hold (Ramarajan, 2014). I can recall many other instances in which my different identities made my job as an RA stressful and confusing. Studies on RAs reveal that role conflict and ambiguity can have many negative effects including lower job satisfaction, lower job performance, and less satisfaction as a student (Deluga & Winters, 1990). Role does differ from identity.
A role is defined by what an individual does, the responsibilities and actions required by a position, while an identity is the sense of self an individual has. Although there is a difference between these terms, this research is still relevant, because it provides insight into the effects of ambiguity in one’s job (both a role and a potential identity). This tension that RAs feel is a significant aspect of their job, and it warrants exploration due to how these identity conflicts potentially impact RAs. Also, more exploration into the identity conflicts of RAs will contribute to the existing fields of research on organizational identification and identity.

My experiences as an RA sparked my interest in identity conflicts and organizational identification. I will define organizational identification as Cheney (1983b) does:

Identification—with organizations or anything else—is an active process by which individuals link themselves to elements in the social scene. Identifications are important for what they do for us: they aid us in making sense of our experience, in organizing our thoughts, in achieving decisions, and in anchoring the self. (p. 342)

Organizational identification is linked to many benefits for both the organization and the individual (Cheney, 1983a, 1983b; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Omillion-Hodges & Baker, 2014; Scott & Stephens, 2009). Also, different studies examined the antecedents of organizational identification, finding that characteristics such as the prestige of the organization or having similar values to the organization increase organizational identification (Cheney, 1983a; Pratt, 1998). However, there is a gap in knowledge about how social identities influence organizational identification.
Organizational identification contributes to the social identity, because social identity is the sum of the individual’s identifications (Turner, 1982). This understanding of social identity originates from Tajfel’s (1981) Social Identity Theory (SIT). SIT states that social identity differs from the personal identity, in that personal identity includes the beliefs one has about oneself, but social identity is concerned only with the identification to groups in which one has membership (Tajfel, 1981; Turner, 1982).

Individuals identify with multiple groups and organizations, which creates opportunities for conflicts between different salient identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ramarajan, 2014). This phenomenon is especially evident in RAs. As illustrated in the example of my own RA experience, conflicting identities can cause confusion and dissatisfaction. The multiple identities that they face—student, enforcer, and friend to name a few—create a complicated environment for RAs to navigate (Deluga & Winters, 1990; Everett & Loftus, 2011). The organizational identification of an RA may be influenced by the identity conflicts they experience in the job. This could have significant personal outcomes for the RAs as well as outcomes for the organization.

In the chapters that follow, I review the important texts around organizational identification and identity. I use the existing knowledge to create a foundation for exploring the possible relationship between organizational identification and identity conflicts. Also, I examine research about RAs to gain further insight in the RA experience, and draw on my own experience to inform my study. I use an interview methodology to learn from RAs about their difficult
experiences on the job to create fresh insight into the salient identities RAs experience, the identity conflicts that occur, how they cope with these conflicts, and how this impacts organizational identification.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Organizational Identification. Organizational identification is the “active process by which individuals link themselves to the social scene” (Cheney, 1983b, p. 342). Organizational identification creates a sense of belonging with an organization. Both the members and the group rely on this sense of belonging, which makes understanding this “oneness” or “belongingness” important for the success of organizational life (Cheney, 1983a).

Organizations foster identification among their members because it is a powerful tool in running a successful company. Employees who consider the company as an important part of their identity will act to protect and advance the company because it is intrinsically linked to their sense of self. Van Maanen and Schein’s (1979) metaphor provides a great illustration of the importance of organizational identification:

Metaphorically, just as biologists sometimes argue that "gene pools" exploit individuals in the interest of their own survival, organizations, as sociocultural forms, do the same. Thus, the devout believer is the Church's way of ensuring the survival of the Church; the loyal citizen is the State's way of ensuring the survival of the State; the scientific apprentice is Physics' way of ensuring the survival of Physics; and the productive employee is the Corporation's way of ensuring the survival of the Corporation. (p. 2)

Also, identification can increase a company’s referent power over employees which, in turn, motivates employees to act independently on behalf of the company, and employees who are more identified make decisions based on the company needs more often than less identified employees (Cheney, 1983b; Scott & Stephens, 2009).
Organizations invest time and money to create an environment that fosters high identification (Cheney, 1983a). One popular example is the amenities that Google provides to employees. Giving employees a number of perks not only makes organizational membership more prestigious, an antecedent to identification (Cheney, 1983a), but also creates a sense of shared identity due to acting out all daily life functions, from haircuts to oil changes, within the context of the organization. Organizational identification can provide a lot of power to the organization. It affects absenteeism, productivity, turnover (Omillion-Hodges & Baker, 2014), “work attitudes, behaviors, and outcomes—including motivation, job satisfaction, job performance, individual decision making, role orientation and conflict, employee interaction, and length of service” (Cheney, 1983b, p. 343). High identification amongst organizational members leads to plenty of rewards for the organization, making this an important aspect of organizational life.

Organizations can encourage organizational identification in a few ways. Cheney (1983a) discusses three of the most effective ways, originally put forth by Kenneth Burke, to encourage organizational identification. The first strategy is finding common ground, which includes efforts by the speaker to link herself to the audience. In an organizational context, companies use this strategy when they structure an internal message to emphasize shared values or goals. The second technique is identification through antithesis, which means unifying a group based on a common enemy. An example of this is a small, local store talking to employees about how bad Walmart is for the community and the employees because it will destroy the economy and jobs. The third strategy is to use the
assumed “we” (Cheney, 1983a). When an organization uses “we” to refer to all organizational members it creates a collective or an in-group that all the employees can be a part of, such as a message to all employees that reads, “We cannot tolerate having an unsatisfied customer.”

Other studies have revealed more ways for organizations to influence members’ organizational identification. Mael and Ashforth (1992) studied college alumni and their organizational identification with their alma mater. They found that having a continued personal relationship with someone at the alma mater significantly increased the alumni’s feeling of organizational identification. Additionally, Omillion-Hodges and Baker (2014) examined the way everyday talk reflected organizational identification. Employees who experience higher identification are more likely to praise the organization in everyday conversations. They discovered that a few strategies helped to positively influence how employees spoke about the company. Those strategies include having organizational justice within the organization, forthcoming and honest managers, and good examples of positive organizational talk. Understanding the different elements that affect organizational identification should be a priority for organizations that want to maximize the potential of their employees.

Organizational identification brings benefits to the individual as well. As Cheney (1983b) indicates, these identifications help us to organize and categorize our experiences, as well as help us to place ourselves within society. Identifying with different groups gives us meaning. It allows us to organize our lives and our experiences into categories based on our identifications (Cheney, 1983a). A
greeting in the morning from a neighbor is part of our experience as a community member, the meeting at work is part of our experience as an employee, and the conversation with the barista is part of our experience as a patron of that coffee shop. However, what is still unclear is how organizational identification is affected when two or more salient identities come in conflict. Social Identity Theory offers us a way to begin to understand this phenomenon.

Identifications with an organization builds an individual’s identity. Understanding identity and how it is tied to communication provides further insight into the importance of both organizational identification and identity. Next, I will discuss the identity theory that supports my use of identity in the context of this study.

Social Identity Theory. To understand identity conflicts, we first need to understand identity. The discussion of what identity “is” is complicated, to say the least. One researcher describes this discussion as “endless and often sterile” (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). This same researcher puts forth an applicable model for understanding identity. Tajfel’s (1981) Social Identity Theory (SIT) is the most significant theory for this research. This theory states that an individual’s identity is constructed in two parts. One part, referred to as the personal identity (Turner, 1982), consists of beliefs, values, feelings, and other personal information. The second part, referred to as the social identity (Tajfel, 1981; Turner, 1982), consists of the individual’s identity that is constructed through memberships to certain groups. SIT is concerned with the social identity.
Four conditions help to further explain SIT (Tajfel, 1981). First, an individual will maintain membership in groups that contribute positively to her social identity, aspects from which she derives satisfaction. Second, if possible, the member will leave a group that does not satisfy the first condition, unless some objective reason makes leaving the group impossible or leaving the group conflicts with important values which create the individuals self-image (Tajfel, 1981). The third condition deals with the individual managing the difficulties of leaving the group. The individual may change how she interprets the group’s unwelcome features or accept these features and engage in social action to change the group (Tajfel, 1981). Finally, the last consequence is that social membership only has meaning in the context of other groups (Tajfel, 1981). This conceptualization of a social identity clarifies how individuals form and maintain identities, their motivation to stay in a group, and related consequences of such identities. SIT provides a good basis for understanding identity, and subsequent texts on SIT directly relate it to organizational identification.

**Organizational Identification and Social Identity Theory.** Focusing on membership to groups relates directly to the act of organizational identification, and Pratt (1998) delves into SIT’s relationship to organizational identification. SIT relates to organizational identification in three key ways. The first is that SIT views categorization as a basic cognitive process, meaning that people categorize themselves and others easily and instinctually. This instinctual categorization that Pratt (1998) identifies directly relates to Cheney’s (1983a) statement that organizational identification allows us to organize our experiences. Second, SIT
demonstrates perceptual and behavioral outcomes. This takes identity from a state of understanding oneself and turns it into actions that continue to reinforce this understanding, much like how employees of an organization, when identified, will act on behalf of the organization (Cheney, 1983b; Scott & Stephens, 2009). Third, this theory maintains that groups only make favorable comparisons between themselves and others (Pratt, 1998). These favorable comparisons relate to the prestige that individuals gain from their organizational identifications. Pratt (1998) demonstrates that the issues of identification and identity are intrinsically linked, and not just in name. However, what is less clear is how one affects the others.

Organizational identification and identity are closely related, and examining the framework of that relationship will help to set the stage to delve deeper into exploring the relationship. While organizational identification is an active process in which an individual links themselves to an organization, social identity is the sum of these identifications (Turner, 1982). A gap in knowledge exists in terms of how an identity conflict relates to organizational identification. Some researchers have looked into the complexity of organizational identification to provide some background into how it can vary and how it may manifest in different types of identification process.

Scott and Stephens (2009) looked into how organization identification levels vary based on different circumstances. Their study showed that identification is not a static trait. It changes often in different contexts. Organizational identification is often much higher when engaging co-workers than
in other contexts. Also, the communication competence of coworkers affects an individual employee’s level of satisfaction and identification. This relationship between coworkers’ communication and satisfaction/identification is due to coworkers being an individual’s main source of information and the main representation of the company. Therefore, if an individual cannot communicate effectively with coworkers they will have a more negative work experience (Scott & Stephens, 2009). These findings clearly demonstrate that communication activities influence the organizational identification of an employee. Also, fluctuating organizational identification has important implications in the context of identity conflicts. Scott and Stephens (2009) described the scenario of speaking with a coworker as a time when organizational identification may be higher, due to the immediacy of membership. An interesting parallel to this is when that conversation with a coworker creates an identity conflict and how organizational identification is affected.

Elsbach (1999) expanded the model of organizational identification to better accommodate the complexities of social identity by considering how organizational identification may manifest in more complicated ways. Her model added new constructs of disidentification, schizo-identification, and neutral-identification to the established identification. Someone engages in disidentification when they actively deny the identity of some group. Schizo-identification is when someone “simultaneously identifies and disidentifies with an organization’s identity” (p. 181). Finally, neutral-identification is the absence of both identification and disidentification with an organization. These added
constructs highlight that identification is an active process. An individual manages her identity in one of these four ways: identification, disidentification, schizo-identification, and neutral-identification. These additional constructs of identification expand the understanding of this complex process, which provides important context to understanding how an individual actively engages in the identity process with an organization. Schizo-identification comes close to considering how multiple identities may lead to a complex relationship to organizational identification; however, more exploration around multiple identities would provide more clarity on how this relationship occurs and what implication the relationship has for the individual and the organization.

What is not thoroughly addressed in the literature on organizational identification nor social identification is identity conflicts. Identity conflicts occur when an individual experiences multiple salient identities in a situation, but she must give preference to one identity prohibiting her from expressing the other identities (Ramarajan, 2014). Ashforth and Mael (1989) began to apply SIT to the area of identity conflicts. They established that identity conflicts cannot resolve through “cognitively integrating” (p. 35) identities, but rather the individual needs to work to separate, rank, and buffer her identities in order to compartmentalize or create a method of coping with conflicts. However, researchers have not made much progress in the area of identity conflicts, and there is a gap in research that examines identity conflicts and how individuals manage these conflicts in the context of organizations.
Multiple identities become salient in different contexts, one important context is that of a job. Because of the nature of their work and their potential to face identity conflicts on a fairly regular basis, RAs are an excellent group to focus on in the study of identity conflicts and organizational identification. RAs are student employees at a university or college that live in the residence halls with the residents. They are there to help oversee the residents, ensure safety, handle emergency situations, put on programs, befriend residents, prevent issues, ensure sanitation, enforce hall rules, and more. Before doing this study, however, it is important to more fully explain the RA’s work world.

**Resident Assistants.** The individuals who work as RAs live with the college students in the residence halls to monitor the students for safety and to be a resource to students who need help in any capacity, from finding a building on campus to providing a shoulder to cry on. The undergraduate student RAs work together in teams in each residence hall or complex (two or more residence halls) under a hall director. They also face adverse conditions, often lacking respect and experiencing hassling from residents in their halls (Deluga & Winters, 1991). This tough job creates stress for the resident assistants (Deluga & Winters, 1991). RAs have face difficulty and complexity, which makes them an interesting population to study.

Three characteristics distinguish RAs as a beneficial population for my study of organizational identification. First, this group of participants have the unique situation of living where they work, causing them to spend a lot of time with the organization and a lot of time with the identity of RA. Second, RAs are
involved in a wide range of stressful situations that may bring forth multiple salient identities, from having to call an ambulance for a resident who has passed out in the bathroom in the early hours of the morning after spending the night consuming alcohol, to more enjoyable situations, such as walking dogs at the local dog shelter as program with residents. Third, I have access to RAs as a college student myself and as a former RA.

Living where they work blurs the line between personal and professional for the RAs. RAs act as both peers and supervisors to the residents they oversee. Juggling the roles they play, from friend to counselor to enforcer, can lead to these identity conflicts. Deluga and Winters (1990) identified both role conflict and role ambiguity as having negative outcomes for RAs such as lower job satisfaction, lower job performance, and less satisfaction as a student. As noted earlier, roles do differ from identities, whereas roles are constructed through the responsibilities and action an individual has and identities construct the sense of self, but these studies still provide insight into issues of identity. These identity issues coupled with the “24/7” (24 hours a day, seven days a week) nature of their job, makes managing their identity as an RA a difficult task. This adds value to my research, because being an RA has the potential for unforeseen encounters that cause very salient identity conflicts which would undeniably have an effect on organizational identification. These three factors combine to position undergraduate RAs as a population that can provide a lot of insight into identification due to the extensive and varied organizational experiences that have the potential to affect organizational identification. Furthermore, involvement in
this research may provide useful insight for RAs and the Residential Housing department into the different experiences of this job and the effect these experiences have on RAs.

When managing these identity conflicts, RAs cope through different methods. These methods, although yet undefined, are likely to include aspects of emotional labor. Hochschild (1983), in her foundational work on emotional labor, *The Managed Heart*, characterizes this as “trying to feel.” When employees have to manage their emotions to fulfill their duties at their job they are performing emotional labor. One example of this is compassionate communication (Miller, 2007). Compassionate communication is required in customer-facing roles (Miller, 2007), such as an RA, with the resident cast as the customer. If a resident is crying in the hallway, an RA must engage in the noticing, feeling, and responding required to handle the situation compassionately (Miller, 2007). If the RA simply walked by because he was tired or busy, then he would be rejecting the identity of RA by not doing his job. Instances of emotional labor are important to recognize in RAs, because they may be a common coping mechanism RAs use to do their job.

This research outlines the literature on organizational identification and identity highlighting the gap in knowledge around the management of multiple identities and identity conflicts. Because identification is an active process, it is useful to understand how people manage their conflicting identities through their own communication choices. Also, the extant research does not provide a clear explanation of how these identity conflicts are related to feelings of organizational
identification. For this study, I have chosen RAs as an important population due to their complex duties and the high potential for identity conflicts to occur. This review of the relevant literature leads me to three research questions that guide my thesis research.

RQ 1: What salient identities do Resident Assistants (RAs) experience in their jobs?

This question will identify the different social identities RAs experience within the course of the job. Understanding the different identities will reveal the sources of potential identity conflicts.

RQ 2: What communication strategies do RAs use to cope with identity conflicts in the scope of their job?

Examining the communication will reveal how RAs handle identity conflicts and manage their different identities. These strategies could provide insight into how to help RAs manage these conflicts and how these conflicts may affect the organization.

RQ 3: How are identity conflicts related to organizational identification in RAs?

Understanding the relationship between identity conflicts and organizational identification will help to fill the current gap in research around this relationship. This knowledge can provide a framework for future research to further explore identity conflicts in organizations. The following chapter outlines the methods I will use to explore these questions.
Chapter 3

Methodology

I used qualitative research methods to explore the identity conflicts of RAs and how these conflicts are related to organizational identification. Qualitative research provides insight into societal issues, problems, and questions, particularly when not enough preexisting understanding exists to study in more structured, quantitative methods (Tracy, 2013). Further, researchers use qualitative research to explore personal experiences and expressions in a level of detail that cannot be captured or explored appropriately through quantitative research (Tracy, 2013). Researchers value qualitative methods because these methods uncover stories and rich details that may not be captured through quantitative methods. Identification and identity are examples of topics that benefit from qualitative research, because rich detail and narratives often accompany a participant’s experiences of identity conflicts (e.g. Pepper & Larson, 2006; Tracy, Meyers, & Scott, 2006). In the following sections I describe the methodological processes I followed and the criteria I used to ensure the rigor of my research.

Criteria. Qualitative research criteria should be flexible. Tracy (2013) established a “big-tent” approach to qualitative criteria, because she understood the balance between letting a study be understood on its own terms and having guidelines for writers and readers to reference. The eight criteria set forth by Tracy (2013) deal with conducting worthwhile research and being a responsible researcher in order to make a meaningful contribution to the field.
Four of the eight criteria involve conducting worthwhile research: selecting a “worthy topic” (p. 231), using “rich rigor” (p. 231), having resonance, and establishing meaningful coherence. Tracy (2013) outlined the first criterion of “worthy topic” (p. 231), which refers to the relevance, timeliness, significance, and interest of the topic. My study on the identity conflicts of RAs and the organizational identification fulfills part of the gap in research around identity conflicts and organizational identification that was called for by researchers such as Ashforth and Mael (1989) and Ramarajan (2014). Second, “rich rigor,” again as defined by Tracy (2013, p. 231), pertains to the effort put forth by the researcher to devote the time and execute the research with diligence. I outlined and followed through on my process including sampling, research methods, data collection, and data analysis to show the value of my process. Third, resonance refers to the impact my research has on the audience. I achieved this criterion through the transferability of my results (Tracy, 2013). Every individual has a social identity and engages in organizational identification, therefore my audience can relate to the participant experiences of organizational identification even if they are not in the same organization or have the same job. Finally, meaningful coherence establishes that the researcher reached his/her goals through relevant methods, which I explain throughout my study. I held my own study to each of these criteria.

Three of the eight criteria pertain to being a responsible researcher: credibility, sincerity, and ethics. First, I established credibility, which Tracy (2013) defines as “the dependability, trustworthiness, and expressing a reality that
is plausible or seems true” (p. 235), through providing a thorough explanation of my research methods and through using multivocality. Multivocality involves including multiple voices within the research (Tracy, 2013), and I accomplished this by allowing my participants’ voices to speak in my research by including paraphrases and quotes. Next, sincerity refers to the self-reflexivity of the researcher and the transparency of the methods. Tracy (2013) defined self-reflexivity as “an honest and authentic awareness of one’s own identity” (p. 232). I showed my identity through reference to my own experience with organizational identification in my previous time as RA throughout the text. Transparency involves being open about how the research transpired, and I accomplished this through taking diligent notes of the process and including them in my research methods section. I was also transparent through my writing about my own RA experiences and the feelings I had during my time as an RA. Lastly, ethics in every aspect of the research was an important consideration, and I adhered to ethical guidelines through following Internal Review Board (IRB) instructions and practicing informed consent. I continuously held myself to each of these criteria.

The aforementioned seven criteria allowed me to achieve the eighth criteria: significant contribution. I created a significant contribution through conceptual development of the topics of emotion in organizations and organizational identification through combining these topics to explore a different facet of emotions and identification. Sticking to these eight criteria held my qualitative research to a high standard which helped to produce a valid, meaningful study.
Participants. I had three parameters for individuals to participate in my study: 18 years or older, English speaking, and a current Resident Assistant, Residential Director, or Graduate Residential Director. First, participants are, adults over the age of 18, the legal age of consent. Second, recruiting only English speaking participants controlled for language barriers.

Third, I recruited students at Ohio University (the University), a rural, midsized university, who are Resident Assistants (RAs) and one participant that works as a Resident Director (RD). The individuals who work as RAs live with the college students in the residence halls to monitor the students for safety and to be a resource to students who need help in any capacity, from finding a building on campus to providing a shoulder to cry on. The undergraduate student RAs work together in teams in each residence hall or complex (two or more residence halls) under a Graduate Resident Director (GRD) or Resident Director (RD), a graduate student or professional staff person, respectively.

The RD or GRD supervises the RAs and oversees the activities of the residence hall. Therefore, two additional participants I recruited were an RD and a GRD. The RAs report directly to their RD or GRD for weekly supervision meetings where the RA talks about achievements and struggles related to the job to the RD/GRD. The RD/GRD can also serve as a resource for RAs if they need someone to talk to about difficult situations in their personal life or with their jobs. The RD/GRD is an important person within the RA team as they act as the leader of the group. Since this person is the manager of RAs and an essential
figure in the residence hall, an RD/GRD’s perspective on the RA experience provided useful information.

I did not include length of time on the job as a qualification because identification can occur at any stage of organizational involvement. For example, two RAs—one who is still in the first month on the job and one with two years’ experience—both can experience identification. Understanding the identification of both the new member and experienced member is valuable.

**Sampling Strategy.** I used convenience or opportunistic sampling, because I chose a relevant population based on my access to the group (Tracy, 2013). As a former RA, I not only had access to this group, but I also believed this population brought valuable experiences to the interviews due to the nature of the RA job. Tracy (2013) identified this type of sampling as a cheap and fast option, which was ideal for my shortened time span and realistic access to participants. Tracy (2013) warned against being lazy when using this sampling method. I avoided this pitfall by seeking to maximize the variance among the RAs involved in my study, including participants from several different residence halls and levels of experience among the RAs, and outlining a comprehensive research methodology.

The participants consisted of 10 undergraduate RAs and one Residential Director (RD). Six women and five men were interviewed, all current students at the University. Of the RAs one was 19-years-old, four were 21-years-old, and five were 20-years-old, and three were sophomores, five were juniors, and two were seniors. The participants had varying levels of experience; five RAs were in their first year, three were in their second, and two were in their third. The RD was a
30-year-old male who had worked in residential housing at the University for a total of nine years. The participants were varied and brought unique perspectives to this research.

**Procedures.** This section describes how I gathered data from RAs, including how I gained access to the population and how I conducted interviews.

**Gaining Access.** Before researching, I received permission to complete this study from IRB (Appendix A). Next, I needed to gain access to the organization. The gatekeepers of the RA population are the directors of the Residential Housing department and the Residential Directors (RD) or Graduate Residential Directors (GRD). I contacted the Director of Residence Life in the Residential Housing department about my research to gain organizational support first. I sent her my access proposal (Appendix B), and I met with her to discuss my research parameters and intent and to ask for access to the population. The Director agreed to allow access and offered to distribute the recruiting email to all of the RAs at the University. In this email to RAs, I requested that RAs contact me via email or phone, both were provided, and after an interested participant made contact we scheduled a time and place based on the participant’s availability. All interactions were conducted via email or text prior to the interview. Participants were selected on a first-come, first-serve basis, except for the last participant who was recruited to have more male representation among the participants.

**Interviews.** I used semi-structured, narrative interviews, because this type of interview reveals the “whole story” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 179). This type of interview let participants represent their experience in their own words.
Narrative interviews allowed the participant to tell their story and navigate their thoughts and feelings in the interview. This was particularly useful for exploring identity because identity is constructed and shared communicatively. Participants often make sense of their experiences through talking about them others, including engaging in sense-making during the interview itself (Tracy, 2013). Participants may not have had awareness of their feelings about the organization and how those feelings reflected on their identities until they started talking about it. Interviews were specifically useful for my purpose; they gave the participants space to create meaning from past experiences that they may have never explored.

I met with participants one-on-one to have a conversation about the topics on the interview guide, either the RA interview guide (Appendix C) or the RD interview guide (Appendix D). We met in a space that was convenient for the participant, which was a room in the University library. The space met the standards set forth by Tracy (2013): accessible; lack distractions; safe space; adequately private; comfortable, and well-equipped (meaning proper seating, electricity, and other necessary accommodations).

*Interview Protocol.* When the participant arrived, I began by introducing myself and explained the purpose of the interview. I provided informed consent forms (Appendix E) to the participant and provided time to read, ask questions, and sign the forms. Then I talked about confidentiality. I informed the participants that I would keep their responses confidential. At the beginning, I collected basic demographic information such as age, gender, years as an RA, and major.
Once I finished the introductory information, I moved into questions from the interview guide (Appendix C/Appendix D). As Tracy (2013) suggests, I began by building rapport through asking questions such as, “How did you decide to become an RA?” “What has been the most memorable on the job experience as an RA?” These types of questions are easy to answer and unthreatening. Next I asked generative questions—“non-directive, non-threatening queries that serve to generate (rather than dictate) frameworks for talk” (Tracy, 2013, p. 147). Examples of generative questions are, “Can you describe a time when it was very hard to do your job?” “What are some of the most difficult parts of being an RA?” Then, I asked directive questions to elicit more specific information. The directive questions served as follow-ups to the generative questions and were spontaneous. I then ended with closing questions such as, “What didn’t we talk about that you think we should have talked about?” and “What advice would you give to RAs to help deal with the most difficult parts of the job?” Often during the interview I would find other avenues of questions based on the previously shared answers that provided for rich stories and experiences.

All interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder, and I took additional light notes during the discussion of my observations, specifically noting the interviewee’s body language and other nonverbal communication that were not recorded by the audio recorder. I followed the interview with a half hour of more rigorous note-taking of my observations when the experience was fresh in my mind (Tracy, 2013). I transcribed all of the interviews in a word document and transferred that data to the qualitative data analysis software program Nvivo 10 so
that the information was easily read, organized, and reorganized. My initial sample resulted in 120 pages of transcription. I stored transcriptions on my password protected computer, omitting any identifying information. All recorded information was stored on an external hard drive with names changed to pseudonyms and was destroyed after transcriptions were finished.

**Analysis.** I entered the data immersion phase by transcribing the data, which included fact-checking via reading the transcriptions while listening to the recordings (Tracy, 2013). After I finished conducting the interviews I listened, re-read, and talked about the data with my faculty advisor and peer students (Tracy, 2013). The data immersion phase occurred in two parts. First, I engaged in the primary-coding cycle and then I engaged in the secondary-coding cycle. In the primary-coding cycle I asked myself open ended questions such as, “What is happening?” and “What am I noticing?” as suggested by Tracy (2013). These questions aided me in creating first-level codes. First-level codes focused on what is happening in the data. The first-level codes began to jump out from the interviews during the transcription and data immersion phase, and I recorded these codes using nodes in the Nvivo software. Some examples of my first-level codes include “emotional situations,” “relationship with residents,” and “first responders,” my 22 first-level codes were collapsed into 6 second-level codes.

After I created first-level codes, I entered the secondary-coding cycle. In this cycle, I analyzed and examined the first-level codes to “organize, synthesize, and categories them into interpretive concepts” (Tracy, 2013, p. 194). The second-level codes move beyond simply describing what is happening in the data to
explain how and why it is happening. For example, I found that RAs talked about the “perception of RAs” and “first responder” situations, and the second-level code became “policing identity” because these first-level codes contributed to the policing identity of the job.

After I developed my second-level codes, I returned to a few of my participants to conduct member checks. These member checks served to test my preliminary conclusions to see how the information resonates with the participants. These member checks also helped me further develop my analysis by expanding or refining my preliminary conclusions. This process sounds linear and clean; however, during my analysis it was anything but. As I was coding, I hit mental road blocks trying to determine appropriate first-level and second-level codes and attempting to understand the data. I overcame these road blocks through talking about my research with my faculty advisor and HTC peers, engaging in sense-making, and spending time with the data and related literature to gain further understanding. This iterative process of moving between data and previous literature is part of the qualitative analysis.

**Member Checks.** After the interviews were transcribed and the conclusions were drawn, I reached back out to two of the participants to receive feedback on the information. These member checks serve to validate or invalidate my conclusions. Additionally, the interview with the one RD served as a type of member check because I reviewed the conclusions with him at the end of the interview.

**Summary**
The narrative interviews of my 11 participants investigated the identities and identity conflicts that occur within the RA position. Following the eight criteria put forth by Tracy (2013) ensured that this study produced a meaningful contribution to the field, and I followed them in each step of my research. The interviews produced great data that was iteratively coded to find important recurring themes which were then further evaluated through member checks. The extent of my findings are discussed in the next chapter.
Chapter 4

Findings

I analyzed my data from 12 semi-structured interviews using NVivo 10 software, a qualitative data analysis program. These data were applied to my research questions, which asked, “What salient identities do Resident Assistants (RAs) experience in their jobs?” “What communication strategies do RAs use to cope with identity conflicts in the scope of their job?” and “How are identity conflicts related to organizational identification in RAs?”

I first analyzed the text for emergent themes, as described in the previous chapter. Then I began looking for specific relationships to the research questions. Through analytical coding, I found three distinct identities that RAs experience in their job in response to the first research question. Two of these are on-the-job identities, police and mentor, and the third identity of student. These identities were developed through the requirements of the job, and were fueled by both the individual’s experiences and the institutional position of RAs. Next, in response to the second research question, the communication strategies RAs use to cope with identity conflicts emerged as distinct strategies to handle cognitive dissonance. For the third research question, I examined the how the identity conflicts related to organizational identification of the RAs.

Additionally, I found an emergent theme within the data that extends beyond the research questions, but also helps to explain the complexity of identity and organizational identification in RAs. I am calling this emergent theme the panopticon complex. This theme deals with the particularly interesting tensions
that RAs experience with the boundaries of the job and the idea that they are never off the clock.

First, I described the context of the study by describing the University and illustrated what the job of an RA is like through examples the participants provided in their interviews. This information is necessary to understand because it provides a foundation for understanding the different identities RAs play at work. Then, in the following sections, I talk about the salient identities RAs experience, discuss the communicative strategies they use to handle identity conflicts and tensions, and explore what these identities and identity conflicts mean for the organizational identification. Finally, I talk about the emergent theme of the panopticon complex.

**Context.** This study is taking place at Ohio University, a midsized university with roughly 17,000 undergraduate students on the main campus (Ohio University, 2015). The University will be referred to as such for this study. It is Ranked 135th among national universities and 68th among top public schools (U.S. News and World Report, 2015). The University is a rural, residential campus with around 8,000 students living in the residence halls. This resident population so constituted through the two year living requirement for the residence halls as well as the low number of commuters caused by the rural location. The University employs around 270 RAs who live in the residence halls with the students, and oversee about 30 residents per RA depending on the living arrangements.

The style of the University’s 42 halls varies. Some halls are more traditional with long hallways that have 2-4 person rooms on each side of the hall
with usually two RAs overseeing the floor. Other halls are “mod” style or module style where there is a cluster of five two-person rooms that share one bathroom that is connected to a common living space that is shared with two to three other clusters of rooms that have one RA overseeing them. The third style has a two two-person rooms connected by an adjoining bathroom with one to two RAs per floor. The halls are divided up into three groups called greens based on the geographic location on campus. These greens vary in size, but they operate under the same organizational structure with the RAs reporting to and RD or RC who reports to the director of the green.

The University established a criteria of values that they say define the pride and what it means to be a part of the community. These values are Community, Character, Civility, Citizenship, and Commitment, also called the 5 C’s. These values are defined by the University as follows: Community “includes being involved and responsible members of not only the university community,” but also of the local and global community; Character includes members being “expected to commit to the highest standards of personal honesty and ethical behavior”; Civility is for civility in communication to foster an environment for the free and open exchange of ideas; Citizenship refers to a “commitment to the public sphere”, “foster[ing] community involvement, becom[ing] engaged citizens acting for the public good, and respect[ing] university property and property of others”; And commitment refers to committing to the other four values and holding other university community members to the same values (Ohio University, 2015c).
These espoused values appear in a few places, such as on large banners in the student center and on a ribbon on the side of some of the university web pages, but they are not ubiquitous. The most visible use of the values is in an adapted hashtag that university officials, like the Dean of Students, use in tweets about appropriate student behavior—#BeSmartBeCivilBeSafe (Housing & Res Life, n.d.). This hashtag is often associated with events and activities that pose a risk, such as a weekend celebration or a highly attended event. Although this hashtag’s true origin may not be inherently linked to the 5 Cs, the use of this hashtag supports the general expectations that the 5 C’s set forth, to behave in a responsible way that fosters a safe university environment. This hashtag has become popular, being used by student run accounts as well other university related accounts. However, the values are not widely used on campus by students or in curriculum.

On the residential housing webpage, this university department sets forth a specific set of values. First, the residential housing department states a unique mission statement that prioritizes the cultivation of development through “purposeful and innovative programs, practices, and services provided in a safe and inclusive residential environment both on and off campus” (Ohio University, 2015b). Also, residential housing puts forth their own areas of importance for student development: health and safety, scholarship, student development, citizenship, and diversity (Ohio University, 2015b), which are additional to the 5 C’s of the University. These specific values are again stated on the residential housing twitter bio, where it claims that the department aims to uphold these values in residence halls (Housing & Res Life, n.d.).
These values appear more pervasive throughout the residential housing department than the University’s 5 C’s. For example, there is a residential housing webpage that describes what a good candidate for the RA role looks like. This page, again, outlines these residential housing values, stating that the “ability to assist students” in each of these areas are the criteria for being a successful RA (Ohio University, 2015d). The University’s values demonstrate an attempt to establish values for the whole institution; however, the residential housing department has adopted a set of values specifically tailored to their needs. Institutional values are important to understanding organizational identity, because connecting oneself to the values of the organization is an important aspect of identification. Knowing these espoused values of the University and residential housing helps identify participants’ organizational identification.

The language of the values of the University and of the residential housing department illustrate an idealistic environment for student development. Upholding these values is asked of every student in order to realize a constructive and enriching atmosphere for learning and growing as young adults. However, the University has a reputation for being a party school. Rated number one on Playboy Magazine’s list of party schools in 2015, the University is known for drinking and partying which is a reputation that administration rejects (Waxman, 2015).

As evident in the RA job description, however, the 5 Cs mean something different to the students that work as RAs. Instead of reaping the benefits of a culturally rich campus environment created by the 5 Cs, their job is to encourage and enforce these values for their residents. From defining a residence hall agreement to writing up a resident for drinking the job duties of an RA are focused on upholding
these values, changing their relationship with this value system. Also, the top party school rating only emphasizes the role RAs play in the halls due to higher drinking rates and more rowdiness. The RAs, as the agents, are entrusted with the cultivation of this idealistic atmosphere. Instead of being the benefactors of such an environment, the RAs have the responsibility to maintain and police the residence hall and the residents’ behavior to ensure adherence with these standards.

**Job Illustration.** Throughout the interviews the RAs talked about the different functions of the job and what they are required to do. These examples illustrate a wide range of experiences. The RA job description sets the expectation of 20 hours of work per week. Most of the RAs agreed that their workload averaged to around 20 hours a week, but three said their hours are different from the expected 20. Rachel, a second-year RA and a junior, said she puts in around 30 hours a week, while Kelly, a first-year RA and a junior, estimated her time working to be around 40 to 50 hours. In contrast, Jordan, a first-year RA and a junior, said he only put in maybe six hours of work a week. This fluctuating commitment comes from the autonomy of the position and the fluctuating nature of the schedule. Aaron, a first-year RA and a sophomore, gave an idea of what an RA’s schedule might be like:

> On average I would say it’s close to that 20 that we get paid for, um, but it since every single day is gonna be different, depends from week to week because you know, um, especially since I work in a big staff, um, I don’t have a schedule week day that I’m on duty every single week, and so it can be three weeks without having duty and then I’m on duty for two or three days in a row or it could be every other week I’m on duty, and so that play into it, and then if you’re weekend you do more rounds then you do on the week night, um, then if you have lockouts that accounts into it or if you have incidents that can then count into it.
Aaron is illustrating the variance in an RA’s schedule, including unexpected events such as lockouts—when a student locks themselves out of their room and the RA has to retrieve the master key—and “incidents,” a blanket term for a disciplinary, medical, or other significant situation.

Additionally, the RAs spoke about the constantly fluctuating schedule. Alex, a third year RA and a senior, talked about the flexibility:

And, uh, as a student I think it makes it a lot easier to, um, to keep my schedule flex, flexible so I’m not scheduling like an 8 hour shift and like figuring out switching shifts with people, um for like a typical like hourly job would be. Um, and so I really appreciate like the flexibility.

Dana, a first year RA and a sophomore, agreed that she liked the scheduling:

Um, I actually really like the way we do scheduling, just because I think it’s like a job where like we really get to pick our own schedules and we can handle switching too, on our own, and we can plan programs around when it best for our schedule, and I think I actually like, I was nervous how I would like handle being an RA with school work, but I actually think it is like really helpful because if I worked in like the dining hall or somewhere else I would just have like set times and like I feel like with this I can really plan around the other stuff I have to do.

The RAs enjoyed the ease of scheduling and that they could plan around their academic and extracurricular commitments.

Although the scheduling made it easy to try to control the RA’s schedules, there were unexpected events that RAs were expected to handle at any time day or night. Speaking about the uncertainty of the schedule, Aaron said:

Um, it can be either good or bad you know some days we have incidents late at night which causes you to lose sleep so next day we can wake up a lot more tired, more irritable, um, I guess it really just depends on like the actual person, because some people can take more stress and be able to really stress easier than others, and so stress management comes in to a lot, because this job can be stressful while rewards, um, and so it just, I again, it just really depends on like the person.

Alex talked about the difficulty of dealing with the constant state of uncertainty:
Um, I think the job, it’s hard to say. Let’s see here. Um, I would say, I would say the job contributed a decent amount [of stress], because a lot of the stress was coming from the uncertainty of it, because I has no idea what I might encounter. Um, I had no idea what was you know, what might go on, what I might have to take charge of, and that was really frightening to me to not really know what to expect. Um, in a lot of ways, and so when I already have like high anxiety to add that into the mix just felt like way too much.

Always fearing that an emergency would appear and the RA would have to invest time, energy, and emotion into the situation can make it difficult to manage a schedule. Although the RAs said that residential housing understands that being a student comes first, RAs cannot just walk away from an emergency situation no matter their schedule. If a resident needs emergency attention, the RA is the person to get the resident the help they need, no matter the situation.

In addition to handling emergencies, RAs perform what they call community building. These activities range from the weekly program that they plan and execute to being present in the residence hall. Annie, a sophomore and first year RA, talked about what programming looks like in her hall:

Some of [the residential housing values] are like diversity, health and safety, community, scholarship, and we actually have programs that we do and we have to do one program a week, and we have to touch on the values that we’re given. So for like a diversity value you could get with your floor section and watch a movie like *The Help* or something and talk about kind of diversity and how it’s evolving with time.

The weekly programs have to align with goals of the residential housing department. RAs are tasked with getting residents to attend, which can be difficult because the events are entirely voluntary. This can add a level of stress to the position. Kelly told a story about how she took the time to plan a nice program
and no one showed up. In this moment of discouragement she wanted to quit her job.

Not all of the community building is as formal as planning programs. Aaron gave a snapshot of what the informal community building looks like:

The residents see you as like a figure to help them grow as a community and just like, like this morning I had a resident who was like oh I think we blew a fuse in our room this morning so just you know reminding them aw okay put in a work request form so that way you go through that and just being there and them seeing you can really help them like oh I have this problem, okay this is how you fix it.

The idea of being present is important to being a good RA. RAs are expected to only have 10 hour of commitment outside of the job, which is met with different reactions. Taylor rejects that expectation, and takes on any commitment that he believes will enhance his future career no matter the time commitment. Kelly, however, devotes herself to school, and says she is in the hall whenever she is not in class, and yet during her peer review the biggest “negative” was that she was never in the hall. The presence of RAs in the hall is supposed to create a constantly accessible resource for the residents, building this sense of community that is important to residential housing.

RAs also have the expectation to know every one of their residents. Alex said, “[T]here is… a pretty high expectation from the department to know [their] residents really deeply.” Each RA is required to have two intentional conversations with every resident every semester, and as Sam pointed out, some RAs have close to 50 residents and some RAs have six residents so the work related to those conversations varies. Also, after the RAs have these
conversations, they have to record them on a software program that allows the supervisor to view the conversation.

The staff the RAs work on also play a huge role in what the RA’s job looks like. A staff is composed of all the RAs that work in a particular residence hall or residence hall complex (multiple halls under one RD). RAs depend on their staff for backup and social support. Even something as simple as switching shifts can be a lifesaver to an RA in need. Alex discusses the struggles of being on an unsupportive staff:

[Y]eah my first year, um, not only was the position new, but my team was not supportive of each other, um, there was lots of tension and hostility and, um, it really just made me shut down in a lot of ways during staff meetings. I just wouldn’t talk, I wouldn’t try to contribute because of like fear of backlash from other people whatever that looks like. It really made me dislike the job a lot more. Staff meetings felt like a really big chore. Trying to find someone to switch duty shifts with me if I had a conflict felt like terrifying, because I was afraid of asking people. Um, and I knew like they didn’t care about me, and so you know, the chances of someone being willing to take my shift were a lot slimmer.

Her staff contributed to the difficulties of the already difficult position. However, her staffs in the following years were supportive and helped to enrich the experience of being an RA:

Um, whereas, in my past two years, like I said, my staffs have not had conflict at all, everyone gets along super well, um and is just really supportive of each other, and so it makes you then, things that we’re required to do you know Halloween or staff meetings, stuff like that, feel a lot more like a social enjoyable experience rather than a chore. Um, and yeah I just helps the job be more flexible, because we care about each other and so people understand, oh like I have this thing going on, you know there’s going to be two or three people who are like “Oh, I can take your shift for you.” Um, and so I just feel a lot more supportive, and like a lot it helps like the job feel less overwhelming which helps me better put my best foot forward I guess.
Taylor even mentioned that he made the best friends being an RA, and that is how some people choose to deal with the social repercussions of the job:

Other people like group together with other RAs and just like form a new community which is often what happens I think I know on both of my staffs, I um, because I’ve been on two different staffs, that happened with a lot, some of my best friends at college have come from being an RA, and that’s what they usually say. Res housing did one thing and they gave me amazing friends, because you do have very similar values as those people um, and you are like forced to be with them a lot, um and so you become very close with them and that’s another way you kind of cope with that, like you just make friends with people who have that same title, because you don’t view each other as that title.

This position can be socially isolating, therefore the relationships one makes as an RA on the staff contribute to decreasing the feelings of isolation and the stress of the position.

Finally, a large part of the RA’s duties involve administrative tasks. These tasks take up a significant portion of an RA’s work hours through filling out paperwork and making sure everything is documented. Kelly described the different administrative tasks RAs are responsible for:

Yeah, so what, you would have lockouts, so you have to like do a lot that’s on the computer for a lockout then, you’re days that you’re on duty the shift you have to work you have to work in the mail room and I mean you only technically have to be in the mailroom for like two hours, but you would also go before and like log all the packages make sure everything’s okay, and then even when you’re not on duty like you have to make sure all of the signs are correct. If there’s a sign that’s not correct you have to take it down you also have to clean up the, um, I can’t think of the word, the staff office, like whenever it’s your day you have to clean it and stuff, so it’s a lot of small things.

The administrative side of the job involves a lot of housekeeping and recording.

As stated, RAs are required to have and record two “meaningful conversations” with each resident per semester. Also, when RAs are involved in any sort of
incident they are required to fill out reports on what happened, including narratives describing the situation. When there are four incidents in one night, something that Kelly experienced, it can keep an RA up until 4:00 a.m. or later filling out all of the paperwork. Administrative work creates important records of the activities of the resident halls, but as the RAs conveyed and Max, the RD, stated, “That seems to be consistently people’s least favorite aspect of the job.”

The RA duties are varied, and they are explored further in this study, but understanding the scope of what it is like to work as an RA is important to understanding the identities they experience. This snapshot is important to understanding the complexity of the jobs and the identities that RAs are continuously managing as college students themselves. I think the best description comes from Aaron who said, “Every single morning when you wake basically, you could almost guess that something’s gonna be different. Like you’re not gonna have the same day day in and day out.” The consistency of this job is that it is constantly inconsistent and encompasses a vast amount of responsibilities that never end.

Identities RAs Experience

The job illustration provides a context to begin the discussion of identities. In the following section I will talk about the identities of police, counselor, and student and how RAs experience those in the context of their job.

Policing Identity. As part of the job, RAs must enforce the rules of residential housing. These enforcements range from issuing a warning to the student to calling the University police to report the incident and ask for
assistance. Additionally, RAs are also expected to be the first to respond to any emergency situation in the hall, disciplinary or otherwise, acting as a first responder and liaison to the appropriate resources. The responsibility to acquire help for a student or enforce the rules of the residence hall lie with the RAs, who are the same age as those they are assisting. RAs engage in a critical identity of the job in policing the halls, but this identity does not occur without its burdens.

The policing identity is adopted differently by all RAs due to the high level of autonomy they have when deciding when and how to enact this identity. For example, Dana, a sophomore and a first year RA, said that it is up to the RAs who gets in trouble:

Yeah, um, just I mean, yeah just like, I mean, just say like really like we’re not the ones that get people in trouble but realistically that’s not true. Like if we didn’t do anything they wouldn’t like be in trouble, we still have to report it, so like we’re still the like the reason they’re in trouble and like what the RA like that I worked with was saying how like, it’s like RAs literally like choose who they get in trouble sometimes like there are times when like you really are tired and you smell something but you might walk past it or whatever and there are times when you handle it and so it’s just like really nerve wracking.

Dana recognizes the autonomy RAs have when doing their jobs. Often times RAs work alone, except on particularly busy weekends, giving them the latitude to make their own decisions about what type of “police” they will be, whether every suspicious activity will be thoroughly investigated and recorded, or to ignore all but the most blatant offenses. This decision is difficult for some RAs who want to make sure residents are staying safe, but feel uneasy about getting a peer in trouble—or those who may want to avoid the paperwork.
In their interviews, three of the RAs specifically mention that they do not look for people breaking the rules. Jordan, a junior first year RA, said he shares his philosophy with his residents, “Like, I already know people are going to drink, and I’m not like looking to like get people in trouble. But like I’ll tell them if I like see you drinking I’ll write you up or if [I] like smell something [like marijuana] I’ll like [write you up]. So they know.” Another RA said in her first year she would “hide in her room” on the weekends to avoid situations where she might have to write someone up, particularly a friend. The RAs mostly share this ideology that if they have to write someone up they will, but they will actively try to avoid those types of situations.

Kelly, a first year RA and a junior, shares her distaste for writing people up saying, “I hate getting people in trouble, like I hate doing that.” However, Kelly knows firsthand not all RAs share this mentality. She told stories of two RAs on her staff who “look for trouble” and play the bad guy by going into a resident’s room unbidden to find reasons to get them in trouble. One of those RAs is in the process of getting someone kicked out of school and the other has successfully turned in multiple other RAs for breaking the rules, which resulted in those RAs being fired for alcohol offenses. These RAs who strongly embrace the policing identity exist, but are not the norm, according to Kelly, and she and the other RAs on her staff avoid being around them if they can. Kelly and her staff are rejecting these people who embrace a strict and authoritative policing identity, opting instead for more benevolence than punishment.
The other aspect of the policing identity is being a first responder in emergency situations. Taylor, a junior and second year RA, described a situation where it was his decision whether to report a potentially suicidal resident or not:

I had gotten a call, I was on duty that weekend, I had gotten one call from a resident saying “Hey, like, there’s a couple arguing like really loud,” it was like 1:30 in the morning, “like a couple arguing really loud, can you come talk to them?” And then I got a second call as I was on my way, and I got the exact same thing. I said “I’m on my way.” Um, by the time I got there was just the girl who was a resident of the building, boyfriend had left, um and she was very upset, um… And so she was in her neighbor’s room who, um, like caught us before we like went into her room and like told us kind of her side of what she heard and what she’s doing, and that, you know she wasn’t really great friends with this resident or her neighbor she just kinda knew her, because she lived across the hall. But then we went in and the girl was kinda hysterical, she was crying a lot, um she was kinda yelling about her boyfriend so we got her to just kinda calm down and we talked to her about other things and like, um, tried to get her to a place where she was like level again, tried to bring that adrenalin down. Um, so, the other RA and I kinda facilitated like, we can, we talked about the situation a little bit at the beginning, we’re here you know we’re here to help you, you’re not in trouble, just here to help you out make sure you’re okay, and then we like calmed her down and we started to talk about other things to get her mind off of it.

Taylor handled the distressed resident and attempted to diffuse the situation through talking with her.

And then, eventually she was like okay I think I’m ready to go to bed so we like walked her back to her room, but in that first interaction before we went back to her room, she brought up in the past she had gone to see psychologists for issues with like her family and um, inflicting harm on herself, and so it was kind of a trigger, but she said that was all in the past that she was, had, hadn’t done that in years. And so, it was a trigger sign. Taylor recognized that this was a risky situation. He knew she had potential to hurt herself, but she convinced him that she was okay. He recognized the trigger sign, but went on with his work.

So when we came back on our two thirty rounds, which is what we do on weekends, we have a, one extra round shift, I decided we should go
straight back to that building just to check on her, instead of, ‘cause that’s usually the last one we go to but I wanted to check on her make sure she was still up and if she was make sure she was okay. We ran into the neighbor and she told us that she went to check on her as well, just to make sure she was okay and had seen a knife with some blood on it, and so from that moment we were like you’re not, you’ve done everything you’re supposed to we’re going to call for her to get help even though, um, they were cuts that weren’t deep at all, but it was there, it was apparent and we decided we needed to do something about it, we didn’t want her to risk anything by staying there by herself so, that’s when we decided to call and then that was kind of like the end of that.

Taylor was providing psychological help to a potentially suicidal resident, and making the life or death decision about how at risk she was. When asked if he would do anything different, Taylor said he would have called the police earlier.

The decisions RAs make every day cannot be taken lightly, and yet those decisions are in the hands of students who have very little emergency training. In fact, multiple RAs mentioned that in an emergency situation their job is to pass off the responsibility by calling the University police or a professional staff member, but the work that goes into determining what qualifies as an emergency is vitally important and not always clear cut, as Taylor’s situation shows.

When Dana talked about the first incident she was involved in, she introduced the experience saying:

Um, yeah, my first like hard was really my first situation ever um, it was like really scary, um, I was like I like was walking on my way back to my room because I just out of the staff office like I was like done with like my duty shift in the office and like literally on my way to the room like residents came up and got me and said that there’s a kid like screaming in their hallway and like saying he’s like gonna kill himself or something and so that was like, I’m a first year RA, and that was like the first thing that ever happened and so I was like super nervous.

She went on to mention that her training experience contributed to her nerves. She had participated in a skit during training that involved a suicide ideation, and she
did not handle it well, and now she is this resident’s first responder. She said she was “too scared to deal with it by [herself]” and luckily there was another RA close by she could ask for help. After the initial two-hour conversation with the resident, she spent the rest of her time on duty checking to “make sure like he’s not planning on killing himself.” Dana understood the significant responsibility she had as an RA, something she felt unprepared for and scared of.

In other instances, enforcing the rules and responding to resident emergencies can overlap, which can create a potential conflict for the RA. Sam, a second year RA and a junior, said that one way he supports the goals of the housing department is to “write people up” and to help residents “learn from their mistakes.” However, he told a story trying to help a very intoxicated girl that he encountered in another hall where he was not worried about the disciplinary side of his job:

I was like okay cool, I’ll come hang out with [Sam’s residents from a previous year that live in a different hall] for a little bit. I come over there and this girl’s literally drunk and crying on the elevator, and I’m like oh fuck. So, she’s drunk crying and this one random girl who’s not her friend trying to be a good Bobcat, trying get her back to her room. I’m like “what room are you in? Where are your RAs?” I’m like looking for an RA and I’m going through, it was in [Hall A], [Hall A] is 9 fucking stories, it’s very hard to find an RA in [Hall A] because if you don’t know where you’re going. So I’m like looking, wait where are the RA’s rooms on every floor, and then you’re looking for these rooms, but a lot of times those RAs may not even be in there, and in [Hall A] a lot of the RAs are typically out so when there’s an RA on duty that’s who you find, so I was like “let me find the RA on duty and get you back in your room” and she’s freaking out about getting in trouble. But, like, I wouldn’t have taken that initiative, I probably would have anyway, but like because I’m an RA I felt more of the need to take the initiative to be like “let me get you set up, because like you really need to calm down.” ‘Cause like at the end of the day she’s freaking out like “I’m gonna be in so much trouble I don’t want the RA don’t get the RA the RA’s gonna get me in trouble.” I’m like that’s what I
don’t want is that people think that the RAs are going to get them trouble, that’s not my job I do not care what you do. Just be safe and responsible, and she was clearly too intoxicated to function, and I’m like “I’d rather you be in your room locked up where you’re safe then to be passed out in the middle of the hallway where anyone can mess with you or someone can be a drunken asshole and do whatever.” Like, I’d rather you be tucked away so let’s make sure that that’s taken care.

Sam was trying to ensure the girl’s safety, and even though she has clearly been drinking, and we can assume from her fear of the RA that she was most likely underage, he was not concerned with the rule breaking. Sam’s overall goal was to make sure this girl ended up somewhere safe, which, in this situation, Sam felt out-ranked the potential obligation to write her up. In this situation, Sam was embracing the identity in a way that would be inconsistent with what he views are the goals of residential housing because his sense of that identity is make sure the resident is safe, not written up.

These tensions add a layer of complexity to the RA job that each individual has to decide to deal with every time they encounter a situation. The decision to ignore the smell of marijuana, act like the sound of clinking bottles was not coming from a resident’s room, or give an extra warning (instead of an official write up) effectively allows an RA to deny the policing identity in a situation. Instead, they can choose to act, not as an authority figure, but as a forgiving peer or a preoccupied student.

One story was told by two different perspectives throughout the interviews that highlights the tensions RAs feel in these difficult scenarios that occur with the policing identity. Sam and Dana handled the incident together, but were
interviewed at different times. They both brought up the incident as a difficult experience they had as an RA. Sam described the incident as such:

I had a resident, I have athletes, so like half of my population is athletes too, so one of the athletes was like smoking weed on Halloween, and I told him “you can’t smoke weed in the dorm on Halloween, uh housing’s policy on marijuana is to call the police.” Call the police, knock on the door, answer the door, and he’s just like literally started to cry like freaking out, like bawling like “I’m going to be kicked off the team like I literally will lose my scholarship.” He didn’t get kicked off the team but he lost his scholarship, and so he’s leaving the university. But like that was very, um, difficult to do (laugh), and so, because like I knew he knew better and he did it anyway and now there’s a life changing decision I had to make that affect affects the rest of his life (laugh) affects what his degree says when he leaves, you know, what he graduates with, so that’s like very difficult.

Dana described the incident in the same way adding that it was “heartbreaking,” and when probed about how she felt about that situation this is how she responded:

That, like, that’s probably like what I think like the hardest part of being an RA is, like I was really sad, because, I mean, like, I know that it’s not my fault and he knows like he can’t smoke and like especially on Halloween and like he was the room right next to the RAs room so, but at the same time like I was just feel bad like catching people for things like that because it’s like they’re not doing anything that like anyone else on campus isn’t doing they’re just like the ones that got caught for it so like, it like. He was such a good kid too, like the police he was so polite and nice and like he was like so sweet, so I just felt bad because it’s just, like, I mean, you know other people like were like drinking and smoking right now but he was the one who got caught and it like changed his whole life and so it was like really sad.

Sam’s feelings differed:

[I was] Pissed, really pissed at him (laughing). And it was very, um, sad, like it was very depressing, cause like sometimes I take responsibility for my residents in a lot of ways, because like I’ve told you I do what I’m supposed to do so I need you to do what you’re supposed to do. So it’s difficult… I can empathize with the fact that like he was very reliant on …[being part of the team]… and he was a good kid and so then you’re like okay well now you, you know what I mean, he felt like he was defined by that and that was very depressing, so.
Both of these RAs understood that they could not ignore the blatant offense, but they both recognized that decision they made to call the police changed that resident’s life. The action they took was to uphold the values of the job they were in as RAs, but at the same time they were following through on a process that they knew was destroying this person’s current way of life. Two 20 year olds were watching their peer cry in the hallway because they set the events in motion that would ultimately lead to him leaving the University. In her interview Dana said, “I am just doing my job, but like at the same time here are things like you do feel like you probably could have let it go or like you wish like, I don’t know.” She also indicated that maybe if she had been alone when she encountered the smell she may have handled the situation differently, and implied that she was not comfortable with the consequences she saw from the actions she took as an RA.

The policing identity can be a stressful identity to manage. The RAs displayed this stress when talking about these experiences through their verbal pauses, stutters, and laughter. When Dana talked about the role RAs have in getting people in trouble, she begins this statement with, “Yeah, um, just I mean, yeah just like, I mean, just say like really like…” and this difficulty talking about the policing identity demonstrates the psychological and communicative struggle to understand and define what this policing identity means to the individual. Again, when she talked about the incident where the student was caught with marijuana she struggled to coherently start her statement, “That, like, that’s probably like what I think like the hardest part of being an RA is, like I was really sad, because, I mean, like, I know…” Sam also displayed faltering during his
stories by laughing at uncomfortable parts of the story, such as when he was
talking about how he made a life changing decision for the resident who had to
leave the university. The verbal fillers, stutters, and laughter are all disfluencies
that indicate the speaker is organizing or correcting speech to properly
communicate about the difficulties of the policing identity (Bortfeld, et al., 2001;
Clark & Fox Tree, 2000). This inability to communicate displays discomfort or
disconnection to the topic of policing, showing how stressful and undesired this
identity is.

RAs perform an important function in the policing identity by upholding
the rules in the residence halls and providing important support to residents in
emergency situations. The overall feeling from the RAs was that this part of the
job is definitely not glamorous, but it is necessary. However, acting in accordance
to this identity can create emotionally charged situations filled with nerves,
heartbreak, and even regret. Both in accordance with and opposed to this policing
identity is the much more tolerable counseling identity that RAs are saddled with
in the context of the job.

**Counseling Identity.** RAs hold a special position of authority in the
residence halls. They enforce the rules, but they are also the most immediate
resource for residents for all problems or questions. The RAs spoke positively
about the counseling identity in the residence halls; they like having positive,
impactful relationships with the residents. As senior third year RA, Sarah
remembers her motivation for taking the job as based on her own experience with
her RA:
I really decided to be an RA, based off of my RA. I liked my RA. Um, we were in a situation where um, I was on the first floor where, um, the girls and guys were separated by the lobby. And my RA lived on the guys’ side, so not necessarily got to interact with the girls as much, so I felt like, while he was a great RA and like did really good programs like for the buildings he didn’t really adapt a lot to like the female residents of that side. So I really wanted the opportunity to like make an impact and do a lot of the things that he did as far as building the relationships but at the same time like do things differently and like make sure I bonded with my residents a little bit more. So it was a mix of like wanting to do things my own way and also like following in someone else’s foot, footprints.

Sarah realized she missed that counseling presence in her freshman year experience, and she sought out the job to create a better experience for future students. Sam, a nursing major, also referenced the counseling aspect when he described why his family thought he would be great for this position, “It goes back to the same reason why they think I’d be a good nurse, is that I’m very good at communicating with people, like um, and making sure that like they feel comfortable and like I try very hard to be like a caring about other people.” Both Sam and Sarah realized the importance of the counseling aspect of the position, and the significance of being able to build relationships with their residents in the halls.

For many of the RAs, the counseling aspect is their favorite part of the position. Rachel, who strongly identified with this on the job identity, said that she loves the job and “relationship wise” it is a “10 out of 10.” One of her most memorable moments includes a counseling situation with a resident who came out as gay to her this last year:

This year this was really cool, um, I have a resident, uh, who like came up to me and she, um, like came out, and like she’s like this is the first time I’m talking about this like my mom doesn’t know and like my family doesn’t know, friends, and like she was like completely open about
everything and she wanted to get my advice and like and then she talked about like some like difficult like experiences she’s had in the past and she like um, “I know I can trust you like um, I know you’re not going to tell anyone but this is just something that’s really been burdening, um burdening me,” um so it’s just cool to be like someone like ex, just, they know that they can go to me and like trust me and like I don’t know I really like that really enjoy that because that’s like why I took the job, um that was my number one reason.

Rachel relished in the opportunity to connect with this resident and spends hours every day talking with her residents.

Also, Alex’s most memorable moment involved a close relationship she was able to build with a resident that was looking for a connection. She was proud to have this role in someone’s life and clearly identified that the RA position facilitated this relationship because it made her a safe person to the resident. Jordan, someone who does not devote a lot of time to the position and views it as more of a “side job,” even commented that he enjoys hanging out with his residents and going over and above expectations in his relationships with his residents.

Sarah, third year RA and senior, talked about how she helped a resident who reported her sexual assault to her. After the incident, she talked about how good it felt to help the resident:

Um, really good (laughing sigh). Really. Just because, uh, like I said she was one that like, like we’ll say hi to each other in passing, but I like didn’t really ever expect to her to like come like seek me out for something so the fact that she felt comfortable enough coming to me to like let me know that had happened to her like felt really good. Like that was why I was an RA on the floor kind of a thing.

She wanted to be that person someone could talk to and get support. Dana actually expressed her disappointment that she does not get to talk to her residents more:
I had like mixed feelings toward the beginning of the year because my floor section is just like not at all what I thought I was like going to have like all my residents are like amazing, but like my floor section itself is just like the closed door kinda floor section so like I literally just like never see them, and so a lot of times I just like feel like unneeded just because like I mean like I literally do, everyone’s doors shut I mean it’s just easier when everyone is like walking around and I can talk to them but I don’t wanna like physically like knock on their door just to like bother them just to like ask how they’re doing so like, sometimes that’s like made me feel unneeded.

Dana expected her job to be connecting with the residents and creating a community in her hall, and when she could not execute that she was disappointed.

The RAs strive to maintain this relationship in the residence halls. After the incident with the athlete and the marijuana, Sam tried to reestablish himself as a counselor after the incident. When asked how he managed the relationship with the resident who was in trouble this is what he said:

Um, I just kinda made sure that like at the end of the day he knew that I was still the resource that he needed, then the next day like I was emailing him like people’s like. “This is the person that I think like, um, should be able to help you with this” because like his ticket was literally the next morning at like one, like he didn’t have time like no turn around for a lawyer no nothing like he was trying to get rid of the ticket, like he didn’t know what was going to happen if he was get community service or whatever so I was like just call this dude and he was like that really helped a lot thanks, it helped it get played down, because like he got charged with something higher and then he like basically played it down lo like a ticket and a fine, but it was very like just making sure I’m still a resource for him and not that I was ever being judgmental, like making sure he was emotionally stable because he wasn’t emotionally stable after he got written up um, and after the police officer showed up so yeah.

He wanted to be the resource, the person that helps deal with the problem and lessen the consequences. Here Sam identifies as a counselor trying to assist his resident in any way he can, even though he was the one who called the police.
RAs enjoy the connection that comes with the counseling identity. Also, they have high expectations in this area that come from Residential Housing. For some, the counseling functions were what they expected from the job, and for others they applied for the job because they wanted to help students. This important identity comes with its own stresses. As Annie said, it is hard to stay positive for the residents if she has problems in her own life. And the night after our interview, Dana was nervously planning a conversation with a resident who may be bulimic. However, these two RAs still value this identity, and see the significance of their contribution.

**Student Identity.** Police and counselor are both identities of the RA job, but RAs have a student identity as well. RAs are students in an academic and social capacity, and this identity plays a big role in how they manage their responsibilities as RAs. Both the police and counselor identities and the other job duties described in the job illustration are happening in the contexts of the RA’s student life. This student identity has two main aspects, academic and social, that each have an influence on the RA.

RAs are “students first” according to the Residential Housing department. The department tells the RAs that their school work comes before their responsibilities as an RA, but the line between being a student and being an RA is not always so clear. Sam and Taylor both mentioned that their number one priority is school and homework, and Rachel mentioned that time commitment of being an RA almost scared her away from the job due to her difficult courses. Although being a student is supposed to come first, there are limitations to this claim.
Residential housing requires all RAs to work all night on one particularly busy weekend at the University. Alex recalls this weekend adding to the stress because she had other tasks to accomplish that were overshadowed by this stressful mandatory weekend. Also, the “student first” mentality only applies to academic requirements. Taylor discussed how student organizations and other extracurricular activities are not considered part of the “student first” and are trumped by the duties of the RA job, even though involvement in student organizations is part of the student experience.

This constant tension between the student identity and RA position is not only limited to the academic aspect of being a student. Social life and development are also a big aspect of the college experience. These social experiences are different for RAs than for other students, which changes their college experiences. Annie mentioned she’s “had a lot of friend drama this year” due to the differences in her personal development and her friends:

[S]o just like, you feel like you’re evolving and changing and kinda live in the hall when you’re staff and feeling good and confident, but then when you go back to the friend group it just is different than how it used to be. So I think in a way you kind of pull yourself away and, or at least I have, I’ve sort of detracted a little bit from that, because I’m moving forward so much that I can’t you know take them with me or drag them with me, so.

As an RA, she is put through training and expected to act with a level or responsibility and maturity not expected of her peers. The responsibility and personal development has changed the nature of her friendships outside of the RA position. Alex mentioned how the difference in authority complicates her relationships with underclassmen because it restricts what they feel comfortable
sharing with her. Also, Taylor verbalized part of the social restrictions that he felt came with the job:

You come back after being a freshman and having all of those fun experiences as a freshman and like, all your best friends, and then you come back as an RA and you don’t have than anymore, because you now like in this job that’s you know you’re kind of put on a pedestal, people are always watching you, um, and so your friends just view you as an RA now, and they don’t see you still as that person that, um they had all that fun with a year before. Even though they still value you as a friend it’s much different a lot of my friends were like “Oh we just always assume you’re on duty so we don’t invite you to come do stuff” when it’s like I’m only on duty like once a week.

Taylor experienced a recognizable difference between his experience as a freshman, before he became an RA, and his sophomore and junior experiences as an RA. These tensions affect how RAs social lives are conducted, fundamentally altering their student experience.

All RAs are also students dealing with the same stresses and challenges. RAs, however, also have to help their residents deal with those stresses as well. Max, the RD, mentioned that RAs are trained on identity development, “giving them a leg up on the maturity,” but this responsibility changes how the student experiences college and handling those tensions can causes stress in both the academic and social spheres.

Both policing and counseling are essential identities in the job of RA, but these identities can come into conflict. Also, the student identity provides additional identity tensions that increase the difficulty RAs face in the course of their job. These identities can come into direct conflict and force the RA to pick with which identity to act in accordance.

Communication Strategies
The second research question asks what communication strategies RAs use to manage moments when they experience conflicting identities. The RAs shared specific experiences that pinpointed times where their identities conflicted within the scope of the job. When someone’s actions do not reflect what they believe, the ensuing internal discomfort is known as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive dissonance creates stress when the individual continuously is acting in a way that is inconsistent with their beliefs or their identity. To correct this discomfort, individuals can do one of three things: change their actions, change their beliefs, or rationalize the difference (Festinger, 1957). One way RAs can change their actions if they do not agree with the organization is to withdraw from the environment, either formally through quitting or informally through putting in less effort and avoiding the environment. RAs can change their beliefs to align with the organization through immersing themselves in the organization and adopting the organization’s beliefs over their own. Finally, RAs can rationalize the difference by finding aspects of the organization that supposedly compensate for the downfalls the RAs have identified. When RAs were dealing with identity conflicts they either engaged in one of these strategies or paid the emotional consequences.

Sam told a story about a situation that lead to him withdrawing from the job through changes in behavior and communication. From his perspective, he had gone over and above for a resident, but his boss was unsupportive and antagonistic towards him for not following the rules:
The other straw [that broke the camel’s back] was when I took a resident to the hospital, which you’re not supposed to do, but like if I think a resident’s dying I’m taking them to the hospital, I don’t care how you feel (laugh). I was walking up and he was moving, and it’s a liability issue and the department says don’t even touch them like we don’t want the liability, but I’m like I’m not on duty, you’re allowed to go to the ER, and there’s been mixed like communication from the department on how to do, because they don’t want to say, they have to say don’t take them to the hospital, but if you’re like I’m doing this, this, and this I should be allowed to take them to the hospital. They’re like gonna say not to take them to the hospital for liability reasons to cover ourselves, but at the end of the day if you need to do that do that, because housing can’t back you. So if the patient were to turn around and sue you, they can’t then sue the department. So you’re taking on the liability yourself which is like alright like this guy, this particular resident, I knew this resident, like I knew his family like I went to high school with him, like he was my quarterback in high school so like I knew him (laughs). I was like his grandma’s not gonna sue me. I’m not really concerned.

Sam’s student identity wanted to help someone who he grew up and was a friend, but it with his policing identity that required him to follow the rules of residential housing. Sam knew that he was not required to take the resident to the hospital, but he was worried about him. He knew he was not technically supposed to bring this resident to the ER, but he concluded that the need for help outweighed residential housing’s warning.

So I took him to the ER. Whatever, right? … “you’re just talking about chest pain you’re talking about you think you’re gonna die, like let’s just go right now.” We don’t think about it. …[S]o you take him over to [the hospital] sitting in the ER sitting in the ER. We’re sitting there waiting and then we get a call from like the RAs who were on duty who were like “you didn’t call pro staff,” like we skipped the step of calling pro staff, it’s a very important step, and so because in of the end of the day housing it’s all about trickling of information, and where, who gets what when. So we’re both like, “oh crap we forgot to call pro staff,” so I’m like who’s pro staff on duty, my supervisor is pro staff on duty, so I’m like shit who’s calling her cause I’m not calling her, like I really, really don’t wanna call her.

So, eventually we just have to call her because people on duty made us call her, so we called her, and we were like “yeah so we took someone to [the hospital]” and she was like “Wait what?” she didn’t understand what was
Sam had to report that he took a resident to the ER and was faced with even more confusion and panic from his boss while he was going above and beyond his job duties to make sure a resident was safe and healthy. He felt unsupported, and did not appreciate being threatened with discipline, particularly while he was still at the hospital with the resident. This threat of a “conversation” from his supervisor betrayed what he expected of the organization, where he thought his role was to care for the residents.

[Like I get back [from the hospital] and then of course there’s a 3 day aftermath of bullshit that I’m dealing with while I have exams and shit coming up this week. I’m exhausted like I’m tired I’ve got shit to do, she like forces me to sit down and talk to me, scares me into thinking I’m going to get like fired or like written up for this and like blah blah blah, and I’m like “you’re wrong, like I don’t care like I really really don’t care how you feel at the end of the day you’re not backing me, you’re more attacking me, like I don’t feel comfortable with that. That’s not okay…”

So that, that was my breaking point, I was done with her, didn’t talk to her for the rest of the semester, didn’t give a shit. I wasn’t gonna, I did my job I did what I was supposed to do but like in regards to her I was basically ready to throw her out on her ass. So, that was the breaking point for that semester so after that I just kinda do my job to the minimal and do what I need to do. Cause when you go above and beyond and get scolded for it,
that’s bullshit. I’m not going to continue to go above and beyond and get scolded, I’m not comfortable with that. That experience demonstrated to Sam that the organization was not what he thought, and it did not align with what he believed his role should be. Therefore, he decided to alter his actions and withdraw effort in order to align his behavior with his beliefs that he no longer aligned with the organization, ultimately disidentifying with the organization.

Earlier in the interview, before he told this story, Sam talked about taking initiative on the job to constantly find more efficient ways to perform the duties of being an RA, and even did work that he was not paid for over winter break. These actions reveal a higher level of identification. He also used to put in the 20 hours of work, but now only puts in around 10 and does not hang around the residence hall as often. The situation in Sam’s story signified a shift in his beliefs about his job, and he no longer saw the job as aligning with who he was, so he changed his actions and withdrew effort. His coworker, Dana, described him as negative and in one scenario said Sam was angry about having to participate in a situation with a resident because he did not want to put in the work. Identification is an “active process by which individuals link themselves” (Cheney, 1983b, p. 342) to the organization, and Sam is making active efforts to not be linked with the organization through his absence in the hall and his attitude toward the job and his coworkers.

While Sam’s strategy was to change his behavior to match his beliefs, another strategy some RAs employed was to change their beliefs to match their behaviors. When Kelly told her family that she would be working as an RA they
started chanting “snitch” to mock her. Coming into the position she was most apprehensive about getting people in trouble. Her beliefs did not match up with the actions she was supposed to take as an RA. As mentioned early, she did not like getting people in trouble. She experienced cognitive dissonance from what she believed her identity to be—not a “snitch”—and had to change her belief to match the actions required by the job. She worked to change her beliefs through conversations with her RD:

    Thinking about being an RA, like I love helping people but then like I hate getting people in trouble. Like, I hate doing that, but I had to think about it, ‘cause like I’ve talked about it this with my, um, my boss and she’s like “you have to think about it as you’re kinda of like helping them because you don’t want them to like, um, be an alcoholic for the first 4 years of college,” you know, you wanna kinda like show them that, eh, eh their cons, there are consequences to their actions.

Rationalizing the difference means that the person identifies the disconnection, but rectifies it by reframing the action to fit in with their beliefs. This strategy allows people to behave in ways that would normally contradict their beliefs, but since they have a good enough reason the behavior does not bother them. Aaron exemplified this tactic when talking about how the RA job affects school work. He said that the RA position can negatively affect school assignments or class performance due to lack of time and sleep, but these draws are acceptable because the position offers perks like two hours of free tutoring and ability to miss certain events for important exams and projects. Ideally, a student’s number one priority is school, and when Aaron was faced with the job affecting his academic performance, he rationalized that the job was worth it and had the appropriate perks to make up the difference.
Annie also displayed this rationalization strategy when talking about the stresses of the position. She was optimistic throughout the interview and only mentioned positive aspects of the job, but she mentioned that it can be difficult to continue being a good RA when faced with “inner turmoil.” When asked how that stress make her feel about her job she said:

I think in a way it’s kind of a blessing in disguise, because it teaches you more about how you get through things or how there’s other things in life that could be worse or we’re all dealing with things. So I think with being an RA it can really show you that we’re kind of all in this together and we can all help each other even though one of us is supposed to be the leader, even your resident could cheer you up at the same time.

When she is struggling with her position and her stress, she realizes that she does not have the luxury to stop being an RA while she deals with it. Even though she has an optimistic viewpoint, she is recognizing the struggle she faces in the position that makes her job of counseling others more difficult. Therefore, she rationalized that her job duties provide her with what she needs to get through the tough spots.

In summary, the RAs used three distinct communication strategies to cope with the stress caused by identity conflicts: changing actions, changing beliefs, and rationalizing the difference. Experiencing dissonance between one’s actions and beliefs is stressful and uncomfortable for anyone (Festinger, 1957). Finding ways to rectify the cognitive dissonance is an important aspect of being a satisfied RA. When these tensions were not dealt with, RAs mentioned how it affected them emotionally. Alex had a tough year her first year as an RA; unsupported by staff and lacking confidence in the position, she struggled with the job and managing the new responsibilities. Instead of seeking help or making any
changes, she just got through it until she was on a better team in a better environment. This time caused feelings of depression for Alex and lead to handling her feelings in unhealthy ways. Rachel, too, mentioned a time when she was overloaded by work and school, unsure of how to handle the time commitments and balance the responsibilities, she said she just worked harder to get through it, resenting the job and seeing her grades suffer. She paid the price for not finding a way to rectify the dissonance she was feeling about wanting to do her best but not having the time to do so.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1981) explains that a person will maintain membership in groups or organizations that positively contribute to her social identity and from which she derives satisfaction. When RAs experiences cognitive dissonance, they have the option to leave the organization, change how they interpret the negative aspects of the group, or engage in social change. Many RAs cannot leave the job because of financial factors, so they are left with the other two options, which align closely to Festinger’s (1975) ways of correcting cognitive dissonance by changing actions, beliefs, or rationalizing the difference. These methods of coping with identity conflicts allow the RAs to build their organizational identification, which increase their job satisfaction, motivation, performance, and sense of belonging within the organization (Cheney, 1983b) which makes being on the job more enjoyable.

Identity tensions are a type of identity conflict associated with organizational change, and these tensions provide perspective on other types of identity conflicts. Pepper and Larson (2006) researched identity tensions in post-
acquisition organizations. Their study examined the tensions employees faced while transitioning to being a part of a new organization. One finding stated that identity tensions are inevitable in times of organizational change; however, the significance of these tensions comes from how the individual decides to manage them. The value an individual assigns to a certain identity predicts the outcome of an identity conflict situation. An RA that values the student identity more heavily than the RA identity or the policing identity more heavily than the counselor identity will act in accordance with the higher valued, or preferred, identity. And if the preferred identity is consistently challenged or begin causing cognitive dissonance those values can shift to realign the RAs identity to prevent psychological discomfort (Mannberg & Sjogren, 2015).

It is in the best interest of the organization if employees are able to manage these decisions in favor of the company. So, in the case of RAs, residential housing would want RAs to handle tensions like Aaron and Kelly, whose strategies favor the university and the expectations of RAs. However, it is not beneficial to organizations if members manage tensions in ways that are similar to Sam, whose frustration and sense of being disrespected and confronted caused him to manage the tensions by deciding to disidentify with the organization and invest less time and effort in the RA position. However, Sam chose to disidentify for valid reasons. The lack of support and level of uncertainty created an emotionally unsafe environment where he felt persecuted for acting consistently with his values. This lead to him making a safe decision to remove himself from the environment mentally because he could not remove himself physically.
Organizational Identification

The final research question asks how identity conflicts and organizational identification are related. In the context of the RA position, organizational identification becomes a more complicated concept. The job title becomes a defining identity for the student whether they want it to or not. For example, when asked how residents view RAs, Taylor had this to say:

Well, they definitely don’t view us as just students. Um, and I know that because one of my residents last year, it was like week 6, and he was like “Wait you go to classes?” I was like, yes I’m also a student I don’t just sit around and wait for you guys to do stuff all day.” Um, so they view us as this weird authority figure that like can get them in trouble.

He also pointed to situations when the RA identity was thrust upon him:

So it’s just like that shift of like you know learning how to still be yourself and having this title that gets thrust upon you. Because when a resident introduces you to someone they don’t say, “This is Taylor,” they say “This is my RA.” And so even if it’s just like one of their friends, like, you’re known as the “RA” and that’s just a title that you’re like given and you really can’t get rid of it.

In new interactions, Taylor has no choice but to be the RA. Regardless of his behavior he will still have that label in the eyes of anyone who knows him. Even his friends from before he became an RA made assumptions that he was busy and excluded him from plans based on his RA identity. This job is an inescapable reality; unlike most other jobs, these RAs never get to clock out.

When referring to the fluctuating nature of organizational identification that Scott and Stephens (2009) researched, identification is higher when an individual interacts with the job, such as when at work or talking with coworkers. In the case of RAs, they constantly interact with the job because they are constantly held to the rules of residential housing. Max, the RD, said that RAs
sign a document when they are hired pledging that they will not consume alcohol at all until they are 21 under penalty of losing their job, which is an example of the reach residential housing has in the lives of the RAs. Therefore, the environment creates a unique case of heightened identification. This forced identification almost mandates that RAs act in accordance with the rules and goals of the organization at all times or face disciplinary action.

Kelly identified this constant identification as distinctly different from another job she had at a paint store over the summer. She said when she clocked out at the store and went home she was no longer representing that store or working, but as an RA she is always working. The feeling of constantly working as an RA, even when not technically working, creates constant job interaction that results in the potential for higher identification and the potential for more identity conflicts (Scott & Stephens, 2009), but it also provides the potential for more dissonance.

Also, many RAs rely on the financial support of the job to stay at the University, so risking their job would also risk their education and future. These stakes create a captive environment for RAs, making displays of disidentification either minute, such as expressing dissatisfaction or staying away from the residence hall when possible, or large, such as ignoring the rules or quitting. Rachel and Taylor have both decided not to return for their last year, choosing instead to embrace the student identity uncomplicated by the policing and counseling identities involved in being an RA.
However, RAs do have ways of demonstrating their organizational identification through displaying citizenship behaviors and forming close friendships with the staff. Annie, who I observed to genuinely love her job, said this about extra tasks:

I don’t really mind any extra tasks. I think I try to strive to do extra, like we’re not forced to clean the staff office, but if it’s dirty it’s just a nice thing to do or kind of keep things comfortable for people or if you see trash out you don’t have to pick it up, the cleaning people can, but I don’t think too much is really asked of us, I think, a lot of times we are very lucky with what we get to do and we do have a lot of free time and so I think taking a little extra time isn’t really that awful.

She enjoys what she does and feels “lucky” to have the position, and therefore does not mind putting in extra effort. Sarah talks positively about her job in the community and spends time enhancing her bulletin boards over expectations, because she takes “pride in the work that [she’s] done in the last three years and …it’s important to [her].” Displaying these behaviors show that these RAs are investing extra time and effort into the organization, aligning themselves with the goals of the organization voluntarily.

In times of identity conflict, organizational identification can either be bolstered or diminished. When facing an identity conflict, much like the identity tensions described by Pepper and Larson (2006), RAs have the choice to act on behalf of the organization or on behalf of the other identity. When an RA decides to call the police after smelling marijuana, rather than ignoring the smell, they are demonstrating their organizational identification. These moments are important indicators that the RA acts on behalf of the organization, because RAs are often alone and acting—or not acting—with high autonomy. Identity elasticity
illustrates this relationship, because the elasticity recognizes that the organizational identification changes and flows but the some aspects remain constant (Kreiner, Hollensbe, Sheep, Smith, & Kataria, 2015). For example, even if an RA decides to not notify the police when she smells marijuana she is still employed as an RA, and she does have to complete certain actions to keep her job.

The relationship between identity conflicts and organizational identification has two mitigating factors: the presence of another RA and the consequences of the RA’s actions. The presence of another RA adds pressure to a situation due to being observed. Rather than purely acting out of support for the organization, an RA’s decision to take action could come from the desire to save face or manage their reputation with a coworker (Goffman, 1955). Also, when the consequences of an RA’s actions are not what they anticipated, this can lead to regret and frustration that may then lead to a disconnect between the RA and the organization. For example, looking back on Dana’s telling of the story with the athlete and the marijuana, she did not anticipate that her calling the cops would lead to his leaving the University and expressed regret at this decision. Sam, on the other hand, was disappointed but did not indicate that he would act in another way—displaying higher organizational identification in that situation. These two factors are important for understanding the relationship between identity conflicts and organizational identification.

At every point during an identity conflict RAs have the opportunity to decide to disidentify or identify with the organization in specific situations. Identity conflicts are particularly stressful times of experiencing cognitive
dissonance that propels the RAs to make decisions and then act on them, which could either lead to higher or lower identification with the organization. For example, when Dana talked about the incident with the marijuana and the resident that had to leave the University, she implied that she may have made a different decision in that situation if she could. In the future, if Dana decides to ignore the smell of marijuana, she will be actively disidentifying with the organization due to the identity conflict. However, if she decides to act, then she will be actively choosing to identity with organization despite the past identity conflict. The relationship between identity conflicts and organizational identification is that identity conflicts create a critical decision for RAs about their levels of organizational identification, creating the potential for disidentification behaviors.

**Panopticon Complex**

Throughout the data analysis a theme emerged that was not an identity, but does have an impact on an RA’s organizational identification and overall college experience. This theme centers on the idea that RAs are never off the clock; whether they are in the residence hall or anywhere on campus, they are constantly seen and their behavior is scrutinized. I am calling it the panopticon complex, based on the panopticon (Greek of “all seeing”) architectural conceptualization from Jeremy Bentham made famous by the panopticon prison model (Foucault, 1975/1977). Bentham designed the architecture of a panopticon building so that an unseen observer in the middle of a circular building could see every person in the building. The unseen observer would be in a watch tower with all of the spaces for people positioned on the perimeter of the structure, allowing one person to
effectively supervise a lot of people. The usefulness of this design comes both from the ease of observation, but also by inflicting the sense of constant surveillance to the people in the panopticon building. A prison is one example where feeling under constant surveillance and only requiring one guard to watch the prisoners would supposedly be beneficial (Foucault, 1975/1977).

RAs do not work in a panopticon structure, but the increased visibility and higher behavioral standards they are held to create an environment where they feel like they are constantly under supervision. RAs are under the constant pressure of wondering if people recognize them and how they are perceiving their actions. Foucault’s book *Discipline & Punish* (1975/1977) describes panopticism, drawn from Bentham’s architectural designs, as economical, omnipresent power enacted through discipline. Foucault (1975/1977) illustrates the shift in discipline, and therefore the shift in power, in society from one of public torture to one of increased surveillance and observation. This is visible in today’s society in the political sphere, such as the Patriot Act, the business sphere, such as when employers track employee keystrokes, and the social sphere, such as the constant use of social media.

As authority figures within the residence halls, RAs become a public face with many of their residents and other students on campus recognizing them. This constant recognition is a form of surveillance for RAs who are held up as the face of residential housing, and they must always be cognizant of where they are, what they are doing, and whether their actions might implicate them. Sarah mentioned that she supports residential housing through “being like an outward face of the
department like sticking to the rules and like just being that representation.” RAs then are required to follow the rules and manage their actions at all times, constantly thinking about and acting out the identity of RA in order to protect themselves from potential disciplinary actions or even firing.

Sam identified this complex as living in a “fishbowl,” the name the department uses:

It’s literally like you’re living in a fishbowl. Like on my way to this … on my way here I ran into three or four residents and two staff members walking literally from the hall… to here. Talking at [the student union] I ran into three of them like “Hey, hey, hey Sam”, like tripped on the elevator and it’s like “Hey Tony,” and I was like oh my life sucks like “Hey, how are you?” So I think at the end of the day people are watching and they see you … just [to] face that like things that have me going to and from are here from here to [the hall] is like a prime example when you go out like you’re going out with some friends or something like that like you gotta be careful who sees you, because no matter where I go I always end up running into a resident at least one, every time. No shit, I don’t think I’ve gone out like with my friends and not seen one residents, like so it’s, it just because like the University is big but it’s not that big. Um, so I think that that makes it more difficult because you really do live in fishbowl, what you do people will see and they can report that they could go do this or whatever so you have to be an example all the time which can be difficult.

Sam’s actions, even on a walk in the middle of the day from his hall to the library, are observed by residents and other staff members. He expresses a fear of being reported and how difficult this constant state of visibility is to manage.

Max, the RD, said there is an emphasis on this position being a lifestyle, not a job:

[As an RA you are] a constant role model even if you sign out of the building potentially bearing consequences of like, sure you weren’t even holding a beer but someone saw you at [a party] so the rumor that got through to everyone was “My RA was totally wasted at [a party],” so. Whether there is truth in it or not, there’s a reality of your life is viewed through this lens of you are supposed to be an upstanding citizen, and you
better not be someone who is breaking laws or rules because you’re supposed to be holding others accountable for upholding those things. Max describes that RAs are held accountable for their actions at all times, and if the rumor of misconduct is heard by those in residential housing there could be real consequences for the RA.

Dana told a story about how social media is upping the ante for RAs because it increases the surveillance atmosphere and is a quick, and potentially misleading, way for others to gather proof of an RA’s behavior.

Me and my friends talk about this but how like Snapchat is just such a game changer for RAs, because it really like is just like changed everything in so many ways because if like you ever do go anywhere like everybody has snapchat and so you never, if like you’re in the background of someone else’s photo or you’re on the University snap or on Campus story or the State story, and you just like don’t know who seeing it. Because I like, there was actually a time when I like was following my friend on snapchat and like she’s not an RA but like she was at like a 21st birthday party or something and there was like a girl like doing a keg stand in the video, but it was like a guy on my staff was holding her up and I was like I saw this video of you and like started freaking out, he was like, he was like “what video?” and like got so nervous. And so, like I think that part is like probably really scary for people, because I mean it’s like one thing for Twitter and Facebook, but I feel like Snapchat just spreads so fast and everybody has it.

The RA was nervous of the repercussions of a video taken at a friend’s 21st birthday, a video he was unaware was taken. He was partaking in binge drinking behaviors, which could potentially lead to disciplinary action, and if anyone in the video was under 21 it could lead to dismissal. Although not recommended, helping a fellow student do a keg stand is not an uncommon college experience. Similarly, attending a 21st birthday party is also common for college students. But these actions can potentially carry huge consequences for RAs.
It is not just other residents or students that RAs have to worry about, it is fellow staff members as well. Kelly talked about an RA, Sabrina, who is notorious for getting other RAs fired. Kelly said that Sabrina has had two different RA groups fired for alcohol, whereas the other people on her staff are “pretty chill when it comes to a situation.” Kelly told a story about how someone on her staff had alcohol in her room, and Sabrina caught a glimpse of it and told their RD, which eventually led to the RA’s termination. In contrast, Kelly had known about the alcohol and never said anything. Kelly also mentioned having to miss out on events because she was afraid of the repercussions of getting caught:

Um, well, I definitely don’t go out as much. Um, last Tuesday, no Wednesday so it was yeah two days ago, it was my friend’s 21st birthday and I couldn’t go out with because it was bars and I’m not 21, I turn 21 in May, so because of that if I would have gotten caught I would have been fired, so that’s the kinda thing that sucks like I missed her whole birthday. I don’t hang out with people that drink as much because like I can’t be around it.

Avoiding drinking is not a difficult task, even in college, when it is for your own personal belief system. But Kelly told a different story, she called her family partiers and said she does not go out “as much” as she used to. Kelly indicated that she partook in festivities that involved alcohol prior to her position as an RA, and now she feels the need to alter her entire social life to fit the expectations of the position.

Max said the far reach the RA job has is a point of contention within the department. RAs sign a contract before they start saying they will not ever drink under the age of 21 and they will report other RAs who do. Many RAs are uncomfortable with this idea and so are many administrators, according to Max:
Um, we have had in the last few years our expectations of RAs use of alcohol and social media actually written out and you know like I think the most controversial component of that is that if you are aware of a fellow RA’s underage use of alcohol that you have to report them. Uh, which is like now like you know like a whistleblower kind of thing and that makes people feel very uncomfortable and that the fact that we have very clearly received the message uh from our department’s leadership that there’s like a zero tolerance for these things we have like literally sign that we are going to abide by this alcohol abuse policy and it’s not just “I’m not going to drink on the job” it’s like “I’m not going to drink at all.” So that means that even if an RA is signed out of the building and at a sorority party or at a band party that if, not even necessarily their resident but someone recognized them as an RA, largely a problem due to the advancement of technology, they will document it and use it against them.

Max identified that the constant pressure of the panopticon that RAs live in would change their social life, causing it to be different from non-RAs. He could also see how it would create resentment towards the job, because RAs do not have the freedom most other college students experience.

This panopticon complex mandates that RAs constantly exhibit RA appropriate behavior or risk disciplinary action, particularly in the social realm. RAs cannot interact with their college environment the way other students can. A mistake that involves alcohol, either consumed or assumed to have been consumed, can lead to the loss of job that is often helping the RA to continue to attend school; a non-RA does not face the same consequences. Two RAs, Taylor and Rachel, both of whom enjoyed their time as RAs, said that they have decided to not continue on with the job in their last year of school. In a follow-up email correspondence with Rachel she said this about not returning:

I want to experience a normal college year. I don't want to be responsible for anyone else but myself. Don't get me wrong, I love being there for people, but it’s just pretty exhausting and time consuming to always be caring for other people and not have time to care for yourself.
So, I figured since I have done it for 2 years ready, and I will be 21, I might as well just have one normal college year experience. She is craving the “normal college … experience,” something that many RAs only experience their first year at the University.

The panopticon complex combined with the functions of the RA job creates a distinctly different experience for RAs than other university students on campus. There is a cultural understanding about going away to university to get an education that involves finding one’s freedom and autonomy, making mistakes and experimenting with one’s likes and dislikes, and involving oneself in the social scene. Instead of being nurtured and developed, RAs are doing the nurturing and developing of other students. Also, for better or worse, there is the presence of alcohol and partying in social situations at most universities. And at the University, as mentioned, there is a higher than average prevalence of alcohol and partying. So are RAs missing the “normal college experience”? From this research I can say yes, the RA experience differs than that of other students at the University in that while other students are experimenting with freedom, RAs are constantly monitored by the watchful and unseen eye of residential housing.

**Summary**

The University’s 5 Cs is the value system perpetuated by marketing efforts; however, these values were not brought up by RAs. Instead RAs referenced the residential housing values as most important to their complex job that involves organizing programs, having meaningful conversations, and performing administrative tasks amongst other duties. These other duties fell under to identities: *police* and *counselor*. These two identities were most salient
for RAs. The police identity encompassed enforcing rules and responding to emergencies while the counselor identity involved listening to problems, providing resources, and being a friend. Also, the RAs experienced the student identity that encompassed the responsibilities of school work and social relationships outside of the RA job.

These three identities caused identity conflict for RAs that lead to feelings of cognitive dissonance—psychological discomfort when one’s actions do not align with beliefs (Festinger, 1957). RAs coped with cognitive dissonance in three ways: changing actions, changing beliefs, and rationalizing the difference (Festinger, 1957). How RAs dealt with feelings of cognitive dissonance determined the affect the identity conflict would have on the RA’s organizational identification. RAs experiencing identity conflicts may choose to change or rationalize on behalf of the organization which strengthens organizational identification or on behalf of another identity which weakens organizational identification.

Throughout my analysis the panopticon complex emerged as a significant theme. The panopticon complex describes the constant surveillance RAs face due to the public nature of their job and the strict rules the organization holds them to at all times. This requires constant awareness on the part of RAs to act in accordance with organizational rules and expectation.
Chapter 5

Conclusion

The RA job is multi-faceted, time consuming, and difficult. The relationship between organizational identification and identity is complicated in this position due to the panopticon complex that assigns an ever-present identity to RAs. Next I will summarize my findings, reflect on my own experiences, and discuss the limitations and future directions of this study.

Summary. Organizational identification is the “active process by which individuals link themselves to elements in the social scene” (Cheney, 1983b, p. 342). RAs are constantly linked to the organization by living where they work and the ever-present supervision explained by the panopticon complex. Fostering high organizational identification benefits the organization because it increases positive organizational behaviors such as reduced turnover and increased productivity; however, RAs do not always have the choice to align with the organization. The constant presence of residential housing in RA’s lives demands a level of organizational identification to maintain quality job performance.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is concerned with the part of an individual’s identity constructed by group memberships. For RAs, the job is not only a workplace social group, it is also a source of friendships, and it constructs their at-home social structure due to living where they work. This unique situation is again described in the discussion of the panopticon complex.

Alex described both her organizational identification and her social identity when she talked about how important being an RA was to her:
Umm… currently, in as an undergraduate student I think it is a big part of my identity, because I think it changes a lot how I can interact with students, but especially students who are under the age of 21, because it really changes you know what people can tell me and not, um, so I think that is like a big thing that, yeah, it definitely adjusts my identity in that way. Um, and I think it’s also something that I am like have a degree of like pride in, that it’s something, um, just that I’m committed to, that you know, I think is kinda known for being a lot of work, um, and yeah I just like something that I’m like proud of like being able to call myself and RA. So, I think in that sense, yeah I would identify as an RA and even it just serves connection for me to other people in a way that I normally wouldn’t be connected. Or I guess to people who I would not normally be connected to. So like if I could have never this person before in my life and, but if we’re both RAs then we have something in common, and, um, so I think that in like that sense it like helps me connect to people like a lot more often than I would if I didn’t have that job. Um, and so, I think that’s a huge part of it. I think once I’m graduated I don’t think it will be a large part of my identity anymore. I definitely think the skills are transferrable that I’ve learned from it. And I’ll take them with me from my undergraduate career, but um, in terms of my identity, like, I would say it’s a decent part of my identity as an undergraduate student.

Alex is proud to be associated with the role of RA because of how other people view the role, the pride she takes in the work, and the connections this position gives her to other RAs, establishing a social identity in terms of SIT. However, she understands that the position changes how she interacts with other students, particularly students under 21, but she chooses to focus on the positives of the job, making it a “big part of [her] identity.” By stating that being an RA is important to her identity, she actively linked herself to the organization, fitting Cheney’s (1983b) definition of organizational identification. This example also demonstrates how these concepts—SIT and organizational identification—are interconnected and can influence each other. The research questions also add to the current literature on these subjects.
The first research question asked, “What salient identities do Resident Assistants (RAs) experience in their jobs?” I found three major identities: police, counselor, and student. Each of these identities plays a major role in an RA’s job and college experience. Police requires the RA to enforce the rules of the halls and be the first responders in emergency situations. Counselor requires a variety of emotional support tasks, including managing roommate conflicts, having discussions about eating disorders, and helping students register for classes. These identities bring about their own stressors, but both are essential functions of the position. The police identity enforces the rules within the residence halls and responds to emergency situations. The counselor identity creates a constantly available resource for residents as they transition into college and provides the function of advisor, friend, mediator, and parent. Finally, student encompasses the tension between the duties of being an RA and the social and academic pressures and stresses of being a student at the University. These identities were particularly salient and played a large role in the everyday lives of the RAs.

These distinct identities are drawn from the experiences of RAs, and they are a good illustration of how identification allows us to organize our experiences into categories to better understand ourselves (Cheney, 1983a). Understanding that RAs are experiencing multiple, conflicting identities is important because these conflicts can lead to lower job satisfaction, lower performance, and less satisfaction as a student (Deluga & Winters, 1990). These different identities set the scene for understanding the resulting conflicts and organizational
identification trends in the complicated lives RAs navigate (Deluga & Winters, 1990; Everett & Loftus, 2011).

The second research question asked, “What communication strategies do RAs use to cope with identity conflicts in the scope of their job?” Coping with cognitive dissonance encompassed the strategies RAs utilized to handle situations of identity conflicts. Cognitive dissonance creates a psychological discomfort that motivates the individual to correct the discomfort in these three ways: change their actions, change their beliefs, or rationalize the difference (Festinger, 1957). The RAs used each of these strategies to rectify inconsistencies between their actions in the job of the RA and their beliefs and identities.

These cognitive dissonance coping methods are related to the constructs of the Social Identity Theory (SIT) put forth by Tajfel (1981). The three qualifying statements of SIT state that an individual will maintain membership in a group that contributes positively to her social identity. This would be an instance where she did not experience an identity conflict or if she rectified cognitive dissonance by changing her belief to allow the action to align with a newly conceptualized social identity. If the organization does not contribute positively to her social identity, she will either leave—change her actions—or reinterpret the unwelcome aspects or features of the organization—rationalize the difference. This integration of theories adds depth to both theories by providing a psychological context to SIT and a social context to cognitive dissonance. Also, looking at RAs’ reactions to identity conflicts gives insight into how employees deal with these decisions and how organizations can better counsel employees through them.
The third research question asked, “How are identity conflicts related to organizational identification in RAs?” In the context of the RA position, organizational identification is more complicated because RAs are expected to behave as RAs at all times, creating a mandated sense of identification. However, when RAs experience identity conflicts, they are faced with a choice of whether to act in accordance with the organization or the values of another identity. This decision can either increase or decrease the organizational identification an RA experiences each time an identity conflict arises.

Organizational identification allows us to organize our lives and our experiences into categories based on our identifications (Cheney, 1983a), but when conflicts occur we have to choose what category is more important to us. An identity conflict is when an individual must decide to prefer one identity, denying the expression of another identity in that moment (Ramarajan, 2014). This research illustrated the importance of RAs choosing to prefer certain aspects of their RA identity, denying their student identity, and how often and pivotal those moments of decision are to the organization. These decisions further emphasize Ashforth and Mael’s (1989) conclusion that an individual cannot “cognitively integrate” (p. 35) identities and must instead separate them and make decisions that reflect each identity’s importance, such as an RA might do when they choose to ignore the sound of clinking bottles in a room because they do not want to take the time to handle the situation.

Finally, the emergent panopticon complex deals with the constant presence the RA job has in RA’s lives. The identities RAs experience, police, counselor,
and student, are compounded by the panopticon complex, the idea that RAs are public figures under increased scrutiny requiring them to constantly act in accordance to the rules of being an RA at the risk of being reported and facing disciplinary action. RAs do not get a break from being an RA unless they physically leave the university, but Max, the RD, said even then they are technically governed by some rules of residential housing. The panopticon complex the RAs experience changes how the students experience college, replacing the freedom most students experience with a constantly present authority.

Organizations invest time and money to foster high identification (Cheney, 1938a), but in residential housing identification does not result just from enjoying the job or organization. Where other organizations create favorable cultures, residential housing can rely on constant pressure from the environment RAs are in to enforce the organizational identification. The constant interaction with the organization creates a stronger shared identity and orients personal relationships to the context of the position—for example a friend in the residence hall is also a resident. Both of these factors, shared identity and personal relationships within the organization, increase identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). If all of the relationships an RA engages with on a daily basis are oriented around her being an RA, then most of the communication and daily actions will be as an RA, further integrating aspects of this identity in the consciousness of the individual.

Self-Reflection. Conducting these interviews reminded me a lot of my experience as an RA: walking the halls hoping to not encounter a situation, late
nights logging incidents with class early the next morning, and sitting in my room wondering if I should investigate the noise in the hallway or keep studying. The difficult situations are full of uncertainty and stress, and I never could escape the weight of being an RA. The panopticon complex has a real impact on RAs. One of my residents was also my sorority sister and the fact that I was her RA strained the relationship due to the power difference, and made me constantly self-conscious about my behavior around my sorority sisters. For me, the cons outweighed the benefits and I chose to leave the position, but I can empathize with the experiences of the participants in this study.

This analysis may have focused more on the negatives, but the RA position has a lot of positives. RAs form supportive communities with each other, build skills in many areas, and receive development and training beyond what many other college students experience. However, it is clear that the responsibilities of this job weigh on the RAs. Sam was particularly vocal about his negative experiences and feelings toward the job, and through our conversation I realized we had even more in common. I, too, had difficulties and stresses caused by an overbearing RD. This made it clear how the difficulties RAs encounter occur across the organization.

Limitations. This study explored the relationship between identity conflicts and organizational identification in RAs. Looking in-depth at 10 different experiences, the study provided a foundation for better understanding both how organizational identification can fluctuate and be affected by identity conflicts, and created an illustration of the reach and complexity of working as an
RA. All of the participants were volunteers who were willing to give up an hour of their time, which may have skewed the sample to people who are more willing to help and be involved in the job. RAs like Jordan, who seemed apathetic to the job, may be more prevalent within the organization than my study demonstrated due to the nature of what this study required of participants.

**Future Directions.** This qualitative case study has implications for future research and for student affairs practices. The interesting findings could lead to future research in organizational identification and the job of an RA. As a qualitative case study, this thesis had the goal to look in-depth at one institution; however, a wider study with more participants and at different institutions could extend the findings of this study and may provide comparisons on how other residential housing offices run their RA positions.

Another direction for future research is to gain further understanding of the outcomes when identity conflicts affect organizational identification either positively or negatively. Identity conflicts create a situation where organizational members can decide to side with the organization or to prefer another identity; understanding what characteristics or precedents affect those outcomes could be powerful organizational knowledge.

The panopticon complex that emerged from this study is an important aspect of the RA job that needs more exploration. This panopticon complex impacts the daily lives of the students, adding stress and a new dimension to the job of RA. Additionally, exploring other professions that may experience the
panopticon complex, such as teachers who live and work in small communities or military personnel, could prove beneficial.

Finally, RAs mentioned the varied amount of work they experience on the job and also that the amount of work varies from hall to hall based on the population the RAs work with. For example, RAs who supervise freshmen tend to deal with more questions and concerns than more experienced sophomores, and RAs in the honors hall deal with fewer incidents than other halls. This inequity in work is not reflected in an RA’s compensation and may contribute to a sense of injustice in the organization. Each of these research avenues would contribute to RA-specific research, and to the gaps in current organizational communication research, enriching the field as a whole.

Student Affairs trains and manages RAs, and this research could provide guidance on future practices. The position of RA is held by students, usually ages 19-22, but these students are tasked with handling situations that seem far above their pay grade. Residential housing may argue that they are just referring resources, which is part of the job, but RAs are still the first responders to potential emergency situations and they have to determine the level of emergency and if they need to call in help. These responsibilities are outlined to RAs before they start the positions, and trainings are even held in how to deal with sensitive conversations. However, the stories of the RAs interviewed for this project indicate that these trainings do not adequately prepare RAs for the emotional and physical stress of trying to assess a potential suicidal situation or talk to a resident about their supposed bulimia. These are important functions of the job, but the
increased stress of the job, on top of the responsibilities of being a student, is a lot to handle for anyone. Student Affairs professionals should take this stress more seriously than they already do; preemptive counseling and mandatory counseling sessions would both help prepare students for the upcoming stress and help RAs who do not know when to ask for help after stressful situations.

Additional to handling high stress situations, RAs are under further stress from living with the panopticon complex. Constant supervision and requirement to adhere to organizational rules brings a constant awareness to the role that the RAs mentioned. Always managing their image, they were aware of their status as RAs constantly, and the RD talked of policies that are far-reaching into RA’s personal lives. As a former RA and a future HR professional, I believe that if employees are expected to behave in accordance to the organization’s rules at all time at risk of punishment, then it seems that they should also be compensated for that time as well. However, instead of increasing compensation, I suggest creating policies that allow RAs to have work-life balance by providing them with a life separate from work. These policies would be complex due to the nature of RA work, but the strict policies in place that dictate RA behavior even at their homes, and which require RAs to report other colleagues at risk of punishment, seem overreaching. RAs are students who are developing just like other students at the University, and yet they are tied to an inescapable job that changes their relationships with other students. Room for RAs to separate themselves from the job would be beneficial for the wellness of all RAs.
References


Housing & Res Life [OhioU_Housing], (n.d.). Retrieved from:

https://twitter.com/OhioU_Housing


Appendix A

IRB Approval

The following research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ohio University for the period listed below. This review was conducted through an expedited review procedure as defined in the federal regulations as Category(-ies):

Project Title: Organizational Identity and Identity Conflict in University Resident Assistants

Primary Investigator: Katherine Maria Clausen

Co-Investigator(s):

Faculty Advisor: Laura Black

Department: Communications Studies

Office of Research Compliance Staff
Rebecca Cole, AA8, CIP
Shelly Rex, RS
Robin Stack, CIP

Approval Date 11-2-15
Expiration Date 11-1-16

This approval is valid until the expiration date listed above. If you wish to continue beyond the expiration date, you must submit a periodic review application and obtain approval prior to continuation.

The approval remains in effect provided the study is conducted exactly as described in your approved application. Any additions or modifications to the project must be reviewed and approved by the IRB (as an amendment) prior to implementation.

IRB approval does not supersede other regulatory requirements, such as HIPAA, FERPA, PPRA, etc.

Adverse events/unanticipated problems must be reported to the IRB promptly.
Appendix B

Access Proposal

Organizational identity and identity conflicts in university Resident Assistants

Submitted by Kate Clausen to Residential Housing

Study rationale

I am an undergraduate student studying organizational communication at Ohio University. I am researching the relationship between organizational identity and identity conflicts. This document serves as a proposal to conduct interviews with the resident assistants that work in the undergraduate Residence Halls. This study will serve a dual purpose: It will provide information that will add to our academic understanding of organizational identification and identity, and it will offer resident assistants and the Residential Housing department insight into the experiences of resident assistants and how to encourage organization identification and cope with identity conflicts. I would be able to provide my results to the participants of the study so they can better understand their own identification with an organization.

Proposal

I want to conduct interviews with the resident assistant staffs of different residence halls/complexes. The interviews would take place one time for approximately an hour. I would conduct a second interview with a few participants to follow up with my preliminary conclusions, which would also only be an hour. The interviews could take place in the residence hall study room or other appropriate location, such as the library or a classroom. I want to provide as
little disruption to the RAs as possible. My goal is to have seven participants in total from residence hall staffs. I would be happy to share my research with the RAs and the Residential Housing department when I complete my study.

Experience

I have conducted focus groups previously through a course facilitated research project. We conducted multiple focus groups through this study focusing on students’ political communication. I am working with Dr. Laura Black of the Ohio University Scripps College of Communication, School of Communication Studies. She is experienced in research and will be advising my processes.

Confidentiality and organizational protection

The participants’ and organizations’ names will be kept confidential, as well as identifying details. The identity of those who agree to participate will be kept confidential, and the data will be constructed to keep identities hidden. I also guarantee my own confidentiality. I will make the detail of the study clear to the participants and have them sign the “informed consent” forms that detail their rights before we begin. I will describe the purpose of the study. All data will be kept in a secure location, and any data that may identify participants will be destroyed. I will use the written results of the data for academic and scholarly purposes.
Appendix C
RA Interview Guide

I. Introduction
   a. Introduce myself
   b. Explain the purpose
   c. Confidentiality and informed consent
      i. Sign forms
   d. Demographic Questions
      i. Age
      ii. Gender
      iii. Major
      iv. Year in school
      v. Years as an RA

II. Opening Questions
   a. “How did you decide to become an RA?”
   b. “How many hours a week would you say you put in on the job?”
   c. “What has been the most memorable on the job experience as an RA?”
   d. “How well do you like working as an RA?”
   e. “In the larger sense of who you are, how important to you is it to being an RA?”
      i. What else is important to who you are?

III. Generative Questions
   a. “What actions do you take to support the goals of residential housing?”
      i. “Which of these actions are beyond the minimum required to be an RA?”
         ii. “How do you feel about the “extra” tasks asked of you?”
            1. Do you always do them?
            2. Do these extra tasks ever affect your attitude towards the job?
         iii. How do you act beyond what is asked of you to support housing?
            1. Why do you do this?
            2. How often do you
   b. “Can you describe a time when you it was very hard to do your job?”
      i. Tell me about it
      ii. Who was involved?
      iii. How did you handle it?
      iv. How did it make you feel?
      v. How did you feel about being an RA after?
      vi. What would you have done differently now?
vii. What were your feelings toward your RD/RC after?
c. “What are the most difficult parts of being an RA?”
i. What makes those parts difficult?
ii. How do you handle the difficult parts?
d. How does being an RA impact other areas of your life?
i. How does that affect your view on your responsibilities as an RA?
ii. How does that affect your feelings towards your job?
iii. How is this different than other organizations?
e. Can you describe a time when another aspect of your life took precedence over your responsibilities as an RA?
i. What happened?
ii. How did that make you feel about being an RA?
iii. How often do you have to make that decision to not put being an RA first?

IV. Closing Questions

a. “What didn’t we talk about that you think we should have talked about?”
b. “What advice would you give to RAs to help deal with the most difficult parts of the job?”
Appendix D
RD Interview Guide

I. Introduction
   a. Introduce myself
   b. Explain the purpose
   c. Confidentiality and informed consent
      i. Sign forms
   d. Demographic Questions
      i. Age
      ii. Gender
      iii. Major
      iv. Year in program
      v. Years as an RD/RC
      vi. Years in residential housing

II. Opening Questions
   a. “How did you decide to join residential housing?”
   b. “How many hours a week would you say you put in on the job?”
   c. “How much do you like working as an RD/RC?”
   d. “How would you describe you duties as an RD/RC?”

III. Generative Questions
   a. “What role do you play on your staff?”
      i. What is your professional relationship with RAs?
         1. How are you involved with the daily lives of RAs?
         2. How often do you talk to RAs?
      ii. “How do you build relationships with your RAs?”
         1. What is the importance of relationships with your RAs?
         2. What is your approach to working with RAs?
         3. What does res housing expect of your relationship with RAs?
   b. “Can you talk about the job of an RA?”
      i. What do you expect from RAs who work with you?
         1. To what extent do you think they need to go above and beyond job duties to support res housing?
         2. What kind of relationship do you expect RAs to have with residents?
      ii. What would you say is the most difficult part?
         1. What do RAs come to you about the most?
         2. How do you help them?
      iii. What else do you see RAs struggle with?
         1. What advice do you give them?
         2. What could change to help with these struggles?

IV. Closing Questions
   a. “What didn’t we talk about that you think we should have talked about?”
b. “What advice would you give to RAs to help deal with the most difficult parts of the job?”
Appendix E
Interview Consent Form

Title of Research:
Organizational Identity and Identity Conflicts in University Resident Assistants

Researchers:
Katherine Clausen and Dr. Laura Black

You are being asked to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study
We are collecting information about organizational members and their experiences of identification/connectedness both individually and with a group.

If you agree to participate, you will participate in a 60-minute interview.

You should not participate in this study if you are under the age of 18.

Risks and Discomforts
There are no known risks. You may feel discomfort that will result from talking about difficult work situations. Please know that your participation is voluntary, and you can stop the interview and leave at any time. If you have any questions or concerns please direct them to your interviewer.

Benefits
This study is important to society because experiences of identification and identity significantly affect an organization positively and negatively through organizational culture, production levels, employee/volunteer dedication, absenteeism, tardiness, and health.
There are no immediate personal benefits.

**Confidentiality and Records**

Your study information will be kept confidential. Your name will not be associated with the responses to the survey. When interviewed, responses to the interview questions will not be associated with you when writing for external audience.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Katherine Clausen, Undergraduate, Honors Tutorial College, Ohio University, kc704411@ohio.edu, 419-953-9355.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please Chris Hayhow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:

- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
- you have been informed of potential risks and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
- you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries you might receive as a result of participating in this study
- you are 18 years of age or older
- your participation in this research is completely voluntary
- you may leave the study at any time. If you decide to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to you and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Signature

Date

Printed Name

Version Date: [9/27/2015]