

DISSERTATION

MORAL BEHAVIOR OF RESIDENT ASSISTANTS: A LIVED EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

MORAL BEHAVIOR OF RESIDENT ASSISTANTS: A LIVED EXPERIENCE

Resident Assistants (RAs) are traditionally upper-class students who are responsible for enforcing residence-hall policies (Heala, 2006). These undergraduate paraprofessional students are consistently asked to hold their peers accountable for their behavior, yet this task can be a struggle for those RAs who are unable to display consistently moral behavior. Although the literature is full of examples of higher education's lasting effects on students' moral development, little is known about the moral development of college students who are serving in the role of RA. Even less is known about moral behavior in the lived experience of RAs tasked with enforcing disciplinary policies.

The purpose of this study was to explore the moral behavior in the "lived experience" of RAs who administer disciplinary policy. The research questions that formed the basis for this exploration were (a) What is the lived experience of RAs who administer disciplinary policies at a residential college in a large urban area? and (b) How can we understand RAs' lived experience using the theoretical lens of Rest's model of moral behavior?

The research method for this study was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The analysis consisted of 12 total interviews with a group of students who comprised one sophomore, six juniors, four seniors, and one fifth-year senior who served as RAs within the University Housing and Residential Life department at a large-size, public, urban institution located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States.

The results of the study suggest that a majority of RAs interviewed did not demonstrate all four components of Rest's model of moral behavior: (a) moral sensitivity, (b) moral judgment, (c) moral motivation, and (d) moral character when they were confronting policy

violations in the residence halls (Rest, 1986). Their reasons for not displaying moral behavior included their relationships with residents and specific decision-making factors that led to their not following through on their positional responsibilities as they had been trained to do. Two of the RAs interviewed were prototypical and consistently displayed all four components of Rest's model of moral behavior.

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

Moral Behavior: A social value process through which humans cooperate and coordinate their activities in the service of furthering human welfare, and the means by which they adjudicate conflicts among individual interests (Rest, 1986).

Moral Judgment/Moral Reasoning: A transformation of one's way of reasoning, expanding one's perspectives to include criteria for judgment that were not considered previously (Rest, 1994).

Resident Assistant (RA): An upper-class student, sophomore or above, who is responsible for maintaining campus residence halls, enforcing residential policies, performing administrative tasks, developing community, and assisting students (Heala, 2006).

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I briefly introduce the topic of moral development and higher education's effect on moral development. Next, I discuss James Rest's theory of moral behavior. Following this discussion, I highlight the moral behavior of Resident Assistants (RAs) because they are responsible for maintaining campus residence halls, enforcing residential policies, performing administrative tasks, developing community, and assisting students (Heala, 2006). I explain the problem statement and identify the research questions. I share key definitions to assist the reader. I explore limitations of the investigation. Finally, I explain my perspective of the study.

Overview

Moral development in college-age students has been studied extensively. Lawrence Kohlberg and James Rest have contributed vast amounts of information to the current theoretical knowledge of college students' moral development. Numerous studies have been conducted that have found that an increase in one's level of education is positively associated with gains in moral development (Good & Cartwright, 1998; King & Mayhew, 2004; Rest, 1986; Rest, 1988; Rest & Narvaez, 1991). The reason education is such a powerful predictor of moral development is that formal education provides a challenging and stimulating environment in which students are encouraged to take more interest in their communities and larger societal issues (Rest & Narvaez, 1991).

Bok (1988) asserted that the primary obligation of higher education is to help "students understand how to lead ethical, reflective, and fulfilling lives" (p. 50). Moral issues that occur on college campuses offer students an opportunity for learning. These moral issues often present puzzling and ambiguous problems that can create educational dialogue (Guthrie, 1997). "There really is no doubt that the experience of higher education has effects on students, both in their

attitudes and behaviors” (Trow, 1975, p. 20). Colleges and universities influence the moral development of students in a variety of ways, both intentional and unintentional (Trow, 1975).

The moral development and moral behavior of the student population is important to study for many reasons. First, it is common for students of both traditional and nontraditional age to enroll in higher education at times when they are making important life transitions, many of which have moral implications (King & Mayhew, 2002). These life transitions are accompanied by a new readiness in individuals to examine the moral dimension of their lives and make choices in order to prepare for their new roles. Also, most American institutions of higher education embrace a mission that includes moral development. Phrases such as “preparation for citizenship,” “character development,” “moral leadership,” and “service to society” are often included in institutional mission statements (King & Mayhew, 2004). Finally, college graduates accept leadership positions both through their employment and in their community that require them to make decisions that affect the lives of others (King & Mayhew, 2004).

As students develop morally, they display varying levels of moral behavior. James Rest (1983) studied moral development extensively and created a four-component model of moral behavior (Chambers, 2011; Derryberry & Thoma, 2005; King & Mayhew, 2004; Rest, 1986). Rest stressed that moral behavior consists of moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character (1986).

Every day certain college students are expected to display moral behavior in their role as RAs. RAs are expected be role models, academic advisors, and crisis counselors, and to stand in for parents and friends to a group of their floor mates in the residence halls. RAs are consistently faced with challenges to their moral behavior because their responsibility provides numerous opportunities for cognitive disequilibrium. “Responding to a resident’s violation of school

policy, a conflict between roommates, or an obligation to enforce a rule with which the RA does not personally agree are all examples of cognitive disequilibrium that RAs may experience” (Willis, 1992, p. 25). RAs have a challenging job, and it is for these reasons that they must demonstrate consistent moral behavior. Yet, one must keep in mind that “they are students too and they need time to develop” (Dodge, 1990, p. A39). When faced with such situations, RAs make the decisions of whether or not to carry out their job responsibilities.

Statement of Problem

RAs are generally upper-class student leaders within the division of student affairs. Deluga and Winters (1991) conducted a study to determine what motivates students to become RAs. Their results indicated six factors: (a) a desire to help others, (b) preparation for future employment, (c) a desire to exert control and display authority, (d) self-development, (e) monetary concerns, and (f) relationships with peer RAs. Once RAs accept the position, they work hard to establish relationships with their residents and find it challenging because they are also asked to discipline them (Rubington, 1990).

RAs act as role models and mentors who offer advice and resources related personal and academic matters, design and implement programs to foster a positive living environment, respond to emergencies, and implement university policies and procedures (Everett & Loftus, 2011). RAs deal with difficult problems, including but not limited to “alcoholism, suicide, homophobia, racism, date rape, eating disorders and stress” (Dodge, 1990, p. A39). The RA position can be very stressful, yet undergraduate students are better suited than professors or other administrators to supervise residence-hall floors because students relate better to their peers (Dodge, 1990).

RAs frequently experience role conflict as they attempt to satisfy competing and incompatible demands concurrently, such as maintaining a positive relationship while still holding students accountable for their behavior (Deluga & Winters, 1990). For example, when RAs have a friendship type of relationship with their residents, they are reluctant to initiate disciplinary action against them (Rubington, 1990). They would prefer to continue to be liked rather than seen as the disciplinarian for the floor. Likewise, RAs have cited these interpersonal relationships as being directly related to their motivation for the position (Bierman & Carpenter, 1994). It is for this reason that RAs may selectively enforce policies when their residents violate residence-hall policies. However, as Blimling (2010) reminds prospective RAs, if they cannot abide by and enforce these policies fairly and consistently, they should not consider becoming an RA.

Although the literature is full of examples of higher education's lasting effects on student moral development, little is known about the moral development of college students serving in the role of RA. Even less is known about moral behavior in the lived experience of RAs enforcing disciplinary policies. Limited research has been identified concerning the effect of the RA experience on moral behavior, and what is available is dated (Willis, 1992). This study will add to the current literature regarding student development theory and, specifically, the moral behavior of student leaders. The information gathered will assist student-affairs professional staff in better understanding what influences undergraduate student leaders to make the decisions that they do regarding selective enforcement of disciplinary policy. It will also provide direction for student-affairs professionals who design RA training.

Research Questions

In my review of literature, I found only one study that investigated how and to what extent the RA experience promoted moral behavior. Rubington's study was conducted in 1992 and used a mixed-methods approach of gathering both qualitative and quantitative data. However, I found no studies that investigated the moral behavior in the lived experiences of RAs administering disciplinary policy. Therefore, to research such a specific question using a qualitative lens will contribute to the literature concerning the moral behavior of RAs. Given the focus of this study, I employed the following research questions:

- a. What is the lived experience of RAs who administer disciplinary policies at a residential college in a large urban area?
- b. How can we understand RAs' lived experience using the theoretical lens of Rest's model of moral behavior?

Delimitations

I conducted the study at one institution; a public, 4-year, comprehensive institution located in the Mid-Atlantic region. The 12 self selected study participants consisted of eight female RAs and four male RAs with varying years of experience as RAs. I interviewed the participants to explore their experiences of implementing discipline policy within their roles.

Limitations

Potential limitations to this research include the following: A challenge to their completing formal interviews is that RAs may not have felt comfortable disclosing that they do not hold residents accountable for policy violations; RAs are aware that failing to document their residents for policy violations reflects a failure to meet the expectations of their position. In this context, RAs may have been concerned that they could face negative job action if they disclose

that they are not carrying out all of the requirements of their position. Finally, I am an institutional employee and although I am not in a direct reporting relationship for the RAs who participated in this study, I may have been viewed as an authority figure.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the moral behavior in the “lived experience” of RAs who administer disciplinary policy. I asked RAs to share their experiences of enforcing disciplinary policy when they are performing their duties. The results may have implications for RA placement; specifically, they may imply value in placing RAs who are not challenged by policy enforcement in areas that are known to have traditionally higher violations than others. Finally, my research explored what factors influenced the RAs’ responses to policy violations. This data will assist in preparing residential-life professional staff to ask probing questions to better support RAs through similar situations should they arise.

Investigator’s Perspective

My experience as a former Residential Life professional has been that RAs choose to enforce policies selectively regardless of the amount of training and experience they have in the role. It is clear that undergraduate students would prefer to be liked by their peers rather than be seen as authority figures and policy enforcers. Yet undergraduates continue to be hired as Residence Life staff members (Dodge, 1990). Often, these students’ increased involvement as RAs has allowed for their personal growth and development; however, they still struggle with moral behavior. I believe that most undergraduate students lack a sense of moral awareness, which leads to their inability to consistently enforce residential policies.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I discuss the literature related to James Rest's theory of moral behavior. I will review the seminal theory of Lawrence Kohlberg as it sets the stage for the discussion and frames the moral-judgment component of Rest's model. I will present higher education's effect on the development of moral judgment. Finally, I will analyze the Resident Assistant (RA) role and responsibilities, including the moral nature of this position.

Moral Judgment Development Theories and History

We can associate students' moral judgment throughout their post-secondary experience with a variety of factors. Trow (1975) claimed that moral judgment is influenced by formal course offerings, how professors teach, and professors as persons, both through their personal relationships with students and as role models. He goes on to state that students are also influenced in their moral judgment by other students, especially significant members of their peer group. Finally, because institutions are "political entities in the broadest sense[,] the consequences for the students of how the college or university orders the relations among its members, of how it governs its own activities, and its relations with its environment" are also influential (Trow, 1975, p. 21).

Lawrence Kohlberg

Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development is cognitive-developmental and focuses on how people make moral judgments (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). He saw judgments as having three qualities: (a) an emphasis on value rather than fact, (b) an effect on a person or persons, and (c) a requirement that an action be taken (Evans et al., 2010). Three criteria framed Kohlberg's model: (a) structure, (b) sequence, and (c) hierarchy (Evans et al., 2010). The structure criterion indicates that, regardless of setting or experience, individuals

exhibit a similar moral reasoning pattern. The sequence criterion affirms that the stages of the pattern occur in a specific order that is fixed. The hierarchy criterion states that each successive stage is more highly developed than the previous one because it incorporates aspects of all the earlier stages. “Individuals understand and use all stages of thinking below the stage at which they currently function, never at higher stages” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 102).

At the core of Kohlberg’s theory is the idea that moral judgment develops through a six-stage sequence grouped into three levels—preconventional, conventional, and postconventional or principled. The basis of moral judgment at the preconventional level is that moral value resides in external, quasi-physical happenings—bad acts, or in quasi-physical needs, rather than in persons or standards. This level has two stages. Stage one (heteronomous morality) focuses on an orientation of obedience and punishment; egocentric deference to superior power or prestige, or a trouble-avoiding mindset; and objective responsibility. Stage two (individualistic or instrumental morality) is associated with a naively egotistic orientation wherein right action is instrumentally satisfying the self’s needs and occasionally the needs of others (Evans et al., 2010).

At the second, conventional, level, the basis of moral judgment is that moral value resides in performing good or right roles, in maintaining the conventional order and the expectations of others. Within this level, stage three (interpersonally normative morality) is associated with “good boy orientation,” which means that individuals learn to seek approval from others, as well as to please and help them. Stage four (social-system morality) orients students to doing their duty, to show respect for authority, and to maintain the given social order for its own sake. Students understand and have a sense of regard for the expectations of others (Evans, et al., 2010).

Kohlberg's third level is postconventional or principled. At this level, individuals separate themselves from the rules and expectations of others and base their decisions on self-chosen principles. Within this level, the concern of stage five (human-rights and social-welfare morality) is that individuals evaluate the rightness of laws and social systems on the basis of the extent to which they promote fundamental human rights and values. Stage six morality (the morality of universalizable, reversible, and prescriptive general ethical principles) involves giving equal consideration to the points of view of all individuals involved in a moral situation. Individuals base their decisions on generalizable principles that apply in all situations (Evans, et.al, 2010).

James Rest

Kohlberg's focus on morality was limited to individuals' understanding of rights and rules. James Rest reformulated Kohlberg's theory because it was confined to the examination of moral judgment, which is only the cognitive component of moral behavior. Rest stressed that moral behavior consists of four additional components.

These additional components are (a) moral sensitivity, (b) moral judgment, (c) moral motivation, and (d) moral character (Rest, 1986). Moral sensitivity is characterized by one's being able to interpret a situation involving the welfare of another as a moral problem and to identify possible alternative actions (Evans et al., 2010). This first component involves identifying what one can do in a particular situation, figuring out what the consequences to all parties are for each line of action, and identifying and trying to understand what one's own feelings are on the matter (Rest, 1986).

Rest (1986) shares research findings that are especially pertinent to component one. The first is that many people have difficulty interpreting even relatively simple situations. "We must

not underestimate the difficulty in interpreting social situations nor must we assume that all misinterpretation is defensive in nature, even though people sometimes may not ‘see’ things because they are defensively blocking them from conscious recognition” (Rest, 1986, p. 6).

Secondly, there are striking differences among individuals in their sensitivity to the needs and welfare of others. A third finding is that social situations can arouse strong feelings before extensive cognitive coding takes place.

Rest’s second component is moral judgment, which he describes as a person being able to make a judgment about which course of action is morally right and thus label one possible action as what a person ought to do (Rest, 1986). People easily make moral judgments (or at least have intuitions about what is right and wrong), yet these intuitions differ dramatically from individual to individual; however, people maintain a great sense of confidence in their moral convictions (Rest, 1986). There are three cognitive developmental assumptions that coincide with this component.

First, Rest (1986) shares that the more people have social experiences the more they develop elaborate conceptions of the social world. Along with this sense of social organization comes a sense of distinct fairness. This is a notion similar to “what I owe to others, others owe to me.” The final assumption is that, when a person is faced with deciding what option is morally right in a given social situation, the sense of fairness that comes from a specific concept of organizing this cooperation drives moral judgment.

Moral motivation occurs when persons give priority to moral values above other personal values such that they make a decision to intend to do what is morally right (Rest, 1986).

Numerous theories serve as reasons people would behave in this fashion. Examples include their altruism, shame and fear as motivators, social understanding of how cooperation functions, and

empathy (Rest, 1986). The clear interconnection between cognition and affect is the individual's mood. Someone in a good mood is more likely to see the advantage of helping and cooperating; in a poor mood, one will most likely see only the disadvantages of behaving in a moral way.

The fourth and final component of Rest's (1986) model of moral behavior is moral character. Someone with moral character has sufficient perseverance and implementation skills to be able to follow through on the intention to behave morally. Doing this involves figuring out the sequence of concrete actions, working around challenges, overcoming frustration, resisting distractions, and keeping sight of the actual goal. The interconnection between cognition and affect is that an individual in a positive affective state has a tendency to persist in a task longer than someone in a negative state.

To further clarify, this model denies that moral behavior is the result of a single process; although one element might interact with others, each of the four components has a separate and distinct function (Rest, 1986). Rest does not portray the basic elements of morality in this model in terms of cognition, affect, and behavior; rather, there are many cognitive-affective interconnections throughout the components. It is also worth noting that the four components represent the process involved in the production of a moral act, not general traits of people. Finally, the components are not meant to depict a linear progression.

Higher Education's Effect on Moral Development

"It is generally agreed that American higher education has a clearly defined role in developing individuals who can both think and act morally" (Pascarella, 1997, p. 47). Certain significant experiences that foster moral judgment occur during postsecondary education when students are exposed to divergent perspectives (e.g., living away from home, or having intellectual conversations with roommates), are confronted with cognitive moral conflict (e.g.,

taking academic courses that present issues from different perspectives), are exposed to individuals with more advanced states of moral judgment, or must assume new personal responsibilities (Pascarella, 1997). These experiences may be more likely to foster growth in students who are receptive and reflective if they are accompanied by other activities in both a cumulative and mutually reinforcing pattern (Pascarella, 1997).

Individuals who attend college demonstrate significantly greater growth in moral judgment than individuals who do not. “During college students shift from using moral reasoning that concedes to societal authority to using reasoning that is based on the application of universal moral principles” (Pascarella, 1997, p. 50). A 1990 Finger, Borduin, and Baumstark study suggested that grade level is a stronger correlate of moral judgment on the Defining Issues Test (DIT) among college students than the self-reported parental (control, warmth) or demographic (age, SES) variables. The subjects consisted of 159 undergraduate students (67 men, 92 women) from all grade levels ranging in age from 17 years to 24 years. All the subjects were selected from abnormal psychology and introductory psychology courses and received extra credit for their participation in the study. A stepwise multiple regression revealed two significant predictors of moral judgment development: years in college, and the frequency of informal social activities. Years in college accounted for 13% of the variance, $F(1, 158) = 12.08$, $p < .001$. Frequency of social activities accounted for an additional 5% of the variance $F(2, 157) = 8.89$, $p < .005$.

Pascarella (1997) reported that principled moral reasoning is positively associated with level of formal postsecondary education, and that students make statistically significant gains in principled moral reasoning throughout their collegiate experience. This effect persists even when controlled for maturation, intelligence, socioeconomic status, and precollege differences in

principled moral reasoning. This conclusion is drawn from evidence of more than 50 cross-sectional and longitudinal studies Pascarella and Terenzini previously analyzed (1991).

Pascarella (1997) went on to report that “the greater growth in principled moral reasoning that accrues to those who attend college (versus those who do not) does not diminish over time, but actually tends to increase” (p. 51).

Pascarella (1997) used McNeel’s (1992) raw data from an unpublished manuscript of a meta-analysis of 22 cross-sectional and longitudinal studies of moral reasoning in 12 institutions of higher education. Pascarella (1997) reanalyzed the data, weighing each study by the size of its sample. He found that, for both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, the average effect size of higher education on moral reasoning was .77. “In other words, college seniors had nearly .80 of a standard deviation advantage in principled moral reasoning over freshman” (Pascarella, 1997, p. 50).

Good and Cartwright (1998) shared that an increase in level of education is generally associated with gains in the development of moral judgment. “The general trend is that as long as formal education is continued, moral judgment scores continue to rise. When an individual’s formal education ends, his moral judgment development tends to plateau” (Good & Cartwright, 1998, p. 273).

King and Mayhew (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of 172 studies in which the DIT was used. The studies measured the degree to which students achieved intended collegiate outcomes related to character or civic activities; some focused on selected aspects of students’ collegiate experiences related to the development of moral judgment, and others documented changes in moral reasoning during the college years in other domains of development. They found that

significant growth in the use of postconventional moral reasoning does occur in college (King & Mayhew, 2002).

There are many possible reasons why [*sic*] this might occur: the general intellectual milieu of colleges and universities that fosters the exchange of ideas, exposure to multiple perspectives regarding social issues, academic values of truth-seeking and careful reasoning, or institutional values of academic integrity and personal responsibility. (King & Mayhew, 2002, p. 252)

Therefore, the reason that education is such a powerful predictor of the development of moral judgment is that formal education provides a challenging and stimulating environment in which students are encouraged to take more interest in their communities and larger societal issues (Rest & Narvaez, 1991).

Rest's View of Education and Moral Judgment

According to Rest (1988), however, we can make a variety of interpretations in conjunction with education as a determinant of moral judgment. The interpretations are associated with individuals' age; their levels of socialization, specific learned knowledge, general understanding of the social world, and intellectual stimulation; and the process of self-selection resulting from a focus on self-development and their innate personal characteristics.

The interpretation related to age assumes that moral judgment scores increase with the passing of years and can be attributed to general maturational changes. The interpretation related to socialization reflects individuals' adherence to attitudes, verbalization, or arguments that are modeled or reinforced in the college milieu. The interpretation associated with learning-specific knowledge differs from that regarding socialization in that persons truly have a greater capacity for knowledge, not just preferences about what they learn. This interpretation comes about because presumably enough students take courses in which specific knowledge or verbal skills

are taught and learned to result in an increase in their mean scores in moral development (Rest, 1988).

We can interpret students' general understanding of the social world in terms of the growth in their maturity in this regard, and in the moral values that follow from such an understanding. This interpretation is pervasive, and students' attainment of this perspective implies that they are able to operate upon new information and organize it, not just memorize facts (Rest, 1988). Finally, we can summarize the interpretation of the intellectual stimulation aspect by saying that colleges affect students by challenging them to think. Rest (1988) stated, "College provides a stimulating environment in which individuals are provoked to work out their own ideas about morality" (p. 186).

The last interpretation pertains to self-selection (Rest, 1988). Here, Rest asserted that the college environment by itself does nothing to foster development in moral judgment. Rather, students who chose to attend an institution of higher education made that choice because they were interested in their own development, they were reflective, and they decided based on personal characteristics that led them to that decision. Overall, the conditions for the development of moral judgment involve both personal and environmental characteristics. Moral development occurs in concert with general social development (Rest, 1988).

Yet Rest (1986) clearly indicated that moral judgment changes with formal education in the direction of the developmental progression his theory predicted. Two meta-analyses of nearly 10,000 participants suggest that the age/education combination accounts for 30 percent to 50 percent of variance in DIT scores (Rest 1986). When one considers the variables of age and education, "formal education is the stronger correlate with moral judgment development" (Rest, 1986, p. 177). Rest concluded,

The people who develop in moral judgment are those who love to learn, who seek new challenges, who enjoy intellectually stimulating environments, who are reflective, who make plans and set goals, who take risks, who see themselves in the larger social contexts of history and institutions and broad cultural trends, who take responsibility for themselves and their environs. (p. 57)

Moral Behavior of Typical College Students

Institutions of higher education teach values and ethics to students regarding the standards by which educated people should live their lives postgraduation (Blimling, 2010). Values such as integrity, a commitment to learning, respect for others, and acceptance of all regardless of backgrounds and current beliefs are examples of institutional standards. These principles are taught through policies, statements made by college officials, programs the institution hosts, and the enforcement of the disciplinary code (Blimling, 2010). Institutions want alumni who are productive members of society and who care about the common welfare of the community.

Participation in a collegiate environment provides a formative experience for students. During this time, students are attempting to make meaning of what is self and what is other (Rodgers, 1990). Robert Kegan's (1982) theory of the six stages of ego development, or "temporary truces," suggests that people establish periods of equilibrium for a time, which provide a boundary between self and other. The six stages are (a) incorporate self, (b) impulsive self, (c) imperial self, (d) interpersonal self, (e) institutional self, and (f) inter-individual self. The incorporate self is labeled by Kegan as stage zero and best characterized by newborn infants; when they cannot see or experience something, it does not exist (Evans et.al, 2010). Children around 2 years of age advance to the impulsive-self stage. Here, they become aware of objects in their environment as independent from themselves. During stage three, the imperial self, individuals develop a sense of who they are and what they want. We can characterize the

interpersonal self stage four, by the crucial importance to individuals of being accepted by others. Individuals are able to make commitments to communities of people and ideas during this stage. In stage five, the institutional self's focus is self-authorship. Individuals can establish their own set of values and ideologies (Kegan, 1994). Finally, in stage six, the inter-individual self can see beyond oneself, others, and systems of which all are a part to form an understanding of how people and systems interact (Evans et.al, 2010).

Rogers (1990) explains that most college students can be designated at stage three, the interpersonal self. We can define the interpersonal stage by the phrase "people are their relationships"; they are "embedded in mutuality with their peer group" (Rodgers, 1990, p. 39). Therefore, for many college students, nothing is more influential than their peer network. This concept of peer acceptance was also found in Reynolds and Ceranic's (2007) study involving college students and moral behavior. They found that when social consensus around a moral issue was high, participants were more likely to exhibit moral behavior. Conversely, when social consensus was not high or it was unclear, only those with a strong moral identity exhibited moral behavior.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) share that a modest amount of research has been conducted regarding moral behavior of typical undergraduate students, and what has been done focuses on academic dishonesty and cheating. After analyzing a number of multi-institutional samples, they found, similar to Reynolds and Ceranic (2007), that peer behavior formed a normative context for cheating. Students were significantly more likely to admit anonymously to cheating in the event that they witnessed others cheating. They were significantly less likely to admit to academic dishonesty if they believed that their peers would disapprove of that behavior (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The strong effect of the peer group remains significant even

when it is controlled for the following factors: age, sex, college grades, parental education, extracurricular involvement, intercollegiate athletic participation, and membership in a Greek letter organization (McCabe & Trevino, 1993, 1996, 1997).

RA Role

RAs are student leaders within the division of student affairs who serve as ethical role models for their peers. The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) has published the *Principles of Good Practice for Student Affairs* (n.d.), which includes as a practice helping students develop coherent values and ethical standards.

In the first two years of college, students learn more from their peers than they do from their instructors. To the extent that the peer environment in the residence halls can be structured in a way to advance the educational values and ethics ... students begin to learn what is expected of them and are more likely than not to adopt the prevailing standards of the community. (Blimling, 2010, p. 59)

Blimling (2010) describes the following ethical skills that are good practice for RAs as role models: being honest with residents, supervisors, and other staff; keeping confidences and being trustworthy; not making promises that they cannot keep; refraining from gossip; knowing what is right and acting accordingly; and keeping commitments.

The job description of RAs includes rules enforcement and a list of responsibilities to help with the personal, social, and academic concerns of students in their area of responsibility (Butters & Gade, 1982). Specifically, RAs help work out group conflicts, provide information, and help build a feeling of community by initiating and helping to organize floor and hall activities and programs (Butters & Gade, 1982). The RA role is very challenging because RAs may wish to be liked by their residents, yet they are responsible for initiating disciplinary action against these same students (Deluga & Winters, 1990).

This role conflict can be a struggle for RAs because “they are students too and they need time to develop” (Dodge, 1990, p. A39). However, paraprofessional staffs continue to be effectively used as Residence Life staff members (Dodge, 1990). These students’ increased involvement as RAs has allowed for their personal growth and development (Miller & Conyne, 1980). This growth comes about not only as a result of experiences that occur on the job, but also as a result of in-service preparation and effective supervision on the job (Greenleaf, 1974).

Greenleaf (1974) stated that, if the role of the undergraduate staff member is to be an effective one, several aspects of the position need to be carefully considered:

Adequate descriptions must be developed; the staff must be carefully selected; meaningful in service preparation must be provided; effective supervision must be given to the undergraduate as he carries out his responsibilities; [and] the undergraduate staff member should be encouraged in rigorous self evaluation. (p. 182)

In 1991, Deluga and Winters conducted a study to determine what motivates students to become RAs. The participants were 55 male and 85 female undergraduate RAs employed by eight different institutions of higher education in the northeast. The researchers surveyed participants using an instrument they created to examine reasons students chose to become RAs, the Responsibility for People subscale of the Stress Diagnostic Survey and the Hoppock Job Satisfaction Blank (Deluga & Winters, 1991). Their results indicated that six factors influenced a student’s decision to become an RA: (a) a desire to help others, (b) preparation for future employment, (c) a desire to exert control and display authority, (d) self-development, (e) monetary concerns, and (f) relationships with peer RAs. They also analyzed these factors to ascertain the relationship between them and interpersonal stress.

The results indicated that desire for power, financial obligations, career development, and personal growth were connected with higher levels of interpersonal stress (Deluga & Winters, 1991). Students who chose the RA role “to exercise power readily and perhaps overzealously

confront students engaged in inappropriate behaviors” showed higher stress levels (p. 550). These confrontations can lead to peer isolation, which is interpersonally stressful. Yet officials at institutions that employ undergraduate students as RAs stated that students are better suited than professors or other administrators to supervise residence-hall floors because students relate better to their peers, and RAs can be viewed as role models (Dodge, 1990).

RAs provide an important role in supporting students and providing them with individualized instruction (Schaller & Wagner, 2007). Such activities are something that higher education simply cannot afford to pay professionals to do (Schaller & Wagner, 2007). Students have more knowledge about how to be a student at their institution than most administrators. They know how to use the online registration system and the public transportation system, for example, and they know which restaurants offer late night deliveries (Blimling, 2010).

There was a time when graduate students were employed as RAs in undergraduate residence halls because “older students were thought to be able to assert more control over undergraduates and provide better counseling” (Blimling, 2010, p. 35). However, role models need to be easily identified by students; and when they are too far removed from what the student believes they can become, role models tend to have little influence (Blimling, 2010). Therefore, undergraduate RAs have an advantage in that their experience is not that far removed from that of the students they work with on a daily basis.

RA Training

Training is a crucial component of RAs’ moral behavior journey. Student affairs professionals, who are responsible for the planning and implementation of RA training, have an impact on the values and moral behavior of paraprofessional staff (Elleven, Allen, & Wircenski, 2001). Such training, and the contributions the institution can make by providing housing to

students, offers the RA the foundation to begin understanding the philosophical and educational purposes of higher education (Greenleaf, 1974).

In reference to RA training, Blimling (2010) stated that “RAs must commit to mastering a certain body of information to do the RA job effectively” (p. 63). While RAs are required to learn a wealth of information, some of which they may never use, it is critical that, in the event they are involved in a situation, they know how to proceed appropriately. If RAs do not know this key information and there is no one else immediately available to assist, their lack of knowledge may make the situation worse or have negative consequences for the community (Blimling, 2010). Winston and Fitch (1993) identified the following as competencies that all RAs should acquire during training: what it means to be a role model; the importance and relevance of community development, system maintenance and control, leadership and governance; how to be a helper/facilitator for their floor; and educational programming and other general institution-specific skills.

Murray, Snider, and Midkiff (1999) conducted a study to determine the effects of training on RA job performance. The participants were 64 undergraduate RAs at a baccalaureate college in the mid-Atlantic region. Before the opening of the residence halls, each RA attended a session on conflict resolution. Immediately prior to the training session and again 4 weeks later, each participant completed a written questionnaire about the content of the training session (Murray et al., 1999). Their results suggest that even short-term training interventions bring about favorable outcomes in RAs’ on-the-job behavior. However, the authors stated that the benefits of training may be limited to the promotion of sound work practices as opposed to the elimination of problematic behaviors (Murray et al., 1999).

Character education is an RA training model that focuses on character formation of RAs who are, in turn, able to foster character development as role models to their fellow students.

Heala (2006) stated,

Character education [means] an intentional initiative that directly attempts to foster a caring environment where persons are taken seriously as responsible individuals, and where persons are challenged to explore and encouraged to apply essential ethical principles to their own lives and relationships with others. (p. 66)

The Character Education and Resident Assistants (CERA) model intends to develop the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of character through monthly training sessions. It involves a “threefold method of implementation: exposure, exploration, and application” (Heala, 2006, p. 68).

RAs’ direct supervisors facilitate training sessions that expose the RAs to role models and encourage them to apply virtuous behaviors to their own lives through CERA (Heala, 2006). CERA has four intended outcomes: It attempts (a) to advance an institution’s preexisting mission, (b) to highlight virtues that are relevant to the unique culture of the institution, (c) to incorporate the fundamental psychology of current character education movement, and, the most important intended outcome, (d) to fulfill the objective that character education will trickle down and spread to other students on campus (Heala, 2006).

Training for RAs is ongoing throughout the year, and on-the-job training provides the real contribution for growth on the part of the RAs. On-the-job preparation can take the form of discussions during staff meetings designed to develop certain aspects of job responsibilities, along with day-to-day supervision of the RA by the professional staff member (Greenleaf, 1974). Murray et al. (1999) suggest that training focused on promoting effective work behaviors produces successful outcomes in those who are able to master new material on a cognitive level.

Direct instruction in the form of day-to-day supervision appears to be an effective and efficient way of promoting mastery of required skills for RA staff members.

Some institutions require incoming staff members to enroll in a leadership class or RA class either before or concurrent with assuming RA responsibilities. Often these courses are associated with the School of Education and focus on general leadership skills. Elleven et al. (2001) conducted a study on the Southwestern perspective of RA training. They surveyed the Chief Housing Officers employed by public or private institutions of higher education in affiliation with the Southwest Association of College and University Housing Officers. They received a 63% response rate to the survey they administered based on the research of Winston and Fitch (1993). The most interesting finding of this investigation was that only 5.9% of the privately responding institutions required paraprofessionals to enroll in an academic, credit-bearing class to further their RA training, while 28.6% of public institutions required a similar course. The authors had believed that this finding would be reversed, given that private institutions have more flexibility in the curriculum and so would take advantage of this opportunity for ongoing training (Elleven et al., 2001).

McKelfresh (1987) conducted a study to determine whether one such class, ED 496, offered at Colorado State University, had an effect on students' moral development. He administered Rest's DIT to students enrolled in the training course and those who were not enrolled. He found no significant difference in the amount of growth in moral reasoning for students who completed the course compared to those who did not. Therefore, there is no evidence to suggest that these types of courses influence moral reasoning; yet the opportunity for ongoing training is a real benefit of enrollment.

RA Challenges to Moral Behavior

Students face numerous challenges just by virtue of being enrolled in higher education. They are exposed to a new intellectual milieu during their college or university experience where new ideas are exchanged, exposure to multiple perspectives regarding social issues occurs, and the expectations from the institution are high (King & Mayhew, 2002). Students are especially tested during this transitional time in their lives and can face personal barriers to their moral behavior.

Liddell, Cooper, Healy, and Stewart (2010) identified four personal barriers related to issues of ethical growth and moral development. These barriers are (a) conformity, (b) lack of ethical awareness, (c) failure to “push away from the dock,” and (d) lack of self-efficacy. Conformity occurs because students have a desire to fit in with their peers. In general, they would prefer not to stand out, which can cause silence or nonaction (Liddell et al., 2010).

Students also display a lack of ethical awareness. The authors stated that “ethical dilemmas are dilemmas because the right course of action is not always clearly visible” (Liddell, et al., 2010). Not being sure about such dilemmas impedes individuals’ moral action and can reinforce personal barriers. Ethical awareness can also be clouded by situational ethics, wherein students believe what is ethical depends on the nature of the situation, as opposed to the practice of applying ethical standards consistently (Liddell, et al., 2010).

We can describe “failure to push away from the dock” as the lack of developmental progression from authority-bound and dualistic forms of knowing to more relativistic, and later, contextualized and committed knowing (Parks, 2000, p. 63). Students need to be able to hold their own ideas and those of authority figures at arm’s length to inspect, critique, and transform those ideas so that moral judgment can inform their moral action (Liddell, et al., 2010). In the

event that students are unable to do this, their moral judgment skills will not evolve. Pizzolato (2009) suggested that this type of cognitive development may not be uniform across all contexts for students. “It is possible that sensitivity to ethical issues (recognition of moral dilemmas) could be influenced by unquestioned and unexamined beliefs and assumptions held since youth” (Liddell et al., 2010).

Lack of self-efficacy is the final barrier for some students. Here, students display a lack of confidence in their ability to address an ethical issue, and the lack of necessary skills to effectively address ethical issues. At times, students know where they stand on ethical issues, but they will lack the confidence to respond, which causes a block to their taking moral action and inevitably impedes the development of their moral character. Students cannot act when they do not feel empowered to do so.

Selective Enforcement: General Issues

RAs have an obligation to their institution as well as to others students in the residence halls to enforce the policies that the college community has agreed to uphold. Blimling (2010) clearly states to potential RAs,

If you cannot abide by these policies, do not consider becoming an RA.... Do not do yourself, the institution and your residents a disservice by not enforcing the rules or by pretending that the policies and regulations do not exist. (p. 35)

However, “Some RAs confuse being liked with being lenient about the enforcement of policies” (Blimling, 2010, p. 42). Certain RAs have a challenging time understanding that being respected by their residents and being liked by them need not be mutually exclusive.

Rubington (1990) also found that RAs tend to selectively enforce policies based on their relationships with the residents. The purpose of his qualitative study was to examine how RAs defined, interpreted, and enforced the drinking rules in two freshman residence halls over a 1-

year period. The study was based on sensing interviews with two Residence Directors and 22 RAs from a fictitiously named institution located in a commercial and residential section of a city.

The RA participants experienced a week-long training that included sessions on the alcohol policy and how to enforce it (Rubington, 1990). Later, RAs were asked to hold floor meetings with their residents, in which they devoted time to discussing the rules that pertained to the consumption of alcoholic beverages. RAs were expected to document residents when they saw them violating the drinking policies. Rubington (1990) shared that the contact the RAs had with residents, even when documenting them, allowed the RAs to get to know the residents as persons and thus begin to exercise discretion in the future.

The RAs began to realize that the excessive application of discipline only cheapens its value. Therefore, RAs tended to reduce the number of times they were documenting residents; at the same time, they developed a set of specific conditions for documentation (Rubington, 1990). An RA participant shared with Rubington that even though he started out the semester documenting all incidents of alcohol on his floor, soon he learned to ignore certain situations. The RA was able to determine those situations that were harmless and those that were harmful. The RA stated that harmful situations could be defined as those in which students are drinking a lot of beer (Rubington, 1990). The RA could tell the situation was harmful because of the effects of the alcohol. Students were “loud and boisterous, slurring speech and getting out of hand” (Rubington, 1990, p. 4).

Throughout the course of the interviews, two themes emerged. First, RAs wanted to appear strict at first in order for their residents to believe that they would consistently enforce the policies. One RA stated, “I started out strict, then I found it gradually breaking down. You get

close to them [the residents], you get to know them” (Rubington, 1990, p. 3). The other theme was that RAs were more likely to document residents for alcohol consumption when those residents did not live on their home floor. Through a process of mutual socialization, the RA-resident relationships evolved to the extent that RAs would “teach” residents on their home floors to break the rules using discretion (Rubington, 1990).

One RA interviewed went as far as to say that he informed his residents that he smokes marijuana, and that he had suggested that, when the residents did, they should “stuff towels in the door [and] spray Glade” (Rubington, 1990, p. 5). The RA rationalized this behavior because his floor suffered less vandalism when students were smoking marijuana as opposed to drinking. This RA had deliberately chosen to ignore the policies of the residence hall.

Selective Enforcement: Role Conflict

Everett and Loftus (2011) similarly explored the concept of role conflict that RAs experience as rule enforcers versus friends. Fifty-five RAs comprised the study population. The researchers collected data through anonymous, self-administered questionnaires followed by semistructured, face-to-face interviews. Of the respondents, 75% admitted to befriending 25% of their floor, while 3.1% claimed not to be friends with anyone on their floor (Everett & Loftus, 2011). All interviewees expressed the need to deliberately create and maintain personal relationships with residents.

The researchers also specifically asked participants about the role conflict they experienced when it came to enforcing university policies with their residents. Of the respondents, 50% answered that this was something that they never or rarely experienced. Yet 25% stated they sometimes experienced this type of role conflict, and an additional 25% shared that they often felt conflicted about these competing interests. Interesting highlights of this study

include that males more often than females experienced role conflict when they were enforcing residence-hall policies with their residents, and RAs who claimed to have a stricter enforcement style reported experiencing less role conflict than those who were more lenient (Everett & Loftus, 2011).

Some interviewees, however, disclosed that even if they did establish relationships with their residents, those relationships never equaled the ones they experienced with their true peers and friends. The researchers attributed this feeling of distance between the RA and the residents to their status as RAs, as well as to differences in age, class year, workloads, and class schedules. The study found this was especially the case in situations in which junior- or senior-level RAs were responsible for floors of first-year students (Everett & Loftus, 2011).

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the development of moral behavior occurs while students are enrolled in higher education. There is a concern, however, that RAs may not be ready for the challenges that come with their positional responsibilities. RAs are consistently being asked to push through the cognitive dissonance and make the right decision for their position regardless of their personal thoughts. These scenarios present opportunities for the undergraduate staff to display moral behavior as James Rest defined it. The goal of this dissertation is to explore the moral behavior in the “lived experience” of RAs who have implemented discipline policies.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I present and discuss the methodology and characteristics of the study, and the strategy of inquiry. I take the reader through my role and share the data-collection and recording processes. I also explain my data-analysis and interpretation methods. Finally, I provide details about the trustworthiness of the data.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study has been to explore the moral behavior in the “lived experience” of Resident Assistants (RAs) administering disciplinary policy. The following research questions guided the study:

- a. What is the lived experience of RAs who administer disciplinary policies at a residential college in a large urban area?
- b. How can we understand RAs’ lived experience using the theoretical lens of Rest’s model of moral behavior?

Characteristics of the Study

This study explores moral behavior in the lived experience of RAs who implement disciplinary policy. The study specifically addresses what relationship exists between moral behavior and the enforcement of disciplinary policies. The strategy of inquiry in this research was qualitative—specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis.

According to Eatough and Smith (2008), interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) focuses on the detailed examination of the lived experience and how individuals make sense of that experience. “IPA is a version of the phenomenological method which accepts the impossibility of gaining direct access to research participants’ life worlds” (Willig, 2001, p. 53). Although the goal of IPA is to explore the participants’ experiences from their perspective, it is

understood that this exploration implicates the researcher's own point of view, as well as the nature of the relationship between the participants and the researcher (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Therefore, the resulting phenomenological analysis is an interpretation of the participants' experiences (Willig, 2001).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis was most appropriate for this study because it sought evidence of moral behavior in the lived experience of RAs who were implementing disciplinary policy. I completed this analysis on the basis of interviews with RAs who had implemented disciplinary policy. My intention was that I would come to understand the RAs' experiences through their own words and described actions. The use of IPA shaped the questions I asked, the form of the data collection, the steps of the data analysis, and the final narrative (Creswell, 2009).

I conducted the study in a natural setting. I interviewed RAs at a residential college in a large urban area. Throughout the course of the interviews, I explored the role of moral behavior as presented in the RAs' lived experiences of enforcing disciplinary policy.

Wiling (2001) proposes a process for analyzing data through an IPA lens, which I implemented. First, I read and reread the transcripts from the interviews in order to create notes that reflected my initial thoughts and observations from the text. Second, I identified and labeled themes that characterized each section of the text. Next, I introduced structure to the analysis by organizing the themes into clusters. Finally, I constructed a summary table to bring together themes and quotations that illustrate those themes. To integrate the cases, I looked across the themes of all of the interviews to obtain an understanding of the phenomena of the moral behavior of RAs.

I attempted to adhere to this initial research plan, but I was aware that qualitative research is emergent. I was attentive to the fact that all phases of the research might change once the interviews began. The key behind this qualitative research was for me to learn about the phenomenon of moral behavior in RAs' lived experience of enforcing disciplinary policy, and to address the research in order to obtain this information (Creswell, 2009).

Participants

Study participants all work within University Housing and Residential Life at a large research institution in an urban setting. I selected the participants by sending an email invitation to all 144 current RAs. In the email I explained the purpose of the study and requested participation. 12 RAs responded stating they would be interested in assisting with my study, therefore they were utilized as participants.

Data Collection and Recording

The interview protocol that I used in this research included approximately ten questions (Appendix B) so that participants could provide flexible answers. The interviews explored the role of moral behavior in RAs who have implemented disciplinary policy. I used these interview questions as a guide to assist me with gathering descriptive data in the participants' own words. I asked follow-up questions when appropriate, even if the topic of a question was not directly related to the interview protocol. Doing this allowed me to better understand the lived experience of each participant.

I used face-to-face interviews with all participants in this study. I collected data during the audio-recorded interview. These interviews allowed me to control the line of questioning to get to the essence of the research interest. At times, interviews can create limitations because they provide indirect information filtered through the lens of the interviewee (Creswell, 2009).

Also, interviewees may bias some of their responses because of the researcher's presence; and not all interviewees are equally articulate and insightful (Creswell, 2009).

I utilized field/descriptive notes and a reflective journal before and subsequent to each interview with the RAs. The descriptive notes contained portraits of the participants, a reconstruction of the interview dialogue, and descriptions of the physical setting and other accounts of particular significance (Creswell, 2009). The reflective journal served as a location where I recorded "speculation, feelings, problems, ideas, hunches impressions and prejudices" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 122).

Data Analysis and Interpretation

I collected qualitative data, analyzed it for themes, and recorded the themes in my reflexive journal. Through the lens of IPA, I analyzed significant statements, generated meaning units, and developed a description of the essence of the relationship between RA moral behavior and policy enforcement. I took the steps described in the following stages to analyze the data.

First, I organized and prepared the data for analysis. I transcribed all of the interviews, typed all of the field notes, and sorted the data based on the sources of the information (Creswell, 2009). I then read through all of the collected data, which allowed me to gain a general sense of all the information I had collected. Based on the initial readings of the text, I produced wide-ranging and unfocused notes to serve as documentation of issues (Willig, 2001).

The second stage of the analysis process involved identifying and labeling themes that characterized each section of the text (Willig, 2001). The theme titles were conceptual and were intended to capture the critical content of the text. Using Willig's approach, this stage introduced structure into the analysis during stage three.

Here, I listed all of the themes and processed them in relation to one another. “Some themes will form natural clusters of concepts that share meanings or references, whereas others will be characterized by hierarchical relationships with one another” (Willig, 2001, p. 55). I gave clusters of themes either in vivo or descriptive labels.

The fourth and final stage of analysis involved the creation of a summary table (Willig, 2001). The summary table contains the structured themes and quotations, including where one can find relevant excerpts in the interview transcription that serve to illustrate each theme. The table included only themes that explain something about the participant’s experience of moral behavior in the RA role. During this stage, therefore, I discarded some of the themes that were generated during stage two of the analysis process.

I looked for themes according to Creswell’s suggestions. These included themes that the readers might expect to find, themes that were surprising and unanticipated, themes that were unusual and might be of greater interest to readers, and themes that served to address a larger theoretical framework (Creswell, 2009). I allowed themes to develop during the data-analysis process rather than reviewing the data with predetermined themes in mind.

I shaped the connections that I discovered into a general description to form more-complex thematic connections. Once I made these associations, I presented the data in a qualitative narrative style. This took the form of a detailed discussion of many themes, including subthemes, with specific illustrations from multiple perspectives, as well as direct quotations from participants related to Rest’s model of moral behavior (Creswell, 2009).

Finally, I analyzed the data for meaning and made interpretations. I derived the meaning by comparing my findings to information I had gathered from the literature. Doing this allowed

me either to endorse or to deviate from previous studies and theories. I also posed additional questions for further research that have come to light throughout the course of this study.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness of the data, I employed the following strategies: triangulation of data, member checking, and provision of a rich, thick description in order to convey the findings. I used triangulation of data as I examined the interview transcripts, observational notes and introspective notes in order to build a coherent justification for the themes. These themes were based on several sources of data from multiple participants (Creswell, 2009). Member checking involved my taking specific descriptions and themes back to participants to determine whether they felt these details were accurate. I made certain that there was an ongoing dialogue regarding my interpretations and the participants' reality and meaning to ensure the true value of the data. I have provided a rich, thick description of the setting, along with my perspectives about the themes I gathered, in order to provide results that allow the reader to understand the shared experiences of my participants (Creswell, 2009).

Researcher's Role

Until the fall of 2011, my entire professional career in Student Affairs was spent in various Residential Life offices. I have worked at large public institutions in urban areas, a small private institution in a suburban area, and a midsize public institution in a rural area. While all of these experiences were unique and different, one thing remained the same: RAs were consistently asked to hold residents accountable for policy violations within the residence halls. Just as this standard was consistent across these institutions, so was the fact that some RAs chose to enforce residence-hall policies selectively and thus failed to carry out a critical job responsibility consistently.

As a result of my history working in Residential Life, I have developed some biases around this issue. I assume that certain RAs want to be liked by their residents; therefore, they will not hold the residents accountable for policy violations. I also assume that the more experience RAs have, the more likely they will be to hold residents accountable because the RAs no longer are as concerned about what their residents think and can focus on upholding their position responsibilities as they have been trained to do.

I focused on RA participants at a residential college in a large urban setting. Although I did not know the participants personally, I had access to them through colleagues who work in University Housing and Residential Life. These colleagues served as gatekeepers for this study. They provided me with access to the RA participants.

I needed to establish trust with the participants so that they felt comfortable sharing accurate information with me. So I used participant-identified pseudonyms for all of the contributing RAs. That way, I have shared none of their identifying information with the reader. Also, I shared with the RAs' direct supervisor none of what participants disclosed to me through the course of the interviews or my observations.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed characteristics of this phenomenological study and my role as the researcher. I shared my data collection methods, along with how I will analyze and interpret the data. As stated, I established codes to discern themes, with the purpose of deriving meaning and making interpretations. I paid close attention to the trustworthiness of the data by employing the methods I listed above.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I discuss the qualitative data analysis of the lived experience of Resident Assistants (RAs) who administer disciplinary policy at a residential college in a large urban area. We can understand the lived experience using the theoretical lens of Rest's model of moral behavior. I used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyze the data I collected. I present a detailed discussion of the themes in a narrative style with specific illustrations from multiple perspectives.

Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore moral behavior in the lived experience of RAs who administer disciplinary policy, and, more specifically, to answer the following research questions:

- a. What is the lived experience of RAs who administer disciplinary policies at a residential college in a large urban area?
- b. How can we understand RAs' lived experience using the theoretical lens of Rest's model of moral behavior?

I developed the interview questions to elicit responses from the participants about their current level of moral behavior.

What I found, in general, in the responses to the first question, was that the RAs I interviewed in this study care deeply about the relationships that they have with residents; they care to the point that they would avoid holding the residents accountable for a policy violation for the sake of those relationships. The RAs admitted to treating the residents of their own floor differently than they treated others in the building. They also disclosed that if residents violated

a policy that would jeopardize their status as students or their choice of majors, the RAs were even less likely to hold the students accountable for their behavior.

The purpose of the second research question I explored was to increase our understanding of the RAs' lived experience through the theoretical lens of Rest's model of moral behavior. I have organized the findings for this section around the four components of Rest's model.

The Participants

The perspectives of the RAs I interviewed varied, although the sample size was relatively small ($N=12$). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 23. Although I attempted to balance gender as much as possible, the sample included more females (8) than males (4). Their years of RA experience was important to me as I selected participants because I was more interested in interviewing RAs who had more than one year of experience, and thus more examples to share. Table 1 includes the self-selected pseudonyms of the participants and their majors.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Class Rank	Years of RA Experience	Major	Age
Arianna	F	3rd year	2	Accounting	21
Barbie	F	3rd year	2	Psychology	20
Franklin	M	3rd year	2	Marketing	20
Gabrielle	F	4th year	2	Public Relations	21
Genevieve	F	3rd year	2	Anthropology	20
Kate	F	4th year	2	International Business	21
Molly	F	4th year	2	Film & Media Arts	22
Sam	M	4th year	2	Anthropology	21
Sarah	F	2nd year	1	Communication Studies	20
Scott	M	3rd year	1	Advertising	21
Tim	M	3rd year	2	Management Information Systems	21
Tuesday	F	5th year	4	Fibers & Fabric Design	23

Following are brief descriptions of each participant. I selected information from my interviews with participants to provide the reader with an understanding of their motivations for assuming the RA position and why they choose to persist in the role. Reasons tended to include the influence that their respective RAs had had on them during their first year of college, early exposure to the position via an older sibling, or their potential ability to impact other students' lives in a positive way through the position.

Arianna

Arianna was a 21-year-old junior. She had a brother who was 5 years older than her who was an RA at a small, liberal-arts college. She was exposed to the position responsibilities of an RA early on and knew that the job was something she would enjoy. She mentioned that she

liked the role that her RA played in her life during freshman year, and she thought she could have that type of positive influence on others, as well.

Barbie

Barbie was a 20-year-old junior. She had a great RA her freshman year and really enjoyed the way he was able to integrate her coed floor. She felt as though her personality was similar to his, and she had a constant feeling of wanting to be an RA because he had seemed to love his job so much. Barbie also mentioned that, as a psychology major, she had experience helping people through traumatic situations, and she was able to apply this knowledge directly to the RA role.

Franklin

Franklin was a 20-year-old junior. He had a difficult transition from home to college his first year, and his RA was very supportive of him through that process. He specifically mentioned a trying roommate experience that his RA was able to help him through. He felt as though the RA job was “a dream come true,” and he said he constantly bragged about it to family and friends. He truly felt as though it has been the most influential experience of his life up until that point.

Gabrielle

Gabrielle was a 21-year-old senior. She had always been a fan of student-leadership experiences, even in high school. She started out in a leadership position within her residence-hall Senate, and then she became Vice President of the Residence Hall Association her sophomore year. These experiences piqued her interest for the RA role. She also had an older sister who was an RA at another large, public university; therefore, her mother had been hoping that Gabrielle would apply for the position for the financial benefits of free room and board.

Genevieve

Genevieve was a 20-year-old junior. She openly admitted that she was first attracted to the RA role because of the benefits. She never realized how much she would grow from the position in the short time that she had had it. She was an out-of-state student, and she felt as though, through Residential Life, she had found somewhere to fit in on campus. She went on to state that, as a science major, she felt that the role also served as a creative outlet for her.

Kate

Kate was a 21-year-old senior. She had an RA her first year who did an excellent job. She shared that he really made their hallway a community, and they still had lasting friendships years later. When she moved to an upper-class environment her sophomore year, she was disappointed by her RA's lack of enthusiasm for the position. She wanted to provide an experience to other students like the one that she had had her freshman year on campus.

Molly

Molly was a 22-year-old senior. Her first understanding of the RA role came from movies. However, when she moved in, she had an RA who was extremely nice to her. He helped her with a challenging roommate issue. She met her first friend at college by attending a program that an RA in her building hosted. Through these experiences, the RAs really helped in her transition to college, and she was excited about being able to assist other students with the same obstacles.

Sam

Sam was a 21-year-old senior. He shared that he had a horrible RA his freshman year and this was what led him to apply for the position, to provide the opposite experience to others. He recounted that he had changed his major multiple times his freshman year, and he felt that a

more attentive RA could have helped him through that process. Sam was looking to get more involved on campus his sophomore year and wanted to help others, especially those in need of academic assistance.

Sarah

Sarah was a 20-year-old sophomore. She was attracted to the RA position because she knew that she would have an effect on others' lives in that role. She had felt very alone the first few weeks on campus as an out-of-state student, and as an RA she had changed that feeling for her residents. They were coming to her with concerns, and she enjoyed sharing with them the appropriate campus resources that were available to meet their needs. Helping others was something that was stressed during her RA training and something that Sarah implemented on a daily basis.

Scott

Scott was a 21-year-old junior. Scott became involved in Residential Life first through residence-hall Senate as a freshman, and then he became the President of the Residence Hall Association his sophomore year. He felt a strong sense of family within Residential Life, and he wanted to continue to give back; so he applied to become an RA. He stated that he had an approachable personality, which was a good fit for an RA; he said he enjoyed meeting and talking with others.

Tim

Tim was a 21-year-old junior. Tim was first attracted to the RA role because of the potential to develop his leadership and people skills. He was the oldest of five siblings, so he had experience assisting his parents with the management of his younger brothers and sisters.

He also shared that the cost savings that came with being an RA (RAs received free room and board as compensation for their work) were a large factor in his decision-making process.

Tuesday

Tuesday was a 23-year-old, fifth-year senior. Tuesday shared that she was attracted to the RA position because of her RA and all of the other RAs in the building during her freshman year. She spent much of her life being around people who were older than her, and she felt comfortable with them. She felt as though the RA role was an ongoing learning experience, and that was what had kept her motivated to return to it year after year. She was the most experienced RA in my sample, having at least two years' more experience than the other participants.

Lived Experiences of RAs Who Administer Disciplinary Policy

In this section, I provide analysis of the responses to the first research question of the lived experience of RAs who administer disciplinary policies at a residential college in a large urban area. Two consistent themes emerged from this research data: RAs' relationships with residents, and factors that assisted in their decisions to confront policy violations and hold students accountable accordingly. These themes represent a composite of the initial codes and themes I identified. The themes represent both descriptive and interpretative components of the RAs' lived experiences administering disciplinary policies.

Theme One: RAs' Relationships with Residents

RAs' relationships with residents played a central role in the lived experience of RAs who participated in my research. The RAs disclosed concerns regarding what their residents thought of them, the friendships they had formed with the residents on their floors over the course of time, and their attempts to relate to their residents on a student-to-student level. RAs

were both gratified and concerned when they were labeled as a “cool RA.” All participants in my study openly disclosed that they treated residents of their own floors differently than they treated residents of other floors in their building as a result of the relationships they had formed.

Residents’ perceptions of RAs. I found that the RAs who participated in this research discussed four perceptions residents have of RAs: (a) RAs as stereotypes, (b) RAs high on authority, (c) cool RAs, and (d) RAs as students. Residents tend to stereotype RAs because of preconceived notions they have of what the RAs will be like based on interactions they have had at friends’ institutions, or on impressions from movies or other aspects of popular culture. They may consider RAs to be high on the authority that comes with the position, which causes some residents to believe that RAs are power-hungry people who are out to ruin the residents’ good time. A handful of the study participants mentioned the concept of RAs being cool, as well. This description reflected the idea that RAs will look the other way and not hold residents accountable for policy violations. Yet overall, the RAs really wanted their residents to understand that RAs are students, too; and the study participants were hopeful that their residents remembered that during their interactions.

RAs as stereotypes. Most of the RAs who participated in my research mentioned that their residents often had misperceptions about them. Arianna shared what she believed to be a common perspective among residents:

So, like, everyone kind of stereotypes RAs as like ... they’re all nerds that just sit in their room and don’t do anything; like, they are really excited and just cut out decorations and hang them on their walls; that is what they all think we do.

Tuesday believes that “Residents rate all the RAs based on appearance. They think all of us are dating, but they also rate us based on, like, how much we want to get them in trouble, as well.”

Speaking of getting residents in trouble, RAs often are simply enforcing residence-hall policies as required, yet they are misperceived as taking a great sense of enjoyment from this part of their position. Sam commented sarcastically,

Whenever people ... try and vilify RAs, I'm just like, "You're right. I have nothing else to do with my time. I just really care about getting you in trouble. Let me tell you about how biochem doesn't matter to me [but] getting you in trouble does."

Molly stated that when she was required to confront residents, they would believe "I'm the strict police person, which I feel sometimes residents seem to think we are, even though we're not." These types of perceptions can create strained relationships between RAs and residents because residents may find it challenging to relate to someone they feel does not share their same interests or does not understand their lack of regard for following the policy.

RAs high on authority. Another perception was that RAs were asked to hold their peers accountable for policy violations. While some RAs could perform this task with the utmost respect for the residents they were confronting, residents could perceive others as enjoying this task too much. At times, not only the residents but also fellow RAs held this perception. For instance, Genevieve recalled, "[There] was definitely [an] RA in our building who was, like, out to get residents and enjoyed that. It was really weird; like, this person, like, probably had no life or something." Sam also stated, "Some RAs last year, especially in the beginning, [enjoyed], like, the thrill and the high of getting people in trouble and [were] almost looking to get people in trouble."

Tuesday admitted that at times she enjoyed "teaching the residents a lesson." When I asked her to share more about that, she said,

I feel like it's a little... I'm not going to lie. Sometimes it's like a power thing... Because you are slightly an authority figure and enforcer, and you know that you can get them in trouble in a sense just to be like, just very straightforward. Sometimes when you feel

disrespected, it's—I felt like, in that moment, I wasn't trying to, like, get at them; but I was just like... I'm doing my job.

It's not that way at all 'cause you're given... When you come to college, you're given responsibilities; but I'm given an additional responsibility—ability to watch over a building of residents. With that does come a certain instance of power that you sometimes use to the best of your ability, and sometimes you use it just to bullshit and lollygag just because I would say...

Tuesday was an outlier amongst my participants. She had been an RA longer than anyone else whom I spoke with; her enforcement style was certainly the most abrasive. More examples will follow throughout this chapter that illustrate her style.

Participants were concerned that, if one RA in their building had a reputation for enjoying getting residents in trouble, then all of the RAs would be colored in the same light. This was another challenge for RAs when they were trying to establish positive connections with residents.

Cool RAs. When the RAs were forming these relationships, they were sometimes asked whether or not they were cool RAs. I asked some of the participants who mentioned this concept without prompting to define and explain it. Sam shared,

Well the concept that I've heard, every time that I've said that I'm an RA... it was at least 90 percent of the time that I've said I'm an RA, I get the second... The next question asked after that is, "Are you [a] cool RA though? Like, are you one of the cool RAs?"... I'm like, "Sure." Like, I don't know what you want to—I don't want to give them any false expectations but... Like last year, I was the cool RA to some people; and then, to other people, I was like that guy who got them in trouble.

During my conversation with Genevieve, this concept was further clarified when I asked her how residents would define a cool RA. She stated a cool RA is one who "Parties with residents ... drinks with residents, or smokes weed, or whatever." She further clarified, "But there is no such thing as [a cool] RA, because by default that RA will get fired."

Barbie recounted an awkward encounter that she had with her residents when she was trying to hold them accountable for a policy violation, but they believed that she was a cool RA.

She shared,

When I was a first-year RA, I felt like, uncomfortable because it was like, “Oh, Barbie’s like, a cool RA. She is funny. She has a sense of humor.” So then I felt like when I would try to confront the residents, they would be like, “What? Like, what are you doing?”

These examples continue to stress the importance that RAs’ relationships with residents played in the RAs’ lived experiences. It was also important for RAs to remember that they needed to strike a fine balance between being the cool RA and being one who was high on the authority that came with the position.

RAs as students. A majority of the RAs whom I spoke with stated that these stereotypes and misperceptions were one of the main reasons that RAs tried so hard to connect with their residents on a student level. Tim, more so than any of the other RAs I met, stated that the key way he was able to connect with his residents was

By conveying that I am a student, as well, that I am a 20-year-old, as well... I am kind of going through a lot of similar things or have gone through a lot of similar things as they have.

Genevieve added,

I always tell people, tell residents, like, I’m a student, too; like, I’m your peer at the end of the day... I just, you know, happen to have these rules in my handbook that I have to hold you accountable to; but I’m held accountable to them, too.

And Franklin stated, “That’s one thing I like to remind them is, like, I’m [a] student too.”

Finally, Arianna shared, “We’re students, too; and you’re a student, so I can’t act like I’m above you.”

Establishing positive resident relationships was paramount to the RA role. Not only did that make for a more comfortable living experience for everyone involved, but it could also

create a community of mutual support and respect. These were key elements that allowed RAs to feel comfortable if and when they needed to confront their residents. Arianna's statement about resident relationships sums up this point well:

The most important thing is building those relationships; because if you build that relationship, they're more likely to respond to you. For example, if I had a program... I've had so many residents that are, like, "I'm here because of you, not because of the program. I don't care what you're doing, but I'm here because you support me; so I'll support you" kind of thing.

RAs' different treatment of own residents. Throughout the course of my interviews, it became apparent that RAs treated the residents of their own floors differently than they treated the rest of the residents in the building. Either the RAs were more lenient with residents on their own floors, or they held those residents to a higher standard and expected better behavior from them. Finally, another concept that the interviews revealed was that of the "good resident."

Leniency. More often than not, the RAs were willing to look the other way if their own residents were participating in a policy violation, but they would hold other residents accountable for similar actions. Arianna was up-front about this fact, stating,

I hate getting my own residents in trouble. I know that they'll respond to me. I know I treat my own residents differently than residents of other floors. I was definitely more harsh than I would have been with someone on my own floor because on my own floor, because I would have known them and I would have been able to pick out a person and been like, "Hey you know the rules," and like, "Come on," kind of thing, as opposed to me, like, yelling at all of them.

Genevieve also shared, when speaking about the residents on her floor,

That's the only time I feel uncomfortable, because I want to cut them some slack or a break. And sometimes I don't always hold them accountable as I should. But any other people in the building, I'll set them straight; like, really quick, I'll hold them accountable. But when [they're] mine, I have, like, [a] really hard time.

Molly stated, “I am a bit more lenient with my girls than I am with other people, just ‘cause I’m, like... I know them better. Barbie also stated the following when asked whether she treated the residents on her floor differently than she treated the rest of the floors in the building:

I would say that. I try not to, but it’s one of those things, or it’s just, like... if I just think it’s a matter of, like, personal relationships. So I think last year I definitely let, like, a few of my girls just kind of, like, fly under the radar when I knew, like, “Okay; you guys are drinking and, like, you’re drinking in your rooms,” and stuff like that. But I kind of like... kind of let it go a little bit. But if I’ve ever heard anything on any other floor, right away I was, like, taking action.

Higher standards. While some RAs used leniency as a way to establish strong relationships with residents on their floors, others stated that they tended to hold residents on their own floors to higher standards because they knew the rules and were still choosing to violate them. For example, Tim stated,

And so I think when I say I hold them to a higher standard, I think it’s because I view them as mine. And it’s a part of me, and they’re kind of like, like anyone who’s on my floor... the rest of the building knows, “Oh, okay; like, you’re Tim’s resident...” But, like, I feel that I’ve given them, not a leeway, but I’ve kind of given them an enhanced experience... And, like, because I’ve kind of opened that door for them, for them to kind of reply with, “Oh, I’m going to, like, get drunk in the dorms, and I’m going to smoke weed, or I’m going to do this or that...,” it’s kind of like, “No”; like, “you’re better than that.”

Franklin similarly shared, “I would say I do hold my residents to a higher standard than everyone else. And I like to protect that higher standard while I necessary should or shouldn’t.”

And Gabrielle mentioned,

I’ve noticed that, with my floor, when they break policy... I’m not strict often, so when I am, even quiet hours, I get thank-you notes under my door, like “We’re so sorry.” You know, like, they really... So in that sense, I’m almost harder on my floor... In terms of, like, “I expect more of you.”

I probed further into this topic of RAs treating their own residents differently than they would treat others in the building, and I found that some RAs took it personally when their

residents committed policy violations; some even found it disrespectful. Sam said that he established ground rules early on with his residents to curb this behavior:

And I kind of frame it, in the beginning of the year especially... with, like, my residents, it's easier 'cause I got the chance to talk to them just being, "When you break policy, you're insulting me; you're disrespecting me..." Like, something I have to do—"You make me do those things."

I would be less apt to [issue a warning] for people that were my residents because I find them to be more disrespectful, that they're like... that I've given them a warning face to face, and they know who I am, and they're still breaking that. So if it's my residents, I'm more actually [to] be like, "Guys, come on; like, that's rude," sort of thing.

Sarah commented that her floor was a reflection of who she was and stated,

I made that very clear to my floor, how, like, "I represent you, and vice versa; so if you're smoking on the floor, it represents me poorly, the building poorly, and everyone involved in that. And so that type of thing I don't accept that at all..." So I think that kind of comes down to, like, what personally you hold more important.

Tim mentioned that he took it personally when his residents violated policy, and he tended to be harsher with them when confronting them on their behavior:

When it's my own, and they've so willingly done it although I have told them time and time again they'll do this, do not do this—that's when I'm, like, like, "You've hurt me..." And, like, I'll make sure that I get right in their face because they know that it can happen. And, like, they've seen it before where I had a resident break policy, and there was, like, 10 kids in his room, and it was something minor; but, like, they saw the RA authority switch flip.

Good-resident concept. Another subset of RAs treating their own residents differently than they treat others was the idea that some residents were typically more compliant than others. RAs mentioned that sometimes students were "good residents"; therefore, they did not want to hold them accountable when they did break a residence-hall policy because it might strain the relationship that the RA had worked so hard to establish. As an example, Molly stated,

I don't want to penalize these students because they're good students. But it's like... But they're breaking this thing that's suppose[d] to be this policy that we have [to] enforce. And it's, like, I have tried to ask them before, like, "Hey could you quiet down?" But then, to them, it kind of makes it like, "Oh, you're just this policy enforcer."

And I feel like, with those residents I've had to ask to quiet down multiple times, they don't connect with me as much, because they're looking at me as this... like, you know, "You have to enforce this policy on me, which means you're out to get me."

When it's a student that like, you know, they're not necessarily... I hate this word *bad student*. But like, they're not a student that causes issues, but they're doing this thing now that is... It's like you have that preconceived thing of, like, this isn't a student that normally does this kind of thing; should I just cut them a break?

Genevieve shared that she was often conflicted when she needed to hold accountable a resident she believed was a good resident and whom she had established a relationship with:

Oh, man; like, I don't know if I want to document this... like, I feel really bad because she's so cool. But then, you know, I did. It was really hard, but I did... even though, like, there's this, like, internal battle going on my head.

The RAs in this study were so invested in the relationships that they had with residents of their own floors that they were treating them differently than others. At times, this difference was a benefit to their residents because they were not being held accountable for policy violations. At other times, they reprimanded their residents more sternly than they might have reprimanded another resident in the building because the RAs took it personally that their own resident would choose to violate a policy, therefore disrespecting the RA. The relationships that RAs established with their residents set the tone for the entire floor community.

Theme Two: Decision-Making Factors

Throughout this investigation, the idea that RAs deemed certain policy violations worthy of pursuit while others they did not become apparent. RAs used the terms of *major violations* and *minor violations* to describe what was and was not worthy of confrontation. RAs shared that, although they might be aware that residents were participating in policy violations, they would confront students only under certain circumstances. RAs considered a resident's attitude and what the resident might have to lose before they documented policy violations.

Situations that require confrontation. When asked whether there were certain situations that were worthy of pursuit while others simply were not, the participants in the study all had varying responses. Many spoke about how they determined when to confront a policy violation. A common distinction the participants made was that, if something was affecting the other residents, they would be more apt to confront it than if a violation was occurring but was not bothering anyone else. Franklin stated that he confronted residents

When it's something you go over in your multiple floor meetings throughout the semester; when it's stuff you hang fliers about; when it's stuff you've done programs on, stuff where you've harped up on it more and more... I'm more willing to, like, pursue that.

Scott also shared,

I would say the [violations] that I deem more worthy of pursuing would be ones where it's, you know, obviously disruptive or potentially harmful to either the person or others. There will be times where, like I said, there's, you know, noise violations or something minor going on that to me wouldn't be disruptive if I were a neighbor or down the hall and these things were happening... You know, I personally might not care too much. I always try and put myself in the resident's shoes and in the neighbor's shoes and think, like, "Oh, if this were me, would I care? Would this be a big deal?" So things like smelling marijuana—that's something that affects the hall, you know?

And of course, you know, alcohol violations that might be mixed with noise violations... Something where there might be, like, a party going on in the room, or just something that is really noisy and disruptive for a long term. That's something that I would, you know, try and pursue a little bit more just because I feel like that would be, you know, more upsetting to the neighbors.

Kate had a similar perspective to Scott and stated she would confront a situation

When it's affecting other people, it's more important [to confront it]. For me, like, noise violations or things of that nature, or rowdy residents that affects people who are say, like, you know, studying for exams... That I'll take really seriously... As opposed to maybe, like, people who are quietly, like, in their rooms maybe violating policy, but... I'm not aware of, I would say, like... I guess I'm just trying to turn this, like... I wouldn't go pursue someone who's, like, being quiet if I suspected that they had alcohol, over someone who is being very rambunctious about it.

Arianna confirmed Kate's belief by stating,

My policy is “If I don’t see it, hear it, smell it, then I’m not going to inquire about it” kind of thing. So, like, whatever [the residents] do on their own time is fine. I’m just not going to proactively look for it.

Major versus minor violations. The RAs made it clear that there were varying levels of policy violations. A majority of the participants I met with used the terms *major violations* and *minor violations*. However, what defined a minor violation was not necessarily universal. Many RAs spoke about noise, guest-card policy violations, and lockouts as minor compared to an alcohol or drug violation. Sam shared his perspectives regarding minor policy violations:

There’s some things that I now know are less severe; less really important to document. You know, some things that don’t have to be documented, I guess... They probably should be, but things that, you know, it wouldn’t be a big deal if they weren’t.

When I probed Sam further to provide an example of an infraction that probably should be documented but was not, he explained,

Lockouts is the main one... I think there’s, you know, official policy that has to do with university policy, and violations, and things like that. And then there’s, like, residence-hall policy, things like having to do with keys, and lockouts, and... you know, quiet hours, and stuff like that. And those things might be a little bit more lax, and a little bit more lenient with how you can address them.

Genevieve made it clear that she tended to follow protocol when the infraction was more severe:

For higher-level violations such as alcohol or marijuana, you’re going to follow your protocols as you’ve been instructed to do so. For lower-level infractions, you’re going to be more apt to give a warning; and then if it’s a repeated behavior, then document.

Sam suggested that there were also minor alcohol violations. When I asked him to define a minor alcohol infraction, he shared,

Well, like, if they’re drinking in their room and, like, you know, they just started drinking, or they were just about to go out sort of thing... It’s one of those things that is, like, “Come on guys,” like, “if you’re going to pregame anywhere, like, you don’t need to do in the dorm”; like, I’ll reiterate, and I’ll always say, like, “I could get you in a lot of trouble right now.”

Alcohol-safety decisions. All of the participants referenced confronting situations that involve alcohol consumption as a violation, and this proved to be a controversial topic. A majority of the RAs considered alcohol possession and consumption to be a minor violation. Many times, these RAs took it upon themselves to determine whether or not students required further medical attention as the result of their level of intoxication, rather than following their protocol and contacting EMS to make an official assessment. Kate shared that the process of confronting alcohol violations in general could be tricky because

If you knock on a door and everything seems normal, you can't ask to look in cabinets or anything like that; or, if they appear sober, you can't be, like, "I'm going to breathalyze you." So I think it's things like that, and I think it's not really black and white; I think there's a lot of a gray area. But I think a lot of the times it comes with the experience to know what to do in those situations; 'cause as a first year RA, I didn't... It was harder to confront ... drinking because you're just... you don't want to accuse anyone. So it's definitely a balance and kind of knowing trends that you've seen from, like, other residents.

Gabrielle mentioned that there were RAs on her staff who had an inner sense of whether or not "someone's really bad or not that bad" in regard to their level of intoxication. She did not feel like she had that same ability to know how people were reacting to alcohol. She stated,

If I see someone and I know that they're like barely tipsy—they look like they consumed one or two, I can turn a blind eye to it... If someone looks horrible, although it's a hassle, I do call [the university's police department], call my secondary.

Molly stated that, on a regular basis, she did not confront students when they came back to the residence hall under the influence of alcohol and tipsy:

Obviously, you do get those students who come back and they're drunk. They're disruptive. They're causing an issue, and that's when, you know, I usually do something. But... if they kind of come back, and they're stumbling, and they go right to their room, you know, who are they really hurting? I feel like... okay; for the way that at least I look it as, you know, like [I] said, if they're not... if they're walking and they're just kind of like, "Oh, I'm a little lopsided." You know, that's fine.

Because it's like... the way I see it is part... you know, they're going to do it. It's part of college. And I would much rather... like... Whenever I usually see that, it's like, you

know, maybe, say, like a group of girls. And it's kind of just knowing that they're going, like, in a group... that they're coming back and they're not that bad. It just shows that, like, even though... You know, obviously drinking alcohol under age is... you know, is an illegal thing to do... At least they're doing it in a relatively responsible manner... If they managed to get back to the building.

Scott shared Molly's beliefs regarding students returning to the halls intoxicated:

I would say there are a couple times where I might have had suspicions that people might have been intoxicated; but at those times they were in their own room, or, you know, getting ready to go to bed. And if I had encountered them, and they were, you know, intoxicated and, you know, being loud, I would say most likely... If they had already made it past security and they were already back on the floor that night, I would have told them to go to bed anyways. I would have just said... "Go to bed; stop being loud, and sober up." So a lot of times, when I have seen people who I might have thought were intoxicated back on my floor, a lot of the times, they were already about to go... to bed, go to sleep; go back to their rooms. And so I might not have said anything just because they were going to resolve the issue themselves.

Scott mentioned that security in the residence halls acted somewhat like a gatekeeper for students who might require further medical attention as a result of their level of intoxication. He stated that, for the most part, if students were able to make it past the security desk, their level of intoxication had been deemed safe to return to their room to "sleep it off." When I inquired about the concern I had for students who might not be okay simply returning to their rooms, Scott stated,

[If] they're walking straight, they're coherent from what I can tell; and I guess, just from what I can, you know, assume, they'll be okay... I figure if they can... make it to their room... they'll be okay.

Resident attitude. Resident attitude at the time of confrontation played a large role in the RA's decision-making process regarding whether to hold persons accountable for a violation, give them a warning, or simply choose to ignore their behavior. When residents were compliant with RAs' requests to turn music down or dispose of alcohol as instructed, RAs were more likely not to hold the students accountable for the infraction.

Kate shared that when she confronted noise violations, she considered the time of day and whether or not quiet hours had begun. She also considered

How the resident responds... I've written up just based on them being belligerent. Like, "Why are you knocking on my door? Why are you telling me to turn my music down? Like, I can play it as loud as I want." So that... I've had that incidence and that's a clear write-up... Just because it's disrespectful, you know. I can knock on your door, like... I'm on duty... I have [the] right to [laughs]... So yeah; a lot of times with that, it's just factors—it's time, noise level, and then their attitude.

Tuesday openly shared that she based how she was going to hold students accountable for their behavior on their attitude toward her during the initial confrontation. She recalled an incident that she recently came across in which she chose not to hold the residents accountable because of their compliance, although reluctant, with her request to dispose of the alcohol they were consuming:

Just a couple of weeks ago, I was on doing my rounds and these girls are being really loud; but I knocked on the door, not because I thought they were drinking but because of a noise violation. So when I knocked on the door, they came out and were like, "Oh, shit" and you heard a clink, clink, clink.

Tuesday asked the residents three times to get the alcohol bottles that they were consuming and put them in the recycling bin. The residents were resistant and tried to pretend that they did not know what bottles she was talking about. When the residents finally complied, she went on to explain to them,

Now, the only reason why I did this is because you had a noise violation... And [the resident] just looked at me and said, "I'm so sorry." But then I said, "I understand you're trying to have a good time, but you have to also understand the rules." And I said, "I'm going to let you go right now because you were being compliant. I don't have... like, you're not giving me any type of attitude even though you did not, like, answer [the door] right away."

Consequences of documenting residents. Some RAs who participated in the study stated that one factor that went into their decision-making process regarding resident accountability was what residents might lose if they were documented and held accountable for

their policy violations. This concept first surfaced in regard to students with certain majors, such as education or premedical, and also those who were athletes. Often, these students were held to higher standards within their professions; and if they were found responsible for policy violations during their collegiate experience, they might no longer be able to pursue their chosen course of study.

Sam shared the following story:

So it's just... There were certain times when [it] falls on the RA to, like... how important is this sort of thing? Like, how much do I want to get them in trouble? I also... if I have, like, a nursing or ed major on the floor, or a premed type thing, I will, like, specifically pull them aside and be like, "I guarantee I'm going to crack down as hard ... as possible on you because you need to make sure you're not getting in trouble for these sorts of things. So, if you're doing in the dorm, you're doing it off campus."

"I'm not going to be up with you at 3 A.M. as you're crying 'cause you have to change your major...." I have seen it happen multiple times, especially in the honors floor, the amount of kids that got in trouble and then weren't premed anymore.... So... If I ran into a situation where it was, like, a minor thing that I had to get them in trouble, I would be like, "What are you doing? You're a nursing major?" I was like, "Do you want me to make you not a nurse in this moment?" Like... I have to make a decision, why would you put me in that choice?... And then, if you do it again, you were wholly allowed to go to the full extent of your ability in getting them in trouble; and they know that they can't be mad at you for doing that.

Arianna was also conflicted about documenting students who were part of special populations. She also worked for athletics and was aware of what could happen in the event that athletes were found responsible for policy violations in the residence halls.

I know what would happen on that side if they were to get caught with it; they are risking their scholarships, they are risking their education here, they are risking a lot... Let's say I do catch an athlete; oh well, I have... Let's say I say to the person that I did catch in that initial conversation... We, like, say, "I know that you are doing this, whatever; but you know what the consequences would be if I were to go further with this. Let's leave this at 'right now' sort of thing."

Therefore, Arianna was making the choice not to document an athlete, and to keep the athlete from getting in trouble with the team and coaching staff.

Summary of Themes

The major themes I have presented in this chapter include RAs' relationships with residents, and some of the factors that influenced their decision-making processes around holding residents accountable for policy violations. It became evident as I analyzed the data that, at times, residents perceived RAs stereotypically, even though RAs preferred to be thought of as students too. Some RAs become labeled as cool, which meant that they were less likely to hold students accountable for policy violations, while other RAs were high on the authority they had from the RA position and overemphasized their role in policy enforcement.

Other discoveries this analysis revealed were that RAs treated residents of their own floors differently than they treated those of other floors within their buildings. More often than not, RAs were more lenient on residents of their own floors and would be less likely to hold them accountable for policy violations. A minority of participants, however, were actually harder on their own residents when they were involved in policy violations than they would have been toward others because the RAs felt their residents should have known better. Finally, some RAs held the idea that there were good students in the residence who typically follow the procedures and were respectful of the RA; if these students were found violating a residence-hall policy, the likelihood was higher that they would not be held accountable for their infraction because of their general likeability.

The second major theme relates to decision-making factors that RAs processed before they did or did not follow through on documenting residents for policy violations. RAs discussed situations that required confrontation, and they deemed disruptions to the residence-hall community a priority for their response. Participants shared their thoughts on major versus minor violations, which varied based on their personal perceptions. At times, RAs took it upon

themselves to determine whether or not students were in need of emergency assistance when it came to their level of intoxication. Taking this approach was contradictory to what they had been trained to do in their preservice sessions.

RAs also determined how to proceed with policy violations based on the residents' attitudes at the time of confrontation. If residents were compliant with the RA's requests, they were more likely to receive a warning than be documented for the violation. In the event that residents were in any way rude or disrespectful to the RAs, the RAs typically followed through on their protocols and documented the situation. A final consideration that the RAs made before they documented residents was what residents might lose if they were found responsible for the violation. Therefore, if students had certain majors or were athletes, and their scholarships or choices of career might be on the line, RAs were more likely to look the other way and not hold those residents accountable for their behavior.

Applying Rest's Model to the Lived Experience of RAs

In this section, I provide analysis of study participants' responses to the second research question of how we can understand RAs' lived experience using Rest's model of moral behavior. Rest's model provides a lens through which I could interpret the lived experiences of the RAs in this study. The four components of this model are (a) moral sensitivity, (b) moral judgment, (c) moral motivation, and (d) moral character (Rest, 1986). For individuals to demonstrate moral behavior, they must meet the criteria of all four components. A brief description of each component follows.

Moral sensitivity is characterized by individuals being able to interpret a situation involving the welfare of another as a moral problem, to identify possible alternative actions, and to determine the consequences of each action (Evans et al., 2010; Johnson, 2007). So moral

sensitivity is characterized by individuals' recognition that a problem exists. Empathy and perspective-taking skills are key to their being able to identify and understand moral issues. When they employ moral sensitivity, individuals can recognize how others might feel or react to the potential negative effects of their choices, thus making it easier for them to predict the likely outcomes of various options (Johnson, 2007). So, for example, RAs who demonstrate moral sensitivity can identify a violation of residence-hall policy and determine the effects of the violation, not only on the resident who is committing the violation, but also on the surrounding community.

Moral judgment is the most researched of Rest's components; in fact, Kohlberg's original theory drew solely upon moral judgment as the basis for his stages of moral-development theory. When persons exercise moral judgment, they are making a judgment about which course of action is morally right; thus, they can label one possible action as what a person ought to do (Rest, 1986). Individuals receive cues from social situations that allow them to understand an issue's fairness and therefore make a judgment about how to proceed. So RAs using moral judgment are able to determine that the morally right thing to do is to hold residents accountable for their behavior and proceed according to the training they have received.

Moral motivation occurs when persons give priority to moral values above other personal values such that they make a decision to intend to do what is morally right (Johnson, 2007). Individuals' moral values often conflict with other important values, which thus makes it hard for them to follow through in an ethical way. Rewards and emotions play an important role in this follow-through. Ethical behavior will result only if moral considerations take precedence over competing priorities (Johnson, 2007). So RAs who use moral motivation would be able to determine, regardless of their personal opinions about residence-hall policies, that they must hold

residents accountable for their behavior. Therefore, if RAs encounter a policy violation, the correct thing to do would be to confront the violator and document the violation according to how they have been trained.

The fourth and final component of Rest's model of moral behavior is moral character. Persons with moral character have sufficient perseverance and implementation skills to be able to follow through on their intention to behave morally (Rest, 1986). Individuals "must overcome active opposition, cope with fatigue, resist distractions, and develop sophisticated strategies for reaching their goals. In sum, they must persist in a moral task or action despite obstacles" (Johnson, 2007, p. 72). RAs who act from moral motivation would implement their plans of action to confront residence-hall policy violations, document the situations, and feel confident that they have followed through on their position responsibilities. They would not have an issue following up with residents after violations because they would have persevered through all of the perceived obstacles to follow through on their position responsibilities. When individuals actively displays all four components, they are demonstrating moral behavior.

Moral Sensitivity

The RAs who participated in this study were more often than not sensitive to the situations that were happening in their areas of responsibility, and they were able to empathize with the role of others on their floor in order to confront situations that might be troublesome to the community. Although some RAs were more lenient than others with certain resident behavior, they all had a point at which they did not tolerate a behavior.

Barbie shared the following information regarding her thought process and actions of documenting students who returned to the residence halls intoxicated:

[They] can come back drunk and, like, for the one weekend I let it go because [they] don't seem like [they're] that messed up; and then they come back again the second

week, and then they're a little bit drunk, and I let it... I let them go again because as long as they don't seem like they're going to cause trouble, then I'm fine letting them go. But let's say they have this pattern of doing that, and then they come back; and this time they're tearing down posters and they're being really loud; like, that's a No, that's a No... I guess with that type of thing, I wait 'till it's like, okay, now it's like, not to a severe point, but it's like, you're being noisy.

Tuesday serves as a good example of an RA who still needed to learn more about moral sensitivity when it came to interacting with her residents. She recounted the following story of her attempt to follow up with a resident after she needed to document the individual for a policy violation:

But I do try to sit down to follow up and say, like, "Do you understand why I did what I did? I don't really care if you're upset." I let them know that I'm like... "I don't really care how you feel, but I just want you to understand why I did what I did and why I continue to follow up on you because..." And I let them know, "If you lived off campus and a neighbor had this complaint, you wouldn't be getting a write-up and a fine; potentially, you'd be going to jail and spending potentially a night and half there, and giving a fine from the City of Philadelphia which could be greater, plus community service time and probation. You're not getting any of that right now."

In both of these scenarios, the RAs first needed to identify the situation as a moral issue, and then to recognize the consequences of their actions. Barbie chose to neglect her original responsibility of confronting the resident the first time the person came back to the hall intoxicated; she chose to ignore it again the second time, and finally she was forced to act on it the third. This approach causes confusion amongst residents regarding what they will and will not be held accountable for; and it is clear here that Barbie was unable to determine the consequence of her inaction and its effect on the floor community. Tuesday's moral sensitivity was lacking in the preceding example. Her follow-up with residents was well intended; however, Tuesday needed to learn that her choice of words could be very hurtful and in fact harm the very relationship that she was trying to foster with the resident. She appeared to have little to no empathy for the student in the situation; and rather than displaying concern, she was

more focused on ensuring that the resident understood why she needed to follow through on her RA-role responsibilities. She was unable to realize the consequences of her choice to treat the resident in such a demeaning way.

Gabrielle, in contrast, used a different approach with her residents when she needed to hold them accountable for policy violations. She displayed moral sensitivity by being nice, friendly, and respectful. When her residents broke the rules, she would address the situation with them; however, afterward it would be as if nothing ever happened. When I asked her if she was apt to give warnings for certain behaviors rather than document them, she stated,

I document... Yeah. No... I don't do warnings... We were never told to do warning[s]... Yeah. I mean... Because then it comes down to... because if I'm getting annoyed one night, then I give one person a warning. But I, you know... like I'm choosing favorites. And I don't like to get into that game.

This attitude was consistent with her similar response to my question regarding whether or not policy violations were worthy of pursuit, to which she replied,

I think they're all worthy of pursuit ... because it's almost a matter of disrespect. Residents think they can get away with everything. And if we say, "No," then they're... If we don't pursue them, then they're just going to keep going.

Gabrielle was able to identify moral issues and determine ahead of time the consequences for her actions. Thus, she decided to treat everyone with respect and follow through on her assigned responsibilities in a clear and consistent manner.

Moral Judgment

Most of the RAs whom I interviewed were unable to employ moral judgment in their everyday lives as RAs. They did not make the most appropriate choices based on their training. A common theme throughout all of the interviews I conducted was that RAs tended to let residents slide when they were involved in an alcohol violation. Molly spoke at length about

alcohol-policy violations and what she perceived her role to be in them, regardless of her training. She stated the following regarding residents returning to the hall intoxicated:

[If] they're just kind of like a little stumbly and a little slurred with their words, I usually don't tend to do much about it... I usually kind of just let it go if they're okay.

But if it's just like, you know, some students are going out on a Friday night, and they come back and they're a little tipsy... I don't feel like that's something, like, "Oh, the university needs to know that this kid went out and partied," you know... You see it once or twice, I don't really... I don't usually think it's something that would need to be documented.

Residents needed to be causing quite a disruption to the community for RAs to exercise the judgment to hold them accountable for their behavior. Sam went as far as to state to his floor,

You will never get caught for the thing that you're doing wrong; you will get caught for being stupid about it. Because, like, I know so many people that have done all those policy violation[s] ... but have done it in a manner that is much more secretive.

Sam was implying that, as long as his residents were quiet about the policies they violated and did so in a way that did not bring attention to them, technically they could get away with their behavior.

Sam also had a hard time understanding that his choices needed to be consistent regarding resident violations, regardless of who the violator was. Sam recounted the following:

If there's a prominent person in the community, or somebody that hangs out with a bunch of people that I know ... it will develop more respect for him if I say, "Hey, I caught you doing this. If you do it again, I guarantee you I will be getting you in trouble for it; but I'm letting you go this time" sort of a thing. That keeps the community together, and then that almost develops more respect between me and this, like, semipopular person on the floor; whereas, if I were to, like, distance myself from them by getting them in trouble, and there's that awkward, like, week period that they don't want to talk to you; or until the judicial stuff is done, they don't want to talk to you. And then after the judicial stuff is done, they want to talk to you; it gets a very awkward. And then they can turn people against you like, "Oh, I can't believe that you got someone in trouble."

In this example, Sam was demonstrating that he would decide based on the residents' level of popularity how he would respond to their policy violation. The judgment that he was choosing to make in this situation was not morally right, yet he was unable to see how this type of thinking would affect the community on his floor.

We can see Tuesday's lack of moral judgment in the following statement that she shared with me:

There are some [times when] I was probably annoyed with the resident, and I said some things I shouldn't have said, like... speaking in the moment, and sometimes I do think, "Well, this person's too stupid; they won't say anything to the RD [Resident Director]." Like, honestly, I would just blame [them] and be like, "Okay; that won't go back to him"; but if it does, I would be in trouble.

Tuesday was clearly expressing that she knew she had said things that were inappropriate to residents; but rather than apologize or inform the RD, her supervisor, of her actions, she simply believed that the resident would not say anything. It became clear that Tuesday's style of enforcement as an RA was based on intimidation and the belief that she was untouchable.

Genevieve expressed a similar lack of moral judgment when she was dealing with a resident whose guest was causing a community disruption. She informed the resident that she was going to rip up her guest card if she did not comply with Genevieve's request of escorting the resident out of the building. When I questioned whether or not RAs had the authority to revoke a resident's guest privileges, Genevieve responded, "I'll say that to, like, scare someone. If they're like super belligerent ... or something like that... But, like, we don't rip guest cards." This type of threat is certainly not something that is modeled for RAs during training, nor would it be considered acceptable behavior. In this instance, Genevieve needed to recognize that intimidating residents in order for them to comply with her requests was not advantageous.

These RAs I have mentioned all needed to recognize that, although they felt like they were making the best decision in the heat of the moment, they were not. They were lacking the ability to make the right choice, which is the basis for moral judgment. This failure was in part because they also were lacking moral sensitivity to recognize that the issues that they had described were moral situations.

Franklin serves as a good example of an RA who used both moral sensitivity and moral judgment in his everyday encounters with residents. I asked him about his comfort level confronting residents, and how he could remain so calm and focused when other participants in the study seemed to get flustered or would rather not enforce the policies. He shared that the type of community that he had established on his floor allowed him to follow through with his students using a standards-based approach. He shared the following example of when he had to confront residents who were violating policy:

Hey guys, like I know like we have this type of relationship; but it's, like, this is not cool. Like, this is the type of thing ... like, this is what we expect... This is what we expect of each other.

He also discussed that he had a plan in mind when he needed to confront individuals, whether or not the situation needed to be documented:

I have pretty much laid out in my head what I'm going to say, how I'm going to say it, how I'm going to approach residents about it.

I'm always going to have a conversation with a student about something that is a policy. Whether it needs to be considered a judicial type of situation, that's a different type of thing; because for those types of things, you're going to have just say, "Hey," like, "this is kind of what we expect out of residents. This is what your floor expects out of you. This is a community." It's different types of conversations on varying degrees of situations because sometimes you just need to remind them, "Hey this is your home. This is your community. This is almost a type of your family." Other times, you have to be like, "This is really unacceptable. And this needs to be taken further because what you've done is completely out of hand."

Franklin also mentioned that adapting the conversation to the situation at hand helped him to stay in control during what could be tense conversations. He understood that each resident and each violation was different and deserved to be treated accordingly.

But, I mean, you keep the entire protocol idea in head and policy idea in head and adhere to that, but you may just handle it a little bit differently to best accommodate the situation at hand because no situation's the same: different people, different personalities. I mean, if you've got someone who's very shy or very timid, you're not necessarily going to yell at them, like... But if you have, like, students who are like being rude and disrespectful, you're going to have that conversation, and it's like, you know, like, "I need you to understand what's going on here." Like, "I'm not trying to, like, be malicious towards you. This is what I have." So, I mean, you handle it different ways. You use different tones, different words, different things throughout the entire situation because you'll never find a situation like it's written in the book because those don't exist.

As evidenced by his statements, Franklin was able to make the right choices using moral judgment as Rest described it. Franklin made the expectations of his floor known, allowed his residents to buy into the concept that the residence hall was a home away from home, and calmly encountered situations as they occurred. He could recognize moral situations through his advanced moral sensitivity and felt confident in his decisions because of his ability to use moral judgment.

Moral Motivation

Moral motivation was an interesting factor that many study participants discussed even without realizing it. The RAs mentioned that returning RAs tended to be much more lenient on their residents than first-year RAs were. I found this to be an interesting observation because, although these RAs knew that they should be holding residents accountable for their actions, they were simply choosing not to do so, and they were not taking responsibility for the outcome of the residents' behavior. Scott mentioned,

[I] had the impression that there were some RAs that were a little bit more lax and some that were a little bit more lenient with the rules. I would say for the most part, like, it would be dealing [with] things, like with documenting lockouts and just, you know,

minor things... I notice in my building and in other buildings I think most returning RAs are more lax because they know how the job is and they have more experience. And I myself and some of the other new RAs on my staff... I notice we're a little bit more strict with the rules just because, you know, we want to do our jobs and do them right.

Sam discussed moral motivation as well and how, in his opinion, lack of motivation at times not only built community but should be conveyed to new staff members as acceptable.

Sam shared that there was a semi-unwritten law amongst RAs that at times it was appropriate to give warnings as opposed to documenting students because doing this would help build community. I asked him how a new RA would be aware of such a policy. He stated,

I think it's intuitive for some new RAs because they're like... they kind of come in with a sense of, like, what an RA has to do; and through training, like, there's a lot of the policies; but, like... In training, you actually don't get a lot of policy; like, it's not like a written view, "This is 20, like, policy things, and you need to memorize all of them and follow by the book." They'll, like, give you situations; so, like, all the new RAs are, like, constantly asking returners, like, "What you'd do in a [this type of] situation?" So, like, during training, they get a lot of the understanding that things are a little wishy-washy as far as... 100% following policy because they learn that everything becomes very, very, very situation based.

Barbie took this idea one step further in our conversation. She stated that there is typically a problem with marijuana in her residence hall. She mentioned that not only did she attempt to help the residents understand how much work it was for her to document these types of situations, but she also had shared with the new RAs on staff her strategy for dealing with residents. This strategy was to provide warnings rather than document them. When speaking with her residents, she stated,

" [With] you smoking all the time," I always tell them, like, "that makes me have to do more paperwork; and if I don't do the paperwork, then I'll get in trouble." So like, I kind of made it so, like, "Hey, get on my team, guys." It's like, "Do what you want to get on my team." And then, from there, I just feel like, "All right, like, thanks... thanks for, like, you know, cooperating" and then just kind of leave the room. But, yeah; it seems to work so far.

Therefore, Barbie had normalized her lack of moral motivation to her residents. She also had worked to include her fellow staff members by sharing her approach to marijuana violations with them:

Yeah, and I kind of communicated with ... the [Residence Hall] RA Force, like... I kind of explain[ed] about what happened last year, and I said, “You know, if it’s getting out of hand, we definitely need to change the approach.” But I told them, like, “Right now, it seems it’s working” and for my residents. And, like, the rest of the hall, I’m just kind of giving out warnings and letting them know, like, “We know it’s you; you need to stop....” And then action will happen... It seems [to be] working so far.

When I went on to ask Barbie whether or not she had this conversation in front of her supervisor, the RD of the building, she replied “No” and laughed a little. The reason for her response was that she knew that not holding students accountable for a policy violation as significant as marijuana was a problem and something that the RD would not condone.

These RAs were not giving priority to moral values—in this case, their position responsibilities. They were simply doing what was easiest for them personally and not holding students accountable. They all provided different reasons for their lack of motivation, from wanting to have a strong community to their desire to do less paperwork. They needed to take a cue from Gabrielle and Franklin.

When it came to alcohol violations, Gabrielle’s opinion was firmly grounded. She stated that she made it clear in the beginning of the year that alcohol was something that she would not tolerate. She let her residents know that

“You’re breaking the policy, not the fact that I don’t really want you to drink.” Because honestly, like, when it comes down to it, like, I’m more concerned about safety; but I realize students will drink. But if my supervisor tells me it’s my job to not have them drink in the building... And I’m telling you, “Do not do that. Now you’re disrespecting me. I’m telling you right now these are my big no-nos. I don’t play that.” I get my serious face. My residents from last year make fun of me because the way my presence changes when I’m talking about policy.

I went on to ask Gabrielle how she was so comfortable enforcing these policies when it seemed that so many of the other participants were so challenged by it and would prefer to look the other way. She simply replied,

I'm just doing my job. We're not... Like, the university doesn't turn a blind eye. We don't tell you, "Don't drink." We tell you how to do it the right way. You know, like, it's... It's not a secret. So literally, yeah; I'm just doing my job here... That helps.

Franklin was only the second RA who, when I asked him about alcohol policy violations, did not attempt to share that there were differing levels of alcohol violations, with some needing a different level of confrontation than others. When I asked if he would consider not documenting and holding a resident accountable for an alcohol violation, he simply stated,

No; alcohol is like, one of my big things. Like, you know; like, you're not supposed to have it. We talk about it probably twenty times a year... We have floor meetings. You have fliers in your hallway. You have handbooks, and this, that, and the other. So, I mean, it's one of those things that you know it's wrong. You know you're not supposed to do it. So anytime I see alcohol, I'm documenting it because I'm not going to be the RA they said that, "Oh he let us off for that," because that puts me in a position, like, where everyone else could hear about it one time. That one time I felt they needed to get away with it... I'm not trying to have that type of reputation like... Because once one person does it, then I kind of have to do it for everyone; so it's really about that consistency type thing. Especially when it's something they know what's going on. Like they know it's against the rules.

Franklin's moral motivation was especially evident when he commented about other RAs who may let certain policy violations slide. He stated that he would not be able to let other RAs out of their responsibilities for keeping the floor safe.

Like, so I don't think necessarily I would let another RA slide on that type of situation. I mean, a lot of the stuff is subject here, but after the fact and like personal conversations, one on one; so, like, one RA could be like, "Oh yeah. There was this party. And, like, I know it was a party, but like, you know, I was going to let it slide just because for whatever reason." ... If I was there, maybe I would have handled that a little bit differently.

Similar to Gabrielle and Franklin, Scott also possessed knowledge regarding certain situations and that, regardless of who might be involved in the situation, he would still need to

document the person for his actions. He recalled a recent event with one of his residents and alcohol use:

There are times where, if it's something that cannot go overlooked, whether or not it's my resident, then I will, you know, do what I have to do. So, for instance, this weekend one of my residents was involved in an alcohol violation. And it's not something that I obviously would have just not documented or pretend didn't happen because, you know, that's something that's more serious. So even though he was my resident, you know, I still had to do what I had to do. But, yeah; so things that are obviously important to document, like... whether or not it's my resident.

Gabrielle, Franklin, and Scott all possessed the moral motivation—the ability to give priority to the moral values of the position rather than give into personal values—about the situation to hold residents accountable for policy violations regardless of the circumstances. The component of moral motivation is one that only these three participants mentioned during my interviews with participants. Therefore, I concluded that they were able to follow through on their training as expected, something that a majority of their peers were not able to accomplish.

Moral Character

Showing moral character was a trial for some of the RAs who participated in this study, but especially for Tuesday. Tuesday was often unable to execute and implement a moral plan of action because doing so involved a self-regulatory process that she did not currently possess. She recalled an experience when she was training a new RA on how to handle an alcohol violation. They encountered what they thought to be a party going on. She told the new staff person,

You're usually supposed to state who you are right away. But I was like... I don't do that all time. So don't do it. And the [resident] like, invited him in the room; and I was just like, okay, we see alcohol, he didn't say anything... And I was like, all right; so then I stepped in, and I was like, "Hey, what's going on, guys?" They're like, "Nothing, we got booze; you [can] come on in." And I was like, "Really; okay." So I went in the room, and I was like, "Wait; do you know who I am?" And then that's when I said [my name and that I was an RA], when I actually was already in the room.

When I went on to ask Tuesday how she felt about this situation in terms of teaching a new staff member not to follow correct protocol, she did not seem to have any concerns about it.

She responded by saying,

Oh, yeah; that happens all the time. I would say every RA has a different style of how they handle situations. You have the RAs that don't care, and they'll just be like, "Man, I do what I have to do to get by. I do my job, and that's it." And they don't necessarily always follow the rules.

I found this display of lack of moral character alarming. It was concerning to me that Tuesday was displaying such a disregard for RA policies and procedures, but it was even more concerning that she was teaching her inappropriate methods to new staff members, as well. For her to have rectified this situation, she would have needed sufficient perseverance and implementation skills to follow through on the intention to behave morally. She would have needed to figure out a sequence of concrete actions, work around challenges, overcome frustration, resist distractions, and keep sight of the goal.

Gabrielle and Franklin were able to model moral character. They both provided examples that are worthy of mention. Gabrielle shared that she had a passion for Student Affairs work. She knew that this was a career interest of hers, and she really knew what her current role meant to the larger Student Affairs machine. She understood that RAs play critical front-line roles, and that she could not disrespect the profession by not implementing the policies as she was trained. She stated,

A big part of it is, like, I respect the profession, so I do... I am good at it... I do want be a future Student Affairs professional... And what might seem miniscule and just policy to certain people, I'm like, I call it "being about this life." ... That's what we pretty much call it. Like, a lot of people weren't about this life. They're just like... When they talk about, like, higher-ups, or whether they're talking about "This policy is stupid, stupid, stupid." I try to get a bigger understanding. Like "You don't understand why this [is] in place." Just little things, like the guest policy. All the RAs hate it. And I'm like, "You don't understand."

[This is] me respecting the profession. It's, like, I see why these policies and the programming curriculum, and, like, how all this plays out in a bigger picture of developing the students. And I take pride in that. And I know what my role right now is in that. So that's why I do it the way that it's supposed to be done.

Another impressive concept that Franklin mentioned was the idea of being an RA all the time, regardless of whether he is on duty or not. He shared that, in training, Residence Life imparts to the staff that they are RAs 24/7. He shared the following example:

Even if it was a Friday night and I'm not on duty, and I'm just chilling, and something's going on... You know, I feel that it's my responsibility to either contact the RA that is on duty or personally go and, like, see what's going [on] myself because I have that responsibility. That's what I was trained to do.

Franklin also spoke very clearly about the need for consistency when it comes to documenting policy violations. He felt very strongly about holding everyone to the same standards:

I mean, I'm really big on consistency almost to a point of fault, I guess, because I've been told that consistency is like holding people to the same standards, not necessarily how you handle the situation. Because you handle situations differently based on the people involved and based on everything. And that's a lesson I've really come to learn this year, and even more so than last year. Th[at] consistency is like holding everyone to the same standards. Like, if I write one kid up for alcohol, I'm going to write every kid up for alcohol... If I write one kid up for smoking weed, I'm writing every kid up for smoking weed. If I write one kid up for ripping down a poster, I have to write every single kid for the poster type of thing... That's consistency, and I think that's really important because if you aren't consistent in that matter, other residents will catch wind of that and try to take advantage of that. And then you have this whole epidemic on your hands, and it's just a problem you don't want to be involved with. So it's really being consistent and really holding each resident to the same standard.

Franklin understood that his entire staff did not necessarily share his values on consistency. He mentioned that probably more than half of his staff did not share his opinion on this topic. His true test of moral character, then, was persevering with the morally appropriate choice even in the face of the opposition that he was getting from his peer group.

Prototypes: RAs Who Implemented Rest's Model

Throughout this research, it became evident to me that two out of the 12 RAs I met with consistently displayed moral behavior across all situations. These two were Gabrielle and Franklin. A third RA, Scott, mentioned that his decision making was linked to his personal moral code, and I will explore this briefly. Gabrielle and Franklin provided different reasons for their higher moral standards. These two RAs serve as prototypes for Rest's model of moral behavior; both displayed confidence in their abilities to implement their position-specific responsibilities regardless of the situation.

Gabrielle. During the beginning of the interviews, I asked all of the participants how they had liked their RA position so far. Gabrielle's response was telling and spoke to her level of maturity. She stated,

I really grew and kind of found my weaknesses and turn[ed] them into strengths. I've been pushed in ways I've never been pushed before. My grades improved although I was busy... And it was a really good time just to be very selfless. Because you were part of something bigger than yourself... Whatever I had going on didn't really matter... I mean, I did get support along the way, but it was a really good time for me to just give myself for something.

This response alone indicated that I was meeting with someone who understood what it meant to be an RA, and that the position was so much more than simply free room and board, and the occasional night on duty during which she could decide whether or not she would like to hold her residents accountable for policy violations.

Throughout my conversation with Gabrielle, her ability to implement all four of the components of Rest's model was evident. She knew that she had been trained to confront and document policy violations, and she did so in a polite, respectful, and consistent manner. She was able to empathize with students in vulnerable situations, and she had a clear respect for the

position. She epitomized moral character when she stated that she was “about this life” in reference to the Student Affairs profession.

Franklin. Franklin’s passion for his RA position came through right from the beginning of our interview, when I asked why he had chosen to become an RA. He mentioned that his biggest motivating factor was that he wanted to have an impact on “at least... one other person, if not hundreds.” He consistently let his residents know that “I’m doing this because I want to help you guys. I want to help develop myself. I want to help develop you. So, like, I think I make that clear as possible.”

Franklin felt as though the RA position was

A dream come true.... And that it’s been one of the best experiences and the most influential in my years. I’ve learned more in the year that I did it last year than I could have even imagined, you know? Because you’re faced with different things on a daily basis that you just never encounter in an everyday life. So it’s a growth opportunity, a way to interact with a lot of different people that I wouldn’t normally necessarily see or interact with.... It’s been one of my favorite interactions.

Throughout our conversation, it became evident that Franklin used a fair and consistent approach when he confronted and documented residents for policy violations. He implemented all four components of Rest’s model of moral behavior by setting a standard of respect for his floor. He was able to put himself in his residents’ shoes and take personal responsibility for the outcome of his position responsibilities. He was able to self-regulate in a way that some of his staff members were not, which was clear in the descriptions he provided of his moral character.

Summary

As they described their lived experiences in this survey sample, the participating RAs typically were not implementing the four components of Rest’s model of moral behavior. I found clear examples that the participants were lacking in moral sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and character. For the most part, the RAs found it challenging to interpret situations

as moral problems because they did not view their failure to implement policies as a moral problem. This evidence serves as the crux of the argument that as a general rule RAs are unable to implement all of the components of Rest's model.

Based on the results of this study, when it came to figuring out what one in their role ought to do, and formulating a plan accordingly, RAs were likely to make up their own rules regarding the situation instead of following through on what they had learned in training. Often, their judgment was clouded by what they perceived to be in their best interest and what seemed to be the easiest solution for them at the time of the confrontation. Their responses in the context of moral motivation were similar to those for moral judgment in that the RAs were more likely to enact the simplest solution, as opposed to following through on violations as they had been trained to do. This outcome was clear in the discussion about returning RAs being more lenient with residents than new RAs, and in Barbie and Sam's examples of their trying to convince new staff members to issue warnings rather than to document students. The times when participants shared examples throughout the interviews I had with them that reflected lack of moral character was concerning. These students were paraprofessional employees, yet they were unwilling or unable to execute a moral plan of action and follow through on duties as instructed.

In contrast, a few participants in this study serve as prototypes of RAs who were successfully implementing Rest's model of moral behavior. Gabrielle and Franklin are examples of staff members who took their training to heart. They understood the need to be consistent in their responses to residents, and to hold them accountable regardless of the personal relationship they had with them or how minor they deemed their violations. These RAs spoke either of a respect for the RA position in general or of their own personal moral codes, both of which ensured that their responses to situations would encompass all four components of Rest's model.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this study, I have focused on the lived experience of Resident Assistants (RAs) who administered disciplinary policy at a residential college in a large urban area. I then further examined the lived experience of RAs using the theoretical lens of Rest's model of moral behavior. The goal of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the approach I used in this study, is to explore the participants' experiences from their perspective; it is understood that this exploration implicates both my own point of view as the researcher and the nature of the relationship between the participants and me, as the researcher (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

I inductively derived the findings in this study; I recognize that my interpretation of the data is only one of many interpretations that could have emerged (Willig, 2001). However, these findings add to the body of knowledge that exists about RAs and highlight the experiences RAs go through when they are determining how to administer disciplinary policy in the residence hall, an often-overlooked topic in research literature.

Findings in Relation to the Research Question

IPA focuses on the detailed examination of the lived experience and how individuals make sense of that experience (Eatough & Smith, 2008). As I noted in chapter 3, this study reflects the responses to and analyses of the following research questions:

- a. What is the lived experience of RAs who administer disciplinary policies at a residential college in a large urban area?
- b. How can we understand RAs' lived experience using the theoretical lens of Rest's model of moral behavior?

The participants, although small in number, brought a diversity of RA experiences and moral situations to the study. For example, some participants consistently held residents

accountable for behavior regardless of the situation, while others considered their relationship with the resident who violated the policy or used their personal judgment about the severity of the violation rather than the stated policy before they decided how to proceed. However, all participants had been provided with the same training and informed of what to do in each situation.

In response to the first research question (What is the lived experience of RAs who administer disciplinary policies at a residential college in a large urban area?), two themes emerged: (a) RA relationships with residents, and (b) decision-making factors. Within the theme of RA relationships with residents, seven subthemes emerged: (a) RAs in the study suggested that relationships with residents can be hard to achieve at times as the result of some of the preconceived notions that college students have of RAs at the time of their enrollment; (b) some RAs are high on the authority that comes with the RA position, and this type of heavy-handedness can cause tension in RA relationships with residents; (c) other RAs take things to the other extreme in an attempt to be “cool” RAs, which means they will not hold their students accountable for policy violations; (d) RAs want relationships with residents to be developed around the idea that the RAs are students too—they also are pursuing their college degrees and want to be seen as peers; (e) RAs tend to treat their own residents more leniently than they treat other residents in the building; (f) RAs often hold the idea that some students are “good residents”; and (g) some RAs hold residents on their floor to a higher standard than those residents on other floors throughout the building.

To further explain a few of these subthemes, some RAs experienced a sense of angst over confronting residents who were typically labeled as good residents—those residents who typically stayed out of trouble and adhered to policies, thus making it especially difficult for RAs

to confront them when necessary. Also, a majority of the RAs who participated in this research shared the view that RAs expect more from residents on their own floors than they do from other building residents. Finally, approximately half of the RAs I interviewed indicated that they were stricter with the behavior that occurred on their own floors because they took policy violations as a sign of personal disrespect from these residents.

Within the second theme, decision-making factors, five subthemes emerged, of which three were personal mechanisms deriving from the primary subtheme that (a) RAs first needed to decide whether a policy violation was worthy of pursuit. Personal mechanisms included (b) whether the RAs deemed the violation to be major or minor; (c) the resident's attitude at the time of the confrontation; and (d) what a resident might lose as a result of being held accountable for a policy violation. As a final subtheme, (e) RAs discussed the fact that often they were making decisions regarding whether or not intoxicated students should be seen by health-care professionals. From my point of view, this decision was the most frightening because the RAs could be making a life-or-death decision for someone else.

The research results also address the second research question (How can we understand RAs' lived experience using the theoretical lens of Rest's model of moral behavior?). The four components of Rest's model are (a) moral sensitivity, (b) moral judgment, (c) moral motivation, and (d) moral character (Rest, 1986). Participants discussed all these components in greater detail, and my analysis identified deficiencies for certain participants while highlighting performances of other participants as examples of RAs who were meeting the mark on the various components. Based on my analysis of the data, two RAs demonstrated all four components of Rest's model of moral behavior in their implementation of disciplinary policy.

Findings in Relation to the Literature

One main purpose of this chapter is to relate the findings from chapter 4 to the existing literature (Willing, 2008). The following discussion, a dialogue between the findings and the existing literature, places these findings within a wider context (Smith et al., 2009).

Higher Education's Effect on Moral Development

As Pascarella (1997) stated, individuals who attend college demonstrate significantly higher growth in moral development than individuals who do not. He went on to report that students make significant gains in principled moral reasoning throughout their collegiate experience. This means that, as individuals progress through their collegiate experience, they will perform better on tests related to principled moral reasoning than their less-tenured counterparts. Indeed, Pascarella (1997) shares that “college seniors had nearly .80 of a standard deviation advantage in principled moral reasoning over freshmen” (p. 50).

I interviewed students ranging in rank from sophomores to fifth-year seniors and found that there was no real difference between their responses related to moral judgment, Rest's component of moral behavior that is most closely aligned with moral reasoning. A majority of the RAs I interviewed, regardless of class rank, provided examples of their choices that indicated they cared more about what their residents thought of them than about upholding the rules and regulations of the residence hall as they had been trained to do. The findings of my study, then, may not support the results of Pascarella's study.

Rest (1988) shared that a variety of factors in conjunction with education can help to establish an individual's level of moral judgment. These features include one's age, levels of socialization, specific learned knowledge, general understanding of the social world, and level of intellectual stimulation, and the process of self-selection resulting from one's focus on self-

development and innate personal characteristics. Rest (1988) went on to assert that the college environment by itself does nothing to foster development in moral judgment. Overall, the conditions for the development of moral judgment involve both personal and environmental characteristics. Therefore, moral judgment occurs in concert with general social development (Rest, 1988).

The idea that moral behavior is not simply linked to a collegiate environment is consistent with the results of my study. As I previously stated, some RAs were not more likely to perform their responsibilities as assigned just because they were at an institution of higher education. In addition, some of the RAs in this study felt social pressure to perform in a way that would be the most satisfactory to their peers, even in the face of violating their professional responsibilities if they responded based on those criteria. The RAs understood their respective positions in the social world and were more concerned with maintaining the status quo than in performing their responsibilities as trained.

Moral Behavior of Typical College Students

Reynolds and Ceranic's (2007) study involving college students and moral behavior focused on peer acceptance. The researchers found that, when social consensus around a moral issue was high, participants were more likely to exhibit moral behavior. Conversely, when social consensus was not high or was unclear, only those with a strong moral identity exhibited moral behavior.

The findings of this study directly support this finding (for the purposes of this study, moral behavior is synonymous with adhering to and upholding residence-hall policies). In the case of some of the RAs who participated in the study, peer acceptance was paramount. In the stories the RAs recounted to me, residents chose to act against stated residence-hall policy; for

example, they chose to drink alcohol in the residence hall. Therefore, since the residents were not adhering to residence-hall policies, the overall level of moral behavior established by the community of residents was already low or nonexistent. Consequently, when RAs observed the behavior, they chose not to follow through on holding students accountable for the violation because the RAs would rather be accepted by their peers than uphold their professional responsibilities.

RA Role

There is an implicit expectation of RAs that they exhibit a higher level of moral behavior than typical college students. This expectation is based on the fact that RAs are placed in roles of responsibility and asked to hold their peers accountable for policy violations. Yet, it is important to remember that RAs are still undergraduate students.

A majority of the RAs who participated in this study did not exhibit moral behavior. They did not have the ability to recognize the ethical dilemma present in their not enforcing their position responsibilities as trained (e.g., they did not hold residents accountable for policy violations). This behavior is similar to how Rest defined moral sensitivity: In certain situations “people sometimes may not ‘see’ things because they are defensively blocking them from conscious recognition”; others may just have difficulty interpreting even relatively simple situations (Rest, 1986, p. 6). Only Gabrielle and Franklin were able to understand that, regardless of the situation they were presented with, it was imperative for them to respond to resident behaviors as they have been trained to do, and hold residents accountable accordingly. The other 10 RAs I spoke with were influenced by their peer group to make an easier, nonmoral choice.

Blimling (2010) asserts that certain ethical skills are good for RAs to put into practice, such as being honest with residents and supervisors, not making promises that they cannot keep, and knowing what is right and acting accordingly. The job description of RAs includes rules enforcement, and this can be challenging for them because they wish to be liked by their residents (Deluga & Winters, 1990). This sense of role conflict tends to be a struggle for RAs because “they are students too and they need time to develop” (Dodge, 1990, p. A39).

The sense of conflict I discovered among RAs throughout the interview process was very clear. They were sharing numerous stories about feeling torn between their position responsibilities and their desire to remain well respected and seen as a resource for their floors. RAs felt that, if they held their residents accountable for policy violations, residents would no longer come to them with questions or concerns. The RAs also believed that the relationships they worked so hard to establish with their residents would be destroyed if they needed to hold those residents accountable.

Deluga and Winters (1991) conducted a study to determine why students chose to become RAs. They found that the following six factors influenced a student’s decision to become an RA: (a) desire to assist students, (b) career development, (c) desire to exert control and display authority, (d) personal growth, (e) financial obligations, and (f) RA cohesiveness. The fact that some RAs choose the role because they are “high on authority” was supported in my findings. The one stand-out RA I met with who truly spoke to her desire to confront residents and hold them accountable was Tuesday. She displayed unabashed confidence in her abilities and readily admitted that she enjoyed “teaching residents a lesson.” The challenge Tuesday presented, however, was that she typically was not acting in a moral way because she

was haphazardly applying the policies and regulations to some residents while not applying them to others.

RA Training

Training is a crucial component of RAs' moral-behavior journey. Blimling (2010) stated that "RAs must commit to mastering a certain body of information to do the RA job effectively" (p. 63). Winston and Fitch (1993) went on the state that RAs should learn what it means to be a role model during RA training. Murray et al. (1999) shared that although the benefits of training may be limited to the promotion of sound work practices as opposed to the elimination of problematic behaviors, it is still worthwhile.

The RAs I met with shared that a majority of their knowledge about their roles came from on-the-job training. They shared that they never really knew about how they were going to proceed in a given situation until the time came to do so. Numerous factors that had nothing to do with their preservice training influenced their decisions about how to move forward with holding residents accountable. The RAs in this study specifically mentioned that they based their decisions on resident attitude at the time of the confrontation, what residents might have to lose if they were found responsible for the policy violations, and whether the RAs considered the situation to be major or minor.

A majority of the RAs I met with stated they would be more apt to follow through on holding residents accountable for policy violations if the residents were participating in an action that was affecting the entire floor community. Therefore, it seems they did learn from their training that their role was one of enforcing community standards within their environment. They learned that they had a responsibility to all of their residents, not just those who were committing a policy violation at the time.

The large urban institution that served as the host site for this study requires RAs to enroll in leadership class during the first semester in which they serve as an RA. McKelfresh (1987) conducted a study to determine whether one such class, ED 496, offered at Colorado State University, had an effect on students' moral development. He found no significant difference in the amount of growth in moral reasoning for students who completed the course compared to those who did not.

This research is consistent with my findings; again, a majority of the RAs I met with did not demonstrate that their enrollment in the class caused them to be sensitive to moral issues. Most of the participants in the current study did not appear to draw upon moral reasoning or professional moral values to implement their job responsibilities. They did not internalize the information that they learned in the class as they continued to use an easier method of either ignoring policy violations or not holding residents accountable when they encountered violations. Several RAs I met with shared that, if they did not see, hear, or smell a violation, they would not proceed with holding residents accountable.

RA Challenges to Moral Behavior

Liddell et al. (2010) identified four personal barriers related to issues of ethical growth and moral development. These barriers are (a) desire for conformity, (b) lack of ethical awareness, (c) failure to "push away from the dock," and (d) lack of self-efficacy. Some of these barriers are similar to what I previously discussed regarding peer acceptance. RAs would rather conform to the standards that are accepted as commonplace on their floors than stand out in some way by holding residents accountable for their actions.

This study affirms these findings because it is clear that the participants displayed a lack of ethical awareness in the choices they were making. Although the RAs were upfront and

honest regarding the fact that they were not holding their residents accountable, and they understood that approach to be contradictory to what they had learned during training, they did not recognize their responses as an ethical dilemma. And although the participants did not describe situations that led me to believe they “failed to push away from the dock,” they did share numerous examples of lack of self-efficacy.

A majority of the participants knew how to respond to situations in which residents were breaking the policies, but the RAs’ moral actions were blocked by a lack of self-efficacy. They were not confident that they would be able to maintain positive relationships with residents after they held them accountable for policy violations; therefore, they chose not to hold them accountable.

Selective Enforcement

Blimling (2010) states that “Some RAs confuse being liked with being lenient about the enforcement of policies” (p. 42). RAs do not always understand that being respected by their residents and being liked by them need not be mutually exclusive. Rubington (1990) found that, through a process of mutual socialization, RAs teach their residents to break the rules on their own floors as long as the residents use discretion.

Similar to Rubington, I found that RAs selectively enforced policies with their own residents. Ten out of the 12 RAs I interviewed stated that they would not hold residents accountable for policy violations for a variety of reasons. Their main concern was that they did not want to ruin the positive relationship that they had with their residents. The RAs wanted to be liked on their floors, and they felt that to be liked they must overlook policy violations.

Everett & Loftus (2011) further explored this RA-versus-friend role conflict. They found that 50% of the RAs they interviewed either sometimes experienced this conflict or often felt

conflicted about these competing interests. The current study revealed that, while not all of the participants felt torn in one direction or another, a majority experienced some form of role conflict that hindered them from administering their responsibilities as they had been trained to do.

Summary of Findings

Comparing the findings of this study to the literature, I found similarities in some instances. The approach I took in this study was qualitative, and I utilized in-depth interviews to understand the lived experience of RAs' moral behavior. I found only one other study, by Rubington (1990), which came close to describing how the moral behavior of RAs included allowing residents to break residence-hall policies. The other studies I researched focused on peer acceptance, class rank in relationship to moral reasoning, individuals' motivation to become an RA, and pre- and posttest moral judgment in relationship to DIT scores (Deluga & Winters, 1991; McKelfresh, 1987; Pascarella, 1997; & Reynolds & Ceranic, 1997). RAs are often the first persons incoming, first-year students meet when they arrive at institutions of higher education. These RAs go on to have a lasting impact on the lives of the students they lived with for the year. In that context, it is important for RAs to embrace their positions as role models and policy enforcers in order for residents to have an ethical, consistent experience.

Implications for RA Training

The findings of this current study can aid Student Affairs professionals when they are planning future RA training sessions. Most of the RAs in the current study did not consistently and effectively enforce residence-hall policies or demonstrate that they were meeting each of the four components of Rest's model of moral behavior. It might be good for RA training to be structured in a way to encourage growth in the each of those four components, with the goal

being to increase RAs' moral behavior. The outcome of this training, in turn, could equate to RAs addressing residence-hall policy violations in a more consistently ethical way.

Professional staff members need to meet RAs where they are and explain that acting in a moral way is at times as easy as carrying out one's position responsibilities. It is important for the facilitator to empathize with the RAs and help them understand that professionals know it is challenging to hold peers accountable. Yet, "If you have accepted the responsibilities of the job, you have accepted the responsibility to carry out the policies" (Blimling, 2010, p. 42).

During these structured RA training events, RAs should be provided with numerous opportunities and a variety of ways to learn what it means to act in a moral way while they are on the job. The training could accomplish this objective in the form of inventories, lectures, role plays, and stories from returning RAs or former RAs about where they might have made mistakes along the way. It is important for RAs to understand the critical role they play in policy enforcement and how their moral behavior directly affects their ability to carry out this function.

Inventories are a helpful way for new RAs to understand where their strengths currently lie and what areas they need to continue to work on. During training, RAs can take one of the many moral behavior inventories to help them to understand their current level of moral behavior and how this will impact their ability to be a successful RA. Debora Liddell's Measure of Moral Orientation (1990) would be a helpful inventory to consider administering. The professional staff members can use the scores on these assessments specifically to assist them in tailoring appropriate RA training. There could also be separate tracks, for example, for RAs who are currently operating at a higher level of moral behavior than others.

After the facilitators have administered the inventories, it would be helpful for them to provide some background and additional information to trainees regarding the assessment. This

conversation could take the form of a lecture or a smaller group discussion. During this time, facilitators can share what scores mean, how professional staff would like to see their RAs grow over the course of the year, and the expectations they have for moral behavior from the RA staff. This approach will allow the RA staff to again understand that their role can be challenging, yet all expectations are clearly set forth during training, and the RAs will be held accountable to these standards.

RA role playing can be an important way for new RAs to learn and gain skills for how best to communicate with their floors, especially around the topic of policy violations. The RAs could also be presented with a script of what to say when they are first presenting the policies to residents. Blimling (2010) suggests RAs say something along the lines of “The university has this policy; the reason for this policy is...,” rather than having RAs make some sort of personal commentary about their agreement or disagreement with the policies (p. 42).

John Foubert (2007) compiled an entire book about lessons various RAs had learned from their prior RA experience, proving that storytelling can be a powerful training tool. His book specifically focuses on mistakes that RAs make while on the job. Returning or former RAs could share what went wrong when they decided not to follow through on their expected moral behavior and instead chose an easier way out of a situation. They could share stories similar to the participant Arianna in the current study, whose opinion was “If I can’t see it, hear it, or smell it,” an infraction was not happening. Other policy-violation confrontation stories that can be shared include RAs who were overzealous when it came to policy enforcement, those who selectively enforced policies in the past, or those who assumed that a resident who came back to the residence hall intoxicated was safe to make it through the night (Foubert, 2007).

It is also important, as Murray et al. (1999) point out, that RAs be able to translate mastery of this training content into improved job performance. Therefore, assessments should be administered before and after training to ensure that RAs have comprehended the information presented, and that they have the confidence to persist through these challenging moments to hold residents accountable accordingly.

Recommendations for Future Research

Institutions of higher education will continue to employ undergraduate students as RAs; therefore, we still need to learn more about RA moral behavior and what expectations RAs are truly capable of meeting. Considerations for further research include expanding upon this study to involve additional participants and locations. This study was conducted at a large, public institution where RAs are trained in a group setting twice a year. Students attending smaller, private institutions may feel a greater sense of responsibility to their community and therefore follow through on their position responsibilities more consistently.

Another future consideration would be to include a standard of measurement for moral behavior similar to the Measure of Moral Orientation, to determine changes in moral behavior over time. An additional approach may include observational research, wherein the researcher can observe RAs while they are on duty and determine through their actions how they are demonstrating the four components of Rest's model of moral behavior.

Finally, it would be interesting to determine whether different living environments have an impact on RA moral behavior. Currently, RAs are employed all over campuses: in first-year residence halls, upper-class halls, apartment and suite-style residences, and discipline-specific living-learning communities. Perhaps these different living environments lend themselves to different moral behavior by the RAs of the respective communities.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have focused on how the findings of this study support the literature, additional, surprising findings that appeared through the course of the research, implications for future RA training, and recommendations for future research. The topic of RA moral behavior is one we can continue to research. This study adds to the current body of knowledge about RAs and highlights the experience RAs go through when they are determining how to administer disciplinary policy in the residence hall. Using Rest's model of moral behavior as a lens for comparison, this study makes clear that a majority of the RAs who participated in the research did not demonstrate moral behavior in their roles.

Individuals' enrollment in higher education leads to greater growth in their moral behavior (Pascarella, 1997). RAs have an opportunity for additional personal growth and development by virtue of their position responsibilities (Miller & Conyne, 1980). However, this growth can be challenged because at times RAs' desire to be liked by their residents outweighs the expectations of their position to initiate disciplinary action against these same students (Deluga & Winters, 1990). Therefore, the very students whose intuitions are employed to enforce residence-hall regulations may not possess the moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character required of them to enforce these policies.

The findings of this study can assist Residence Life professionals in better understanding the moral behavior of RA staff members and provide suggestions for training opportunities to best serve these paraprofessional staff members. It is important to continue to educate RA staff about moral behavior as defined by Rest's four components because their position requires them to carry out that behavior daily. A majority of the RAs who participated in this research were not actively holding their residents accountable for their behavior and, in turn, were not

educating the residents that their behavior had consequences. However, institutions of higher education will continue to use undergraduate RAs as policy enforcers in the residence halls, where they will continue to have an influence on the lives of their fellow students.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTERS



Knowledge to Go Places

Research Integrity & Compliance Review Office
Office of the Vice President for Research
321 General Services Building - Campus Delivery 2011 Fort Collins, CO

TEL: (970) 491-1553
FAX: (970) 491-2293

NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

DATE: September 26, 2012
TO: Anderson, Sharon, 1588 School of Education
Robinson, Dan, 1588 School of Education, Stark, Rachael, 1588 School of Education
FROM: Barker, Janell, Coordinator, CSU IRB 1
PROTOCOL TITLE: Moral Behavior of Resident Assistants: A Lived Experience
FUNDING SOURCE: NONE
PROTOCOL NUMBER: 12-3770H
APPROVAL PERIOD: Approval Date: September 26, 2012 Expiration Date: September 12, 2013

The CSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human subjects has reviewed the protocol entitled: Moral Behavior of Resident Assistants: A Lived Experience. The project has been approved for the procedures and subjects described in the protocol. This protocol must be reviewed for renewal on a yearly basis for as long as the research remains active. Should the protocol not be renewed before expiration, all activities must cease until the protocol has been re-reviewed.

If approval did not accompany a proposal when it was submitted to a sponsor, it is the PI's responsibility to provide the sponsor with the approval notice.

This approval is issued under Colorado State University's Federal Wide Assurance 00000647 with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP). If you have any questions regarding your obligations under CSU's Assurance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Please direct any questions about the IRB's actions on this project to:

Janell Barker, Senior IRB Coordinator - (970) 491-1655 Janell.Barker@Colostate.edu
Evelyn Swiss, IRB Coordinator - (970) 491-1381 Evelyn.Swiss@Colostate.edu

Barker, Janell



Barker, Janell

Approval is for 15 participants using the approved consent form to obtain consent. No changes may be made to the protocol or documents without prior approval from the IRB. Make any changes through an Amendment in eProtocol.

Approval Period: September 26, 2012 through September 12, 2013
Review Type: EXPEDITED
IRB Number: 00000202



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Office for Human Subjects Protections
Institutional Review Board
Medical Intervention Committees A1 & A2
Social and Behavioral Committee B
Unanticipated Problems Committee

Student Faculty Conference Center
3340 N Broad Street - Suite 304
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19140
Phone: (215) 707-3390
Fax: (215) 707-9100
e-mail: irb@temple.edu

Certification of Approval for a Project Involving Human Subjects

Protocol Number: **20896**
PI: **Stark, Rachael**
Review Type: **EXPEDITED**
Approved On: **18-Sep-2012**
Approved From: **18-Sep-2012**
Approved To: **17-Sep-2013**
Committee: **B BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**
School/College: **STUDENT AFFAIRS (3700)**
Department: **STUDENT AFFAIRS ADMINISTRATION (37000)**
Project Title: **Moral Behavior of Resident Assistants: A Lived Experience**

The IRB approved the protocol **20896**.

If the study was approved under expedited or full board review, the approval period can be found above. Otherwise, the study was deemed exempt and does not have an IRB approval period.

Before an approval period ends, you must submit a "[Continuing Review Progress Report](#)" to request continuing approval. Please submit the form at least 60 days before the approval end date to ensure that the renewal is reviewed and approved and the study can continue.

Finally, in conducting this research, you are required to follow the Policies and Procedures, the Investigator Manual, and other requirements found on the Temple University IRB website: <http://www.temple.edu/research/regaffairs/irb/index.html>

Please contact the IRB at (215) 707-3390 if you have any questions.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Participant Interview Questions

1. What attracted you to the RA position?
 - a. How have you liked the position so far?
 - b. Is it everything that you expected?
2. What types of policy violations do you typically need to confront in the halls?
3. How comfortable are you confronting residents on policy violations?
4. Tell me about a situation that you've encountered when you needed to make a decision about holding a resident accountable.
 - a. What factors assisted in your decision making?
5. Are certain situations worthy of pursuit while others aren't?
6. When faced with a situation that you are unsure how to pursue, how do you typically respond?
7. Is there any additional information that you would like to share regarding why you chose to do what you do in certain situations that I have not asked and is pertinent to the conversation that we have had?

APPENDIX C: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE FORM

Consent to Participate in a Research Study Colorado State University

TITLE OF STUDY: Moral Behavior of Resident Assistants: A Lived Experience

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Sharon K. Anderson, Ph. D., School of Education, email: Sharon.anderson@colostate.edu and phone: (970) 491-6861

CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Rachael H. Stark, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, email: rachael.stark@colostate.edu and phone, (215) 204-9604

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH? You have been identified as a potential research participant because you are currently a Resident Assistant at Temple University.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY? The principal investigator is Dr. Sharon K. Anderson a professor in the School of Education. Dr. Anderson is the primary advisor to the co-principal investigator, Mrs. Rachael Stark. Mrs. Stark is a university administrator who works full time at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. This study is being conducted for Mrs. Starks' doctoral dissertation.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY? The purpose of this study is to better understand, through a theory of moral behavior, the lived experience of Resident Assistants who have the responsibility of implementing discipline policy within their hall.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST? The study will consist of a 1 hour face to face audio recorded interview that will take place in the Dean of Students conference room located within the Howard Gittis Student Center at Temple University. In addition to the 1 hour interview, you will be given an opportunity to read the interview to verify the accuracy of the transcription.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO? You will be asked to participate in a 1 hour audio-recorded face-to-face interview. You will be asked to share your experience as a Resident Assistant who is responsible for implementing discipline policies. Additionally, you will be given an opportunity to read the interview to verify the accuracy of the transcription. This activity should take you 1-2 hours.

ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY? Although it may be possible for you to be identified, the researchers will work to honor your anonymity. You will have a pseudonym and the university used for the study will not be identified.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

There are no known risks for participating in this study. However, it is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures. The researchers have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize known and potential risks.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? Participation in this study will not directly benefit you; however the study itself could prove useful to student affairs professional staff about student leaders' decision making processes in implementing disciplinary policy. It could also provide direction for student affairs professionals who design RA training.

Page 1 of 3 Participant's initials _____ Date _____

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY? Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE? We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be individually identified in these written materials.

You will choose a pseudonym that will be used in the actual write up of the research. For example, Mrs. Stark may elect to use the pseudonym of "Tammy"; in this case all information related to Mrs. Stark would be identified as Tammy.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. For example, your name will be kept separate from your research records and these two things will be stored in different places in a secured setting. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

Your record of receiving compensation (NOT your data) may be made available to CSU officials for financial audits.

WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? You will receive a \$5 gift card to a local food establishment for your participation in this research.

WHAT HAPPENS IF I AM INJURED BECAUSE OF THE RESEARCH? The Colorado Governmental Immunity Act determines and may limit Colorado State University's legal responsibility if an injury happens because of this study. Claims against the University must be filed within 180 days of the injury.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the co-principal investigator, Rachael Stark at (215) 204-9604. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

This consent form was approved by the CSU Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects in research on September 26, 2012.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW? Each interview will be audio recorded.

Yes ___ You may audio record our interview.

No ___ I would prefer not to be recorded for our interview.

You will be asked to participate in member checking, an activity designed to verify the accuracy of your transcribed interview. Please acknowledge that you are willing to participate in member checking after the initial interview by checking the following ___ and initialing here _____.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 3 pages.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Name of person providing information to participant

Date

Signature of Research Staff

Page 3 of 3 Participant's initials _____ Date _____

APPENDIX D: EMAIL RECRUITMENT MESSAGE

September 26, 2012

Dear RA:

My name is Rachael Stark and I am a doctoral candidate at Colorado State University in the School of Education and Associate Dean of Students at Temple University. Dr. Sharon K. Anderson, professor in the School of Education and I are conducting a research study to investigate the moral behavior in the lived experience of Resident Assistants who implement discipline policy. The title of our project is *Resident Assistant Moral Behavior: A Lived Experience*. You have been identified as a potential research candidate due to your status as a Resident Assistant on campus. I obtained your contact information through the University Housing and Residential Life Office.

We invite you to participate in the study. Your participation includes a 1-hour audio recorded face-to-face interview to talk about your experiences as a Resident Assistant implementing disciplinary policy. Participation will take approximately 1 hour and will take place at a time and location that is convenient for you. In addition to your participation in a 1-hour audio recorded interview, the investigators will ask you to read over the transcribed interview to check for accuracy of what you said. This member checking activity should take no more than 1-2 hours of your time.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participation at any time without penalty. As a thank you for participating in this research you will be given a gift card to a local eatery.

I have attached the consent form for this project to give you more information about the study. If you would like to participate in this research or have any questions, please contact Rachael Stark at 215-204-9604 or rachael.stark@temple.edu. You may also contact Dr. Sharon K. Anderson, Principal Investigator, at 970-491-6861 or Sharon.anderson@colostate.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator, at 970-491-7243. I will be following this email with a phone call within the next week.

Sincerely,

Sharon K. Anderson, Ph.D.
Professor

Rachael Stark, M.A.
Doctoral Candidate