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The Gendered Experience of Female Resident Assistants

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The Gendered Experience of Female Resident Assistants

by

Christa Rahl

A THESIS

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The Gendered Experience of Female Resident Assistants

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University of Nebraska, 2023

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This paper sought to answer, “What is it like to be a female resident assistant (RA) in a society that has historically privileged men?” I structured this as a phenomenology within the transformative paradigm. I interviewed four participants twice with a prompt between interviews and one participant once. These participants were at least 19 years old and had held been an RA for at least one school year during the last five years.

I worked in the realm of Joan Acker’s (1990) theory of gendered organizations. I specifically had findings within the constructions she wrote about such as the division of labor, the division of allowed behaviors, and organizational logic. This theory was the backbone for my interviews and the way in which I studied the data. From these interviews, I found several essences. These include women being expected to connect with their residents through stronger relationships than males, the stereotype of women enjoying arts and crafts more than men inundating housing departments, men having more relaxed rules than women, women taking the role as a mothering figure where men are seen as a friendly authority, and women being expected to host stronger events than men.

These findings led to my conclusion that several areas within housing departments and campuses could be changed. For example, resident directors (RDs) should do internal check-ups to ensure they have equitable expectations for their male and female RAs. It is also my recommendation that the full staff of RAs is adequately trained in mental health crises to ensure each staff member feels comfortable engaging in mental health incidents. I also encourage RAs to allow themselves to stand up for themselves to be treated equitably.

This connects to the literature because research has shown the RA role is increasingly difficult and men and women have different experiences. Housing departments can find areas to check in with their staff to ensure they are treating their RAs with respect and equitable expectations.

To Mom and Dad,

I did it. I just had to freak out first.

Acknowledgments

If you're reading this, I did not drop out.
And that was not an easy feat.

I would like to thank God first and foremost. Without my faith and His help, none of these pages would exist.

Thank you to everyone who supported me through this year plus of researching, panicking, researching, writing, convincing myself I would never finish, researching, writing, ranting, and finally finishing.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1 1

Introduction..... 1

 Methodology 8

Chapter 2..... 11

Literature Review..... 11

 Conceptual Framework..... 22

Chapter 3..... 33

Methodology 33

 Phenomenology..... 35

 Data Collection Methods 37

 Semi-Structured Interviews 37

 Process 38

 Protecting Participants 41

 Recruiting Participants..... 42

 Participants..... 43

 Analysis Method..... 44

 Trustworthiness..... 45

Limitations 47

Chapter 4..... 47

 Participants..... 48

 Themes Outlined..... 50

 Division of Labor..... 51

Women Being Expected to Connect with Residents Through Stronger Relationships Than Men 51

The Stereotype of Women Enjoying Arts and Crafts More Than Men Inundating Housing 54

 Division of Allowed Behaviors 57

Men Having More Relaxed Rules Than Women 57

 Organizational Logic 60

Women Taking the Role as a Mothering Figure Where Men Are Seen as a Friendly Authority 61

Women Being Expected to Host Stronger Events 63

 Conclusion and Essence..... 65

Chapter 5..... 66

 Connections to and Departures from Existing Literature 67

 Areas for Future Research 73

 Implications..... 76

 Implications for Professionals..... 76

 Men’s Agency..... 81

 Lasting Impact 82

 Conclusion 83

Appendix A- Interview Questions 91

Appendix B- IRB Approval	95
Appendix C- Recruitment Messages	96
Appendix D- Qualtrics and Demographic Questions	98
Appendix E Informed Consent	100

List of Appendices

Appendix A	Interview Questions
Appendix B	IRB Approval
Appendix C	Recruitment Messages.....
Appendix D	Qualtrics and Demographic Questions
Appendix E	Informed Consent

Chapter 1

Introduction

My boss had a key to my living space. He had used this master key to wake up one of my male coworkers for an optional breakfast. My one-on-one check-in conversations with my residents were required to be a bit longer and more in-depth because of my gender and the gender of my residents because my director believed the stereotype about women talking more should be evident within my notes and time spent with each resident on my floor. My bulletin boards for passive learning (often referred to as “passives”) needed to be beautiful, even though a floor below me had notecards with a single staple and handwritten trivia facts.

The joys of being a woman, I suppose.

I was not always happy about the differences I saw among my staff.

Unfortunately, the resident assistant (RA) experience can look vastly different depending on one’s gender. I come from a history of this. I was an RA for three years at the University of Nebraska- Lincoln, where I received my bachelor’s degree in journalism. It was the most rewarding and frustratingly difficult job I have held to this day (of 11 different jobs). I lived in a traditional-style residence hall with all women on my floor with a maximum capacity of 52 young women, which was mostly full each year. In my three years, I experienced the leadership of three directors, two full-time and one interim in between.

Personally, I dealt with a resident director (RD) counting the staples in my passive programming (bulletin boards) and reminding me that they needed to be better

and better because the ladies on my floor would expect that from me. The female RAs had much higher expectations from our supervisors because we were assumed to be the crafty type, even though my entire staff knew that arts and crafts stressed me out. My female counterparts enjoyed the crafts, but not the differing expectations. We discussed the issues of fairness and equity. We did not take them up the chain of command because of ongoing drama regarding different points of view and a series of gossiping and retaliation within our department year after year. We did not want to add any more reasons for other halls in the complex to refer to and see our unit as dysfunctional.

The discomfort continued for me when we were told that our one-on-ones with each of our residents needed to be in-depth and simply longer because our female¹ residents would be chattier than the males on the floors above and below us. This led to extra stress on the female RAs because of the time commitment dedicated to catching up with 40-50 residents at least once, but often twice a semester. However, it is also important to acknowledge that while these were stressful times, I also held many points of privilege with being straight, Christian, and White. These expectations from my supervisor were most prominent in my first year with my first RD and then more discreetly enforced with the following RDs.

These expectations became increasingly problematic when my first RD began to identify problematic behaviors in women that were not considered a problem for men. For example, I was once given a verbal warning because my RD claimed it made him uncomfortable that I had been having a conversation with my peer female RA about my

¹ I decided to use “female” as an adjective and “woman” as a noun.

sports bra being too tight near his desk. His discomfort led to him initiating a conversation with his boss, which resulted in a verbal warning. However, when the male RAs were inappropriate in their jokes and comments or misused the master key card, they were given a cautious reminder that we are not allowed to break into residents' rooms for pranks, per the guidelines around the UNL (University of Nebraska Lincoln) prank policy and policy about master key cards. The policies require harsher punishments, but they were not enforced. Each incident had a new excuse from upper housing administrators about why the men got to keep their positions as RAs. Their reminders were similar to my verbal warning despite the written policies regarding the misuse of master keys and pranks. Because of certain misuse incidents, RAs were no longer allowed to keep their master keys activated. We were to go down to the front desk to activate it whenever a student needed access to their rooms from then on.

These key cards were especially problematic because my RD had once broken into an RA's room after telling him that he was hired for his diversity. It was disconcerting to know that our RD who often roamed the halls in the late hours of the evening and early hours of the morning also had access to our bedrooms. As a White man from suburban Omaha that identified as gay being broken in on by a director who held the same sexuality, this made the entire staff uncomfortable, but the women were especially concerned about their living spaces being infringed upon because we never had a full lock on our doors. This ties into the fears because of the reality, that women have on college campuses regarding sexual discrimination, harassment, and assault. For clarity, the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) found that 26.4 percent

of female undergraduate students “experience rape or sexual assault through physical force, violence, or incapacitation” (para. 3, 2023). These fears do not resolve themselves, especially when it is made even more clear that there is always access to your room. The RD was told to apologize to the RA for invading his privacy with no further actions required. The RA ended up quitting, dropping out, and moving away because of how unsafe he felt in his living space and on campus. This event gave each of us the idea that men in power would stay in power, which was also scary to think about the implications thereof. The RD appeared unphased by the fact that he had such a significant negative impact on this RA’s life that he left. The rest of us had to deal with knowing some men could use their keys to enter our living spaces and not face a penalty.

These experiences make up just a fraction of the gendered experience of the RA role. RAs and their superiors coupled with the history of national patriarchy and today’s societal expectations of women have created an arena for various experiences within the same job title, which I discuss throughout this paper.

Significance

The existing literature on the gendered experience of RAs is sparse. The research that does exist consists of gendered organizations as a whole and what it is like to be an RA more broadly (Acker, 1990; Letarte, 2013). Cousineau and Chambers (2015) had the only research I could find about what it was like to be a female RA. My research will add to this to give a glimpse into the differences between cisgender women’s experiences and the experiences of men. The idea that the world is gendered, and society has different beliefs about what cisgender “men” and “women” should do is not new, but this study

elucidates the issue within the role of the RA, which has not been studied in this way.

The study was guided by the question “what is it like to be an RA in a society that historically privileged men?” Through interviews with women who have first-hand experience with the RA role, I will add to the small amount of information regarding the experience. This will also allow the research participants a chance to reflect on their time as an RA and think about their experience in a gendered way. Some may have done this before, and others have not. The interviews allowed participants to consider their experiences in a gendered society and any confusing frustrations or actions taken by the university staff.

I decided to research and write about this topic because I would like to see the roles become more equitable for RAs of any gender. When I left the job as a third-year RA, I was burnt out and angry at the housing system. However, it was not until a year or so later that I realized I was angry at more than the RA job individually. I was also frustrated with the system it was created by and adhered to. I realized it was allowed and acceptable for my male superior roaming the halls on my floor full of young women, counting my staples, and that made me angry. I was not only aggravated at the one micromanaging RD, but I was also frustrated and angry that he was allowed to take these actions without being held accountable and I experienced a lot of scrutiny of my work which appeared to me to be not applied in the same way to men.

Someone needed to write about this topic because it does not receive enough attention in academia or higher education practice. I took up the challenge because I felt it would allow people working in residence life to look inward and see what is happening

and how the gendered environment leaves cisgender women feeling. This is important to me because being an RA can be about the residential experience without undue burdens based on sexist stereotypes.

In my literature review, I covered the difference between sex-based discrimination and a gendered experience. To put it simply, “sex-based discrimination involves treating someone (an applicant or employee) unfavorably because of that person's sex, including the person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or pregnancy” (EEOC, 2022), whereas gendered means to be “reflecting the experience, prejudices, or orientations of one sex more than [another],” which I have used to spotlight the female experience (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This is vital to this research because it allows me to demonstrate how the RA role differs for women and some of it does not meet the legal definition of sexual discrimination. I also discuss the broader idea of gender inequality in the higher education atmosphere. This gives context to my research since there has been research about the environment of higher education but there is only one source (Cousineau & Chambers, 2015) I was able to locate about genders in the RA job. I also dive in a bit deeper and explain the RA job and the roles RAs play now and have played historically. This gives a background for readers who have not been an RA and shares what has been found through empirical inquiry already. Then, to get a bit deeper, I share the limited research on the RA job experienced by women. This content is lacking in the existing literature, so I summarized what is already out in the world. This also sets the pace for where my research will pick up to fill a hole in the literature.

To give further context, I also wrote about more of the histories at play in the current RA role. This includes the history of gender roles in higher education. I wrote about the history of the Deans of Women and the impact they made on the world of women in higher education. These women were trailblazers for advocating for women as faculty and staff and helped push society to where it is today. This history gives context as to why things are how they are because of where society started. I also cover the history of Title IX and how impactful that piece of legislation was and continues to be. Interestingly enough, the amendment did not start out relating to college athletics or sexual assault, even though that is what it is most known for on campuses today. This builds and completes the contextual environment for the rest of the research.

Throughout this paper, I use the conceptual framework from Joan Acker (1990) which includes the theory of gendered organizations. This theory brings out the idea that most any organized group or unit is gendered and favors men over women. This idea is evident throughout my research into existing literature and my own experience on the job. However, the theory also helps the researcher understand that changing this kind of system of oppression is not an easy task. While this is true, Acker also argues in 2000 that ignoring the issues because it is difficult does not create a better world and can actually be harmful. That is why this research must be done, regardless of the difficulty. Ignoring the issue would allow the gendered norms to persist and allow the oppression and inequity to continue, which I just personally want to interrupt.

Methodology

This project was completed in the realm of phenomenology because the central aim is to find the essence of a phenomenon. I am attempting to share the experiences of several people who went through a similar experience, which is perfect within phenomenology. I chose this method because it gives a platform to raise the voices of the women working in housing and create a space for other female RAs to know they are not alone. As defined by Merleau-Ponty (1965), “Phenomenology is the study of essences and accordingly, its treatment of every problem is an attempt to define an essence,” the essence this time being the gendered experience within the RA role on university campuses (p. 1).

The steps of conducting this research were easier on paper than carrying them out. After choosing the topic of gendered experiences for female RAs for my thesis, I got to work on researching what already existed so I could work to fill any gaps in the research. I knew the literature was thin, so I worked with my advisor to find related research topics that would allow me to have and give context to the complicated issue. I then submitted (and resubmitted) my application to the Institutional Review Board for permission to do this thesis research. This was approved once I confirmed that I would be careful to protect the identities of the participants through several measures and I would not put them in harm’s way. I was able to do this by keeping my records behind a password-protected account and deleting them when I am allowed, which is after three years.

After the background work, it was time to get started with the hands-on research process. I provide an overview here and go more in-depth regarding this process in

Chapter 3. To complete this project, I needed participants, which I found through emails, social media posts, and networking with those around me who knew women who had been RAs for at least a year within the last five years. This allowed second- and third-year current RAs to participate, but not first-year RAs due to their lack of experience within the job so far. I collected their personal information through a Qualtrics form.

Once I had reached enough participants, I scheduled my first interviews. I asked several introductory questions to get a sense of their RA experience in general along with questions that allowed them to ponder their experience from a critical lens. After the first interview, I allowed time for reflection and gave the option of thinking or journaling about questions via a worksheet. This was not required but gave ideas of what examples to think about as we headed into the second interview. Then I set up the second round of interviews and asked more questions about the difference between the male and female experience in their halls. Acker (1990) explained that any organization would be influenced by societal norms for men and women, which I kept in mind during these conversations. I believed each woman would have examples of how they saw their gender impact their job in the residence halls.

After each of these interviews, I put the recordings through otter.ai and Zoom's internal transcription service to transcribe them. After checking for errors, I was able to read through each interview and highlight with a color-coded system any comments or phrases that appeared substantial. These themes would turn into the bulk of my writings in the findings section of this paper. Because of the significance of my research and ensuring I understood what they were saying, I scheduled one more follow-up with each

of my interview participants to ensure that we were on the same page about which parts of their story I was sharing. Part of phenomenology in the transformative paradigm is to put the research participants' voices above my own, so I checked back to confirm I was not simply creating the narrative I desired out of their stories.

Once these themes were credited as reflecting the participants' experiences, I wrote the findings and discussion chapters of this thesis. I focused on how participants' experiences either reflected the themes seen through the lens of the theory of gendered organizations or contradicted the theory (Acker, 1990). This is also how I decided to write the implications within the Discussion chapter. These implications give institutions ideas to create a more equitable environment for their RAs. Any adaptation of these implications for practice would likely aid the campus in becoming more inclusive and enjoyable.

Key Definitions

Within this paper, I used several words and acronyms that are not always common knowledge. Here are several of the most common and important examples:

RA- Resident Assistant or Resident Advisor- a student who is also an employee of the university who works and lives on campus to assist their residents, who often live on the floor with them concerning their safety, well-being, and student code of conduct violations.

RD- Resident Director- a university employee who also often lives in the residence hall in an apartment who also supervises a staff of RAs that live in or around their building.

Resident- anyone who lived on campus. A student would be considered an RA's specific resident if they lived on the same floor as the RA.

Gendered- "reflecting the experience, prejudices, or orientations of one sex more than the other," which I used to refer to the experience of women who held the RA role (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Passive- a bulletin board in the residence hall that the RA is responsible for decorating, often with a theme and university-wide goal. For example, on my campus, we were asked to fit them into a given category such as "relationships" or "purpose,"

Door dec (decoration)- a name tag for the residents' doors that was created by the RA for each resident and staff member in the building. These also often have requirements such as a number of layers of paper or elements. They also tend to keep with the theme the RA has for the entire floor.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Existing literature on the gendered experience of RAs on higher educational institutions' campuses is sparse. Because of this, it is important to gain insight into similar ideas and phenomena. For example, gender discrimination is a more commonly used term and action than a gendered experience, so people are more likely to recognize the issue. While a gendered experience is not necessarily discriminatory, the two phenomena have similar roots in a historically male-oriented organization and society (Acker, 1990). With this, I also explain the history of women in administrative positions on university campuses, particularly explaining the history of the Deans of Women. This

history is embedded with sexism and those effects linger on through today's society, which allows me to tie in the historical research to the current world of gendered organizations in Joan Acker's (1990) theory.

The Resident Advisor/Assistant Job

This study surveyed several resident assistants/advisors from here on called RAs. These RAs are students at the university who live on campus in residential housing and are responsible for a group of other students living on their floor or in their residence hall. These responsibilities include hosting events on the floor or building, keeping the hall welcoming, talking the residents through various problems, and enforcing university policy (Blimling, 2003; Manata et al., 2017). The job, responsibilities, and compensation vary based on the school. It is common for RAs to be expected to create bulletin boards that are both creative and artistic as well as educational, host a variety of floor events to keep students engaged, and work through any problem the resident springs on them (Blimling, 2003). For example, I was once asked to fix a printer in a dorm room and solve a relationship conflict. RAs can also be asked about campus resources like when the gym is open or questions suited for their advisor such as registering for classes. Some of these questions come during typical business hours and also since it is a living space, the questions can also come early morning or late at night depending on when the residents and RA come into contact. Most RAs are required to be "on duty" throughout the week and month and some are also required to work their residence hall's front desk answering the phone, providing service to residents, and monitoring activities in the hall (Manata et al., 2017). Being "on duty" refers to being the person who receives phone

calls about incidents throughout their shift. Some RAs serve on duty with a partner RA and others serve shifts alone. These shifts are typically overnight and on weekends whereas the RD would take the calls during the time that RAs are in classes during the day. The compensation for RAs also varies. It may only include free room and board, including a meal plan. Some universities will either replace this compensation or supplement it with a monthly, quarterly, or bi-annual stipend (Boone, 2016).

It is said within the resident assistant community that nobody knows what RAs are asked to do or what they experience unless they have lived in the role and done the job. The RA role has differed throughout the years and gained complexity as it grew (Davidson et al., 2016). Next, I will explain the evolution of the RA role.

The role was first introduced in the Middle Ages in Bologna, Paris, and Oxford in the form of student hostels which had managers from outside the university (Davidson et al., 2016). This idea made it to America in colonial times but they had a faculty member serve as the resident assistant (Davidson et al., 2016). This was short-lived as the faculty member serving as both a disciplinarian and professor created a very negative relationship. As time passed, women were admitted to higher education institutions, which created a new dynamic among students and staff. Universities were uncomfortable leaving women to live on their own and act independently, so university administration felt it important to provide safety and security for its women students in a newfound way (Davidson et al., 2016). The RAs in this era contributed what was known as “in loco parentis” which meant they were standing in seemingly parental roles for the students they watched over (Davidson et al., 2016). When the United States government changed

the majority age to 18 for most states, it pushed housing and student life to treat students more like adults (Davidson et al., 2016). In 1967, this led the National Association of Women Deans and Counselors to establish five concrete roles for RAs: to help create a welcoming environment in the residence hall, to help students with basic assistance, host activities for students, enforce student codes of conduct, and help with the administrative tasks within housing departments (Davidson et al., 2016). This list of responsibilities has only been added since, which can cause stress and confusion for student RAs. With both more work for the RA and a more authoritative role, RAs have more to balance in both tasks and relationships. For example, a sixth duty was brought in in 1982 which required RAs to also aide in keeping the hall safe, orderly, and quiet (Davidson et al., 2016). However, one of the arguably most meaningful changes happened in the 1960s and 70s when overnight duty was introduced so that RAs were available even after most resources on campus had closed for the night (Davidson et al., 2016). This was impactful because it created a role that could be activated around the clock. The job changed from a glorified part-time job to one that includes waking up at 3 a.m. to assist a resident.

The RA job varies day-to-day and even hour-by-hour. “The resident assistant is responsible for a type of corporate, and public, discipline mandated by residence management while being housebound with and caregiver to the individuals they are asked to discipline,” which poses its own difficulties (Cousineau & Chambers 2015, p. 29). To break it down, RAs are required to live on campus where they are enrolled in classes, work in their home, and assist their neighbors while also enforcing policy. For example, an RA would be expected to write up an incident in which a resident is drinking alcohol

on a Wednesday night and then throw a community building event the following Friday and help them through a break-up on Saturday before they meet with the RD about the alcohol incident on Monday. Boone (2016) laid it out plainly when they wrote that “RAs are expected to serve as role models, problem solvers, counselors, mediators, campus resources, community builders, and administrators in a part-time job while in pursuit of their undergraduate degree” (p. 30). In other career settings, this would be uncomfortable. But in Housing, it is expected, and students are encouraged to apply for the position (Boone, 2016). Outside of the university setting, this is best compared to if you were to live with a law enforcement officer, tell them about your day and your struggles, and then have the officer pull you over for speeding the next day while on your way to a party they were hosting. This example pulls from the idea that the RAs are required to live next to people they oversee, are called to create strong relationships with their residents which leads to many difficult conversations about previous and current struggles, and are required to host programs both passively and actively to create community and aid in the educational mission of the school (UNL University Housing, 2022).

This community and aiding in creating a comfortable campus can be a daunting task for some RAs when combined with every other responsibility on their plate. For example, Letarte (2013) noted that “RAs are the eyes and ears of the university and have the incredible responsibility of simultaneously filling the roles of a student, role model, counselor, teacher, and administrator” (p. 5). These community-building events also give the RA a chance to interact with their residents to make sure each person living on their

floor is still doing well and not needing an extra form of assistance. This is because “RAs must be able to identify when a resident may be struggling in a manner that requires referral to a professional staff member. They must not only recognize when a crisis is occurring but, most importantly, they must know and follow proper university protocol to manage the crisis” (Letarte, 2013 p. 5). Not only does this add pressure and stress to the RA, but it also leaves the RA vulnerable to lawsuits if things go wrong or incidents are not handled correctly (Letarte, 2013). Because most laws that save individuals from such lawsuits include the condition that the person is within the scope of employment, the RA and RD are placed in a delicate position because they live within the residence hall, and therefore their working office and the employees are essentially never not at work (Letarte, 2013). This couples with the reality that “RAs are described as ‘over-worked’ and ‘under-trained’ which is a recipe for institutional liability under agency law” because mistakes are more common when the individual is tired or does not have the ample knowledge to deal with such a large plethora of incidents (Letarte, 2013 p. 8).

Some parts of the RA experience are positive. As RAs learn and grow through the position, they gain experiences they can add to their resumes and interview topics because after RAs leave the role they “will be more likely to draw upon their skills and abilities as trained observers, problem solvers, and community builders” (Davidson et al., 2016 p. 46). They could also have new friends from their floors each year. This happens regardless of if these relationships create a difficult balance of friend and authority while they are still within the confines of the RA role (Loftus & Everett, 2011). These

friendships can be important for the RA to feel supported and can be complex if the line between friend and RA gets blurry.

Gender in the RA Job Experience

Although the RA job is different than other fields, some studies found discrepancies between cisgender women's experiences and their cisgender male peers. Cousineau and Chambers (2015) found that women in the RA role felt as though they were asked to be "surrogate mothers" for their residents. At the same time, this study found that they did not receive the same respect after they responded to an incident that their male peers received. The researchers concluded this was related to how women are viewed as mothers and males are viewed as a friend and colleague. This study dives deeper into what it looks like to be a female RA in a world that favors men. It gives an updated glance into the female RA role and could bring to light the differences between the experiences and organizational expectations of men and women.

This was discussed further in Loftus and Everett's (2011) study on role conflict within the RA experience. They defined role conflict as

the seemingly contradictory and competing simultaneous roles accompanying two of their social positions within different campus structures: rule enforcer in the bureaucratic organizational hierarchy of the housing and residential life office and peer/friend in the student community.

(p.74)

which led to differing views on how to handle the job and relationships.

The study noted that RAs often feel conflict because they desire to be friends with their residents but also need to fulfill their role as policy enforcers. The disconnect between friend and authority figure was difficult, but the RAs also brought up how the job is challenging because it never ends. RAs “work and live among their peers 24 hours a day, 7 days a week” and they can feel “obligated to fulfill the job responsibility of rule enforcer even when they are off duty” (Loftus & Everett 2011, p. 75). This is while simultaneously attempting to maintain close, trusting relationships with each resident (Loftus & Everett 2011). This role conflict impacts “RAs’ job performance, job satisfaction, and satisfaction as a student” negatively because of the added stress and clashing responsibilities (Loftus & Everett 2011, p. 75).

This gives background information about how RAs are expected to live their lives day to day. The Loftus and Everett (2011) article did not differentiate the experience by gender, which could provide valuable insight for housing professionals.

The 2015 survey also produced results that pointed to differences in what each gender RA felt was expected of them (Cousineau & Chambers, 2015). These differences in expectations are often based on the stereotypes of women, but they can still be challenged and brought to the light to benefit those in the position now and going forward. For example, they found that female RAs were seen as stand-in mothers to the residents whereas the males were not seen as father figures (Cousineau & Chambers, 2015). While the women believed the RAs would be treated equally by their residents, the study also found that they would experience the opposite. There were differences in both expectations and care-giving, specifically that women had more unspoken

expectations from everyone they worked with and around (Cousineau & Chambers, 2015).

Basic Information on Sexual Discrimination

Allport (1954) as referenced by Triana et al. (2018) defines workplace gender discrimination as “a person’s perception that they were denied equality of treatment in the workplace because of their gender” (para. 8). This definition is vague but gives a foundation of where this study takes off. This conjoins with Braun et al.’s (2017) idea that men and women equate the role of follower to women. Please note that while it was more inclusive to recognize gender diversity including non-binary gender, this study refers to literature that uses the gender binary because including all of the work on genders outside of the binary would have been too many topics for one thesis. Gender discrimination affects the person discriminated against in many ways, including how they feel about their job-their job satisfaction--which also includes details of their experience such as their satisfaction in the role and whether they plan to stay in their position (Herrbach, 2006; Mathieu & Zajac, 1990 as referenced Triana et al., 2018). This is partnered with the fact that 42 percent of women believed they had encountered gender discrimination in the workplace in 2017, according to a Pew Research study (Parker & Funk, 2017) gives way to understanding the gendered experience as well. This study focuses on the experience of female RAs because of the connection I feel to the topic as well as the history of women taking the backseat to men in higher education and the larger society. While men can also face discrimination or harassment in their employment based on their gender identity, it is seen in different ways, in workplaces,

and frequency (Farkas et al., 2020). These studies and articles are useful to increase awareness of the occurrence of gender discrimination in employment and can help set the groundwork to dive into deeper specificity around the gendered experience in housing employment. Because gender discrimination happens in any field, especially when women are given a role of leadership (Chang & Milkman, 2020), I look deeper into the experience of women when they are treated differently than their male counterparts without distinct discrimination.

Gender Inequality in Higher Education

Since this research is based on experiences in a university setting, it is also vital to the study to explore the world of higher education and the history of gender inequality that exists within the institution of education after high school. It is widely known that the college experience in the United States was originally designed to educate White wealthy men (Thelin, 2019). However, what is less widely known or, at least, acknowledged is how this system has passed down traditions and ideas that continue to discriminate against those students, staff, and faculty who do not identify as a man (Acker, 1990). This discrimination is not only found in higher education (SteelFisher et al., 2019), but it is where the study focuses.

History of Title IX

Women have worked to bring discriminatory practices in higher education to light and reduce them by advocating for policies and laws that help women be protected against discrimination. There have been many legal rulings regarding student enrollment. This

was done through the work that created and passed what has become known as Title IX, which came as part of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Powell, 2022).

Although when many people think of Title IX they think of athletics, it was not passed only to benefit women athletes; it was passed to minimize and call attention to the discrimination against women in higher education (American Association of University Professors, 2016). Regarding athletics, the law created a lobbying cry for equal opportunities in sports based on the language surrounding gender inequality in education and within organizations that accept federal funding (Mertens, 2022). Funding for women's sports was receiving minute percentages of funding compared to men's athletics, so supporters of women's athletics made the argument that Title IX applied to their sports as well as in the classroom. This was not popular with men involved in men's athletics but was later interpreted to validate the women's sports advocates' concerns. Women in sports now claim Title IX is why they are able to compete (Mertens, 2022).

This overall discrimination was in no small part due to society's idea that women should not be in higher education but should be at home raising and attending to their families. Even if not spoken outwardly, the idea of women's role being at home taking care of men or children was engrained into the American belief system due to the years of its prominence (PBS, 2000). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 gave some help but did not completely eradicate the problems involving women's discrimination and it did not prohibit discrimination based on sex in educational settings (American Association of University Professors, 2016).

It was not until 1970 that two congresswomen, Martha Griffiths and Edith Green took up the challenge of rectifying the problems within higher educational institutions. Green believed there needed to be changes to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This idea allowed Congressman Birch Evan Bayh to speak to congress about the differences in discrimination against minoritized races and discrimination against women (American Association of University Professors, 2016). He referenced how it is more socially acceptable in society to be overtly discriminatory against women while times were changing regarding discrimination against minoritized races (American Association of University Professors, 2016).

The law was signed into law in 1972 by President Richard Nixon and stated that discrimination based on sex was now illegal in cases that involved programs receiving federal assistance. It has since been adopted in any educational institution or activity that receives federal funds, which includes a wide array of establishments and programs within them, including most higher educational institutions.

Conceptual Framework

Since there are a variety of ways that individuals can experience sex discrimination, I based my research on Joan Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations. The theory provides a specific way of examining organizations which I used to guide my research design, analysis, and recommendations. Acker's theory, at its core, explains that gender plays a role in the power and privilege at play in structured organizations. In short,

to say that an organization, or any other analytic unit, is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine instead of structuring the job responsibilities, each person's role, and their evaluation through a more inclusive lens. (Acker, 1990, p. 146)

This connects to my research question: "What is it like to be a female RA in a society that has historically privileged men?" This connects to Acker (2006) when they wrote about inequality regimes and how "in general, work is organized on the image of a White man who is dedicated to the work and who has no responsibilities for children or family demands other than earning a living" (p. 448) This quote describes how Acker through years of research came to understand the gendered nature of organizations and how the gendering of organizations impacted women. The theory substantiates the experiences of women which differed from their male counterparts. In this study, I used Acker's (2006) definition of inequality in organizations; she defined inequality as

Systematic disparities between participants in power and control over goals, resources, and outcomes; workplace decisions such as how to organize work; opportunities for promotion and interesting work; security in employment and benefits; pay and other monetary rewards; respect; and pleasures in work and work relations. (p. 443)

Acker (2006) additionally explained that gender is a social construct and the inequalities between men and women are evident in every organization, which has historically also been integrated into class systems.

Within Acker's (1990) theory, there are five constructions (Table 1), or key areas. These include divisions, symbols and images, workplace interactions, individual identities, and organizational logic. Each of these is broken down further into smaller categories.

Table 1

Acker's (1990) Constructions

Constructions	Divisions	Symbols and Images	Workplace Interactions	Individual Identities	Organizational Logic
Definition	Labor, allowed behaviors, locations in physical space, power, family, state	Explain, express, reinforce, sometimes oppose those divisions	Patterns that enact dominance and submission	Consciousness of the existence of the other three aspects of gender	Creating and conceptualizing social structures
Examples from Acker	Manager positions given to men, men's work seen as skilled, women's unskilled	Men's masculinity linked to technical skills	Gender differences in interruptions, turn-taking, setting the topic	Views on language use, clothing, presentation as a gendered member	Written work rules. labor contracts, managerial directives, job evaluations,

Within the first construction, divisions, there are six categories: labor, allowed behaviors, locations in physical space, family, power, and state. These divisions explain how men are favored in all sorts of divisions within their work world and outside lives. Symbols

and images are more straight forward and are used within or sometimes against the six divisions. Workplace interactions are also easier to understand than the list of divisions because they are the patterns of how the workplace acts to complete the tasks at hand. The individual identities construction is used to explain the three aspects of gender, which Acker (1990) explained as language use, clothing, and presentation as a gendered member of society. The last construction, organizational logic, is used to understand the social structures at play within an organized group. These are all laid out in Table 1.

The gendered organizational theory dives into the concept of organizational theories through a feminist lens in that it critiques how gender plays a role in organizational structure and the societal ideas of jobs and hierarchies. Acker (1990) asserts that “organizations are one arena in which widely disseminated cultural images of gender are invented and reproduced” (p.140). This idea connects to my research in that I am interested in what it is like to be an RA in a society that historically privileged men. I dive into RA experiences related to gender and inequities in the employment of RAs, which connects to Acker’s (1990) idea that “some aspects of individual gender identity, perhaps particularly masculinity, are also products of organizational processes and pressures” (p. 140). These processes and pressures could range from having separate expectations for men and women, allowing different problematic behaviors to be ignored based on gender, or having an individual called out based on their sex or gender. My conversations with the RAs helped me understand these processes and pressures that exist in university housing departments.

Overall, the theory of gendered organizations allows researchers to critique and bring light to the ideas of gender in organizational structure by questioning positions on what organizations should look like and who holds the highest points of the hierarchy. Even though there has been little research about housing as an organization and whether or not it is gendered, Acker (1990) suggests that all organizations are gendered in some ways. This research seeks to increase awareness so that departments at institutions across the country can invest their time into creating stronger environments and understand the experiences their RAs go through to create welcoming homes for all residential university students.

Acker's theory also conveys the difficulty in changing the existing systems of oppression and differing experiences based on gender. While it can look appealing to just turn away from gender inequities and attempt to look at the world and specifically the RA job as gender neutral, this can do more harm than good (Acker, 2000). Acker stated that "the belief in gender-neutral organizing is comfortable to those with privilege. Indeed, one of the privileges enjoyed by those with power is the privilege to not see the systemic sources of privilege" (p. 630) because the people enjoying the privileges are those who can choose to not see the issues that those with oppressed identities are withstanding.

She further explains a bit about what to expect one tries to make changes. Acker indicates organizations and people working toward a more equitable workplace must do so with patience and calmness, so as to not leave people in defensive positions. However, "the necessary timing and rhythms of action projects may not fit comfortably with the timing and rhythm of ordinary organizational activities" so there is a delicate balance

between fighting the current powers and making big changes (Acker, 2000 p. 629). The key is to ensure the policymakers and change creators are not taking on more than they can handle at one time. Acker (2006) brings this to light when she said “change efforts that target a limited set of inequality-producing mechanisms seem to be the most successful” because the people behind the efforts can focus on the specific change they want to implement (p. 455). This idea brings out the anticipation of the rapid transformation of the office or residence hall so long as people attempt to fix things little by little so that one day the hall can be equitable for everyone who lives and works there.

Overall, Acker (1990) explained that gendered organizations exist anywhere there is a group of individuals working together and women have come a long way since times before 1972’s Title IX. The title has been effective in starting the path toward equity in ways that the original supporters and sponsors did not account for, yet there is still work to do for a more equitable world surrounding gender.

History of Gendered Roles in Higher Education

Before one can clearly understand how and why some women have had a different experience in higher education than men, one must understand the history of women in higher education. Women were not initially invited to higher educational institutions because it was not expected in society for them to take on that role or those that follow with a college degree. It was more acceptable for women to spend their time at home with cooking, cleaning, and tending to children and/or husband-educated woman would be a better homemaker, wife, and mother,” which gave both sides reason to argue (Parker, 2015 p. 6). Both sides of the aisle were firm in their beliefs about where a

woman belongs and neither side liked to budge. But the women had a minor victory in 1837 when Oberlin College in Ohio admitted the first women and men of all races, creating an expansion of education and resources unheard of before that time (Parker, 2015).

Even though women were allowed in classes, the road to equality was still bumpy. Parker cites that women were let out of classes on Mondays so they would have time to do the men's laundry (Parker, 2015). This gave way to the creation of new women's colleges by way of independent private colleges, catholic institutions, or public colleges with an emphasis on liberal arts degrees (Parker, 2015). These colleges were progressive but were still led by men instead of opening the position to allow women to lead women. Admitting women, was just the first step. Schwartz (1997) wrote that "the successes of those women who survived their experiences as students, faculty, and administrators and prospered during this time" were more exciting and telling (p. 504). The continual pushback on administration made it clear that women were itching to find a role where they could lead and be of practical use in the higher educational setting.

These roles first appeared by the name of Dean of Women (Parker, 2015). The initial jobs of these deans included looking after the female students since they were on their own and society believed that a woman on her own was dangerous and potentially harmful (Ndiffer, 2002). Because of these stereotypes and fears, "deans had to attend to the physical and safety needs of women before addressing issues of community, intellectual fulfillment, and career intentions" (Ndiffer, 2002 para. 10). The deans

continued to push their roles and ask for more responsibility. They desired to have a more specific skillset involving training in a role that encompassed both artistic and scientific aspects (Schwartz, 1997). This was primarily succeeded through the organization of deans of women across the country in the National Association of Deans of Women (NADW) as a branch of the National Education Association Report which allowed deans of women to join together (Schwartz, 1997). These deans had been looking to learn specific skills through training for the relatively new position on their campus (Schwartz, 1997). Schwartz (1997) found that “the deans of women were diligent in building their profession on the bedrock of academic discipline, research, and publication” (p. 507) because they were quite literally starting from the ground and working their way up through the academic hierarchy. This led to the deans of women being well-established in their roles by the mid-1930s (Schwartz, 1997).

The deans of women worked tirelessly to support their students and push the envelope of what was expected of women in higher education. According to Ndiffer (2002), the deans accomplished two major goals: they were able to create a new professional identity while also improving the classroom experience for women attending the institution. Through their work in the NADW and higher education as a whole, the deans of women were able to fight against the ongoing privileges of university being saved for only wealthy men and women. Because education had become such a powerful force, the deans of women were forced to look it in the face and start an ongoing battle. Education “assumed the role of gatekeeper to the professions and therefore to the middle class. It also became the institution that society looked toward for expertise” (Ndiffer,

2002, para. 12). These challenges were exasperated by the idea that “this gatekeeping function of universities had profound classist, racist, and sexist implications, as predominantly White, middle-class men came forth as knowing what was ‘best’ for everyone” and the pushback on authority would not come for many years (Ndiffer, 2002 para. 12).

Slowly but surely the roles changed for women and deans of women became better known as deans of students, which are still around today, however, this title change came with the downsides of losing their direct line to the institution’s president and becoming subordinates to men and (Parker, 2015). Parker (2015) found that since the 1950s, men have taken the majority of the top administrative positions in higher education regardless of the large number of women in higher education graduate programs. This means that women are often reporting to male administrators.

The role women play in higher education has had its ups and downs. While the men were off fighting in World War II, the women were able to prove themselves as leaders in the university setting. But when those who had been fighting returned home, the work the women were not selected for positions (Parker, 2015). This work during the war was evident through the creation of preferred practices for both students and administration, creating and maintaining professional associations such as NADW, conducting research that was developed into a newfound body of literature in journals, reports, and books, and improving overall campus environments (Parker, 2015). The women’s administrative work conflicted with the societal belief that men and women

were created to do different tasks and the prevailing social desire to preserve the administrative roles of men.

Parker (2015) found that “from 1950 to the present, males have assumed the roles of the majority of presidents, vice-presidents, deans, and other top administrative positions on college campuses” (p. 9) and there are more male managers in higher education even though there tend to be more women studying education and student affairs. This reality conveys the direct impact a patriarchal society can have and hold throughout history even after the red tape is stripped away. The women deans of women/administrators worked hard to create what Ndiffer (2002) described as genuine access. Ndiffer (2002) wrote that it was not enough to equate access to admission because “as anyone who has labored on the margins of the campus knows, mere admission is not enough” (para. 18). They share that the deans of women went further than that because genuine access would also include feeling a sense of belonging to the community without feeling ignored, harmed, threatened, or as though you are just a stereotype. Because of the work deans of women have done, campuses are closer to engaging with true genuine access which “means that you are welcome as different and therefore do not need to conform to hegemonic norms” (Ndiffer, 2002, para 18). This is an ongoing goal that began with the deans of women, but the work is simply not finished yet.

Possible Solutions

While this problem can be discouraging, many authors and researchers have come up with several possible ways to acknowledge and correct the behaviors connected to gender discrimination in the workplace. For example, Chang and Milkman (2020)

suggested that it could be helpful for hiring agents to ask themselves if they would make the same decision had the applicant displayed a different gender. If the answer provided evidence that there could be different decisions based on gender, the hiring agent would then be self-aware of a possible bias (Chang & Milkman, 2020). This also elucidates the issue of the gendered experience since the experience in a non-gendered experience would be the same.

Since Acker has said that gender discrimination in the workplace may be impossible to avoid overall, it is just as important for companies and supervisors to work proactively and reactively. Triana et al. (2018), found that employees who felt they had been discriminated against based on their gender were actually less likely to bring the case to legal court if they felt their original claim was handled professionally and they were believed. Triana et al. (2018) furthered this by asking organizations to have a process in place for when instances occur and ensuring the employee hurt is treated with the utmost “respect and compassion” (para. 65). This includes providing the employee with employee assistance programs. The proactive approach could carry equal weight. Chang and Milkman (2020) found that allowing employees to get to know each other and see everyone as an individual can allow them to stereotype less and in turn discriminate less often. This is based on the idea that human minds like to compartmentalize everything and when it has a lack of information, it will take from other spaces to fill the gaps (Chang & Milkman, 2020). The idea would then be to have fewer gaps for the mind to fill with stereotypes and ideas from media or old ways of thinking.

Chapter 3

Methodology

My method for this research was to conduct a phenomenology based in the transformative paradigm. Participants were cisgender women over the age of 19 who had held the resident assistant/advisor role for a year or longer in the last five years. Through interviews, I made meaning of the data to determine the essence of their experiences as RAs using Acker's theory of gendered organizations as a lens.

Transformative Paradigm

Mertens (2015) describes the transformative paradigm as having four distinguishing features: the central importance of lives and experiences of diverse groups, an analysis of inequities based on individual identities, an examination of how inequities lead to actions, and using transformative theory to create program theory to other RAs. These inequities can express a need for education or change because of the new findings. I chose Acker's (1990) theory because it directly confronts and explains gender inequalities in organizations, which is a good fit for this paradigm. I also appreciate that this paradigm because it places emphasis on the participants' experiences and allows me to get to know them as people instead of only participants providing data for the study. Having relationships with participants connects to my history in journalism, which I discussed in the Introduction. The transformative paradigm also adds the call to action which I saw missing from my work in journalism.

I chose to use the transformative paradigm for a few important reasons. The most critical of which was that it acknowledged the power differential between myself as the

researcher and my participants and then gave the power to my research participants by empowering them and creating a level playing field using the transformative paradigm (Hurtado, 2015). It is essential that my participants knew and I ensured that I was not simply using them for their experience. The transformative paradigm gives time for the researcher and the participants to get to know each other and build rapport and trust. I lean toward this paradigm based on my ideology that life creates stronger connections with others when both parties are authentic and honest with each other. For this reason, I did not desire to work within a paradigm that would not allow me to create relationships with the RAs I was speaking with.

The transformative paradigm also elevates the idea of giving back to the community one researches (Hurtado, 2015). For this research in particular, this looks like me remembering the specific issues the participants brought up and fighting for equity however I can. A seemingly small step is publishing this thesis, but the steps will continue as I learn more about how to advocate for people I am not physically or emotionally close to since we did not have a relationship before this research. Hurtado notes that the most important action for transformative researchers is to empower the community they work with so that the researcher does not engage in “drive-by” research. For example, I was able to send links to one former RA working on her doctorate because I knew some potential participants for her research for her dissertation. This would not have been possible if I did not have the explicit goal of getting to know my participants and empowering them to spread their knowledge and experiences across academia and their outside worlds.

Phenomenology

I chose to conduct a phenomenology so I could seek out the essence of what it is like to be a female RA. According to Mertens (2015), phenomenology is research that “seeks the individual’s perceptions and meaning of a phenomenon or experience and calls upon the researcher to suspend theories, explanations, hypotheses, and conceptualizations” (p. 247) so that the researcher can understand the true experience. Neubauer (2019) expanded on the definition of phenomenology when he stated that it “can be described as an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it” (para. 9). This method of research allowed me to gather the life experiences from my participants with their perceptions at the forefront of the research and analysis.

The method is described as “the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience” through both the words people say and how they say them (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 2). In other words, “phenomenology is a form of qualitative research that focuses on the study of an individual’s lived experiences within the world” (Neubauer, 2019, para. 1). This emphasis on experience is perfect for my study because I am looking to elucidate issues in housing employment through cisgender women’s life stories rather than a quantitative study that seeks to quantify human experiences. I focused on the qualitative approach to give the numbers a story told from the individual’s perspective. This is all a part of the idea that phenomenology suggests that most actions in research and elsewhere can be intentional and have meaning behind each action. Sokolowski (2000) explains that “the

doctrine of intentionality, then, states that every act of consciousness is directed toward an object of some kind,” (p. 9) which better helps the researcher conclude what the participants say about their lives. In this study and through phenomenological studies, it is possible to find meaning and understanding through participants’ words and the stories and examples they share with the researcher. This is why I used other RA’s experiences to show examples of what it is like to work in housing on a campus that has traditionally favored men. I could have used only my own examples, but this study allows for diving deeper into the essence and truth from more than one individual going through a similar situation or phenomenon. All these definitions and explanations reflect why it was important for me to talk to women who had experienced the RA role on a college campus to learn what the experience meant and how it impacted their lives.

The transformative paradigm acknowledges that each person holds their own biases. However, I was able to take certain steps to center my participants’ experiences instead of my own. I interviewed and allowed them to express their story exactly how they would like me to hear it through having a casual conversation at first to build the relationship and then allowing them to answer each with as little or as much as they liked for each question. “The intent is to understand and describe an event from the point of view of the participant” so I did not interject my opinions or ideas into the participant’s lived experience (p. 247). The experience I studied, in particular, is the life and role of a resident assistant on a university campus who has been hired by the housing department and lives where they work and attend school. Teherani et al. (2015) explained phenomenology as finding the essence of a phenomenon by looking at it through the eyes

of someone who experienced it and then making meaning of the phenomenon. Because of the importance of putting the experience and perspective of the participants first, I looked through my notes to see which ideas appeared to be the essence of the participants' experiences. I am confident that the essence I describe is true from my participants based on each of these tasks I set for myself to be the most credible possible.

Data Collection Methods

To learn more about this experience, I interviewed the participants twice for data. These interview questions are in Appendix A and were scheduled to last about 90 minutes. Between the two interviews, I sent the participants a worksheet/ journal to fill out or think through so that could have assisted them in thinking about the roles they filled and if their roles were influenced by their gender in any way. These are also in Appendix A.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured, which Galleta (2001) says, "provides a repertoire of possibilities," (p. 24) which was perfect for this thesis research because I was never sure exactly what areas I would hit in the conversation, but I knew the most important questions to ask to have the best likelihood of getting the information I was looking for. See the interview protocol in Appendix A. This connects with the phenomenology method because I am only looking for the essence of each participant's experience. I did not need each person to answer the exact same questions in the same order because it would not create the comfort I was looking for through the

transformative paradigm or the trust and overarching experiences I was hoping to understand through phenomenology. The critical questions came down to the questions I asked about gender and how they saw equities or differences based on this identity. I asked these questions after getting to know the participant through easier questions and questions to understand the nuances of the RA role on each particular campus. I had relatively different conversational interviews with each of my participants. Some women wanted to tell me everything about their time as an RA and how it was influenced by their gender, while others wanted to simply stick to the questions. Because of the fluidity of the interview set-up, I was able to adapt to the participant depending on how much the participant offered. This adheres to Galleta's (2001) idea that "there is a great deal of versatility in the semi-structured interview, and the arrangement of questions may be structured to yield considerable and often multi-dimensional streams of data" (p. 24). This was the case in my research because each woman allowed me to see into her world with a different perspective or lens.

Process

The interview questions were curated through the lens of Aker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations. Some examples help explain how the interviews were structured and how I was able to intertwine getting to know the participant on a personal level, while also learning about their experiences for this research thesis. A full list of the interview questions is available in Appendix A. For example, I asked about their current position in life, whether that be a new job or if they are still in school. This gave me perspective as to what they do with their day-to-day time and created room for me to also

ask if this position was influenced by their time as an RA. This question was inspired by personal experience. I loved my time as an RA as much as (sometimes more, sometimes less than) I hated it. I loved the time working with students and being a resource for them to come to for issues ranging from registering for classes, setting up a printer, finding vomit in a bathroom stall, and going through a break-up. These experiences are what led me to pursue my master's in student affairs. I knew I wanted to continue to be a resource without judgment for college students. So, it was important to see if I could relate to my students who have continued their time in higher education or not. Either way was fine, it just created a stronger bond when I understood where they are in life now. This bond created the trust and relationship that the transformative paradigm calls for. It also gave the participant space to think more critically about their experience as an RA and how it may have affected them in different ways than they've been able to process.

Further into the interview, I started asking more direct and difficult questions about the RA experience specifically as a woman. For example, I asked about their relationship with their staff and the expectations each gender had placed on them to see if there were any discrepancies. This was also clear when I asked the women if their time allotted to different tasks was equitable to that of men. When the women described spending more time on their tasks because of higher expectations, I was able to continue the conversation about where those differing expectations came from. It was interesting to see if the expectations were placed internally by the women or from an external force, such as their supervisor or other staff members.

The interviews took place over Zoom because the participants did not all live around my campus and Zoom allowed me to record the interviews more securely than my phone voice memo recorder would be able to. I interviewed the participants from December to January in various private, quiet spaces. Unfortunately, one participant was only available for the first round of interviews. I also took into consideration that the ability to administer these interviews during Winter Break was a point of privilege. I was not required to work at my assistantship over the long holiday, so I was able to allow the participants to dictate the schedule.

Each interview was approximately 90 minutes to create a space in which the participants felt valued while also respecting their day and time and getting into depth about their experiences. The 90 minutes range allowed me to catch up with the participants to bring back humanity to the world of research interviews in one small step and then having the interview. To me, this means not looking at participants as data points but instead as multifaceted people with hobbies and a personality that can contribute to the world and quite possibly even give the research some extra credibility. The time was important because I felt that if the interviews were too short, I would get to the analysis and not have enough examples or experiences to dig into, I also worried if the first interview was too long, then the participant would not be as likely to return to the second interview so I was conscious to limit the first interview and have a specific, important, purpose I communicated for the second interview. However, I also understood that it takes time to build trust with each participant, so I wanted to allow them that time. It is also true that different people need different amounts of time, so I was glad to have

the full 90 minutes available in case they needed it, but I did not push the participants to stay for the full time if they were finished answering questions.

Each interview was transcribed through otter.ai and then listened to again to check for errors or any areas in which the program was not able to catch some words. This account is also secure and protected by a password.

Protecting Participants

To take steps toward confidentiality and protecting the identities of participants, I did not refer to the individuals by their true identity in my write-ups but instead gave pseudonyms for each person that I remember but did not share. This is made clear because I did not interview the Golden Girls for this research thesis, no matter how much I would have liked to. I named my participants after all four main characters from the classic television show “Golden Girls” and one (Lorelai) from “Gilmore Girls” because these women on television have strong personalities and were fun to watch. They were the characters in my comfort shows when thesis-writing got stressful. I also wanted to bring a sense of life and humor to what is often a dry and mundane world of academic literature’s language. The pseudonyms allowed the participant to feel comfortable sharing any difficult details of their experience without fear that their supervisor or institution would react poorly in case their story shed a negative light on the person or institution.

I also created anonymity by keeping the interviews, transcripts, and recordings on my University of Nebraska- Lincoln OneDrive, which is secure and needs a password to access. This adheres to the guidelines set by the Institutional Review Board as well. The IRB is also aware that my transcriptions were run through otter.ai and Zoom. The

majority of the files were transcribed through Zoom through its cloud feature, but due to one unfortunate misclick, one is housed on otter.ai. All of the interview data is password protected and is still protected. These transcriptions were all then copied and pasted into one document for ease of reading through and finding examples in which the same topic was brought up by more than one participant. I will keep the files for another three years in case someone needs them from me as required by IRB. My IRB approval is in Appendix D. After that, they are allowed to be deleted and they will be removed from my laptop, Zoom, long document, and otter.ai account. This keeps with IRB standards as well as creates space on my accounts for different storage.

Recruiting Participants

To recruit a request to find participants to my network both here at UNL and beyond. These recruiting messages are found in Appendix C. For example, I emailed my advisor, and they were able to connect me with their network of alumni both from my program and from other areas of their life. I did this with the two other professors I have been a student under in my master's program as well. Anyone interested in being involved with my project then filled out a quick Qualtrics form with contact information and information about when and where they worked as an RA so I could ensure they met the minimum requirements for this study (Appendix E). I included a copy of the Informed Consent document for the study in Appendix C which shows how I described the study, requirements, and criteria for participation.

This recruitment script was also posted online on social media in hopes of finding women from different campuses because it is in my own belief set that it can be

beneficial to share experiences from a variety of different campuses and parts of the United States. This is not required by either phenomenology or the transformative paradigm but is instead a personal value. Examples of where the call for participants was posted include Facebook groups for higher education professionals, including ACUHO-I Women in Housing Network, my personal LinkedIn, and my mentor's personal Facebook page. The last of which does not work in higher education but has connections with people all around the country from her consignment consulting business.

Participants

As previously mentioned, I gave each participant a pseudonym from the TV series, "Golden Girls." The character was assigned to the participant before I met them, so the personalities do not match the participants. This was simply a difficult project and referencing one of my favorite comfort shows brought some sunshine into this world of academia.

I interviewed four women from several different institutions. Before the interview, each participant verbally agreed to the informed consent (Appendix B). Rose was an RA at a university in northern America with approximately 10,000 students. She held the role for three years. Blanche was an RA at a private, Jesuit, non-profit university in the Midwest with approximately 3,000 students. She held the role for two years. Dorothy was an RA at a public, commuter four-year university in the Midwest with approximately 15,000 students. Sophia was an RA at a public four-year university in the Pacific Northwest with approximately 25,000 students. She is finishing her third year as an RA.

Each participant identified as a cisgender woman, which was a qualification for the study. I created this qualification to keep my research scope as narrow as possible while still answering my research question about the experience in this specific gendered organization.

Analysis Method

Based on the importance and complexity of this research thesis, I analyzed the transcripts through several different steps of coding. I started with a general open coding, where I sat down, listened to each interview, and marked the places I wanted to keep in mind and felt were major examples and experiences. While “open coding includes labeling concepts, defining and developing categories based on their properties and dimensions,” (Khandkar, 2009 p. 5) I focused more on finding important developments and specific areas to ask about in the second interview as well as concepts I was able to find in more than one interview transcript.

Once I had finished all of both sets of interviews, I used the important aspects of the interviews from the initial open codes to fill in a spreadsheet of Joan Acker (1990)’s key concepts. This allowed me to truly connect the experiences the women had as RAs to the concepts I read about in her theory. These concepts included the division of labor, cultural symbols, workplace interactions, individual identities, and organizational logic. The spreadsheet analyzation tool because I could pinpoint examples of my own experiences interacting with each of those elements and felt comfortable assuming I was not alone in these thoughts or experiences. In the next section, I explain the steps I took to ensure trustworthiness in this study.

Trustworthiness

It is important to go through how I ensured quality and check how I corrected any ways I could be wrong. Mertens (2015) mentions several criteria for quality that I based my research on. The first area was to ensure credibility, which is allowing the readers to trust that what I found stands true. I created credibility by creating a meaningful relationship with each participant through more than one interview. This achieved a deeper connection and a second time to discuss similar topics. Because of the gap in time between interviews, the women had time to think more on their own time about what their experience was like and how it may have differed from their male colleagues. This also created an environment fit for the transformative paradigm that I discuss further later. I also worked to strengthen my credibility and internal validity through peer debriefing with my advisor. Internal validity is a term used to describe the assurance that the data and findings are true and not caused by outside variables (Mertens, 2015). I also had low experimental mortality, which is when participants dropout of the study before it ends since only one participant left the study (Mertens, 2015). These actions for credibility put different eyes on my research so I was not completely invested in the data and my own experiences and theories I lost what the participants were meaning to tell me. This is important in both the transformative paradigm and phenomenological research. Transferability is when the researcher allows the reader to learn about the context of the research and participants so the reader can decide for themselves whether the research findings would apply to their situations (Mertens, 2015). I worked to create transferability through my research by using more than one participant and providing

detailed descriptions of the participants and where they worked such as the size of their university and their salient identities. Most of my participants chose to share their race, age, and sexuality, for example.

To enhance my confirmability, I kept detailed notes of my data. Confirmability is the ability of the findings to be plausible given the data the researcher collected (Mertens, 2015). To increase my confirmability, I kept notes of each interaction with my participants along with our questions and the transcripts of our conversations. This allowed me to have another person check both the data I collected and my takeaways to create a higher possibility that the findings reflected the data and I was putting the participants' voices and ideas before my own. When I did this with two friends who volunteered to help, they agreed with my findings and shared that the research is interesting but not unexpected. I also kept a journal to track how I felt during and after each point of my interviews because it helped me understand why things could go awry as well as keeping track of which participant said which talking point. To stay within the transformative paradigm, there were several things I described in the transformative paradigm section that I did. I paid close attention to whose voice I was expressing in my thesis and always prioritized the participant's experience. I also had fuller interviews with the participants so that we created a lasting relationship that could be mutually beneficial in the moment and after the research was completed. I also acknowledged that I had several points of power during the research process as a White, cisgender, master's student human being leading the conversation. I tried to help make my participants more comfortable by allowing them to know some of my experiences being an RA as well.

This created a stronger relationship in which we were able to share our similar and different experiences. We even laughed at the oddities that can occur through the RA position.

Limitations

My study was not perfect, as I am a human being working with other human beings. That said, there were certain limitations to my study. The first of which is that due to time constraints, I was not able to member-check my findings. This would have involved me sharing back the findings I was taking from each participant to ensure I was correct in what they believed was the most important from what they shared with me. I was also not able to have a peer review the essence of my findings. I was only able to get the themes checked instead. This limits the credibility of the findings but does not disqualify them.

A limitation I could not control was due to time conflicts and mismatched schedules, I had one participant not schedule a second interview. I was still able to use the data from her interview, but I was not able to check back in or build the relationship I did with my other participants.

Chapter 4

Findings

I did this research in the transformative paradigm through phenomenology to find answers to the question “what is it like to be a female RA in a society that has historically privileged males.” I was lucky enough to have five participants in the interview process described in the methodology chapter. The process included two interviews regarding

their time as an RA with a short worksheet in between. These participants are named after characters from my favorite shows, “Golden Girls” and “Gilmore Girls.” The participants needed to be cisgender women and had held the RA position within the last five years for at least one full school year. Each of the demographic questions was optional and participants were given the option to share more identities they hold as salient.

Participants

My first participant was named Rose. She identifies as a White woman and was 25 at the time of the interview process. She is “not sure” of her religious affiliation at this time. She described her time as an undergraduate at a public midwestern university with approximately 10,000 students. She held the RA position for three years in her undergraduate experience and now works at a different university as a hall director.

My second participant was named Blanche. She identifies as a cisgender, heterosexual Black, spiritual Christian woman and was 27 years old at the time of the interviews. She also holds the salient identity of being a first-generation college student. She also spoke of her time as both an undergraduate and graduate student in RA and RA-adjacent roles at a public midwestern university with approximately 10,000 students. She now works at a different university in higher education and is pursuing her doctorate.

My third participant was named Sophia. She identifies as a heterosexual, Caucasian woman and was 25 years old at the time of the interviews. She was an RA who was also involved in Greek life. She described her two academic years as an RA at a private Jesuit university in the Midwest with approximately 3,000 students. She is currently working with the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI). She said in the

interviews that she believed having the RA experience led her to her lifelong goal of working for the FBI, so she is proud of her work and her role.

The fourth participant and final Golden Girl was named Dorothy. She identifies as an Asian, Catholic, heterosexual woman. She was 22 years old at the time of the interviews. She described her two and a half years as an RA at a public northwest university with approximately 24,000 students. She is currently finishing her undergraduate degree and still holds the RA position.

My fifth and final participant and only Gilmore Girl was Lorelai. She identifies as a straight, White woman who does not practice religion. She was 24 years old at the time of the interview process. She described her experience as an RA for three years at a private southeastern university with approximately 25,000 students. She is currently pursuing her master's degree and works as a teaching assistant.

With these participants and the data they gave, I found themes that emerged through the data, which led me to the essence of the experience. These themes are the basis of the phenomenological research realm I worked in. These findings add to the small amount of research literature that exists about the gendered experience of RAs on a college campus. This allows supervisors to take an internal look at their staff and see if they are perpetuating any stereotypes or if their university goes against the grain of what these women and myself have experienced. Using Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations, I analyzed the interviews to find common themes and placed them into one or more of Acker's constructions of gendered organizations. I took ample notes during the interviews due to my fear of losing all of the information if the recordings were

corrupted or lost. This also stems back from my history in journalism. To keep my mind awake and aware through days with multiple interviews and days with only one, I kept a journal of how I was feeling going into and after finishing each interview. This allowed me to understand myself and why some ideas and topics could have stuck out more than others.

Themes Outlined

The themes I found from the collection of interviews were that two of the aspects of Acker's (1990) theory were the most frequently mentioned in my research for female RAs: division of labor and the construction of organizational logic. Within the category of the division of labor, I found that there was a theme of women being expected to manage tasks with higher effort and planning than men. Also included in the division of labor, there was a theme of women being held to the stereotype that they are craftier and enjoy artistic tasks more than males. I confirmed these by allowing two friends to read my data chart and share whether they believed I was creating findings based on my own experiences. They both agreed that these findings appeared to come up in the data as well. Within the organizational logic, I found the theme of women being expected by residents, other RAs, and supervisors to take on a mothering approach to the RA role whereas males were seen as a friend on the floor. There was also the theme of women being more likely to have more thoughtful events with more meaningful intentions for their residents that came from both the supervisors and the residents.

Division of Labor

Acker (1990) described the constructions that appear in organizations that impact the gendered experience there. These included divisions, symbols and images, workplace interactions, individual identities, and organizational logic. The divisions were broken down into divisions of labor, allowed behaviors, locations in physical space, power, family, and state. This is to say that each of these ideas acts as a dividing line between what men and women experience in their workplaces. These divisions tend to prioritize men, which is also the case in my findings through this research. Examples of the divisions prioritizing men include men having less work to do to receive the same rewards, men being allowed to behave in more inappropriate ways or to slack off more often, and men being allocated more convenient or larger spaces than women.

Women Being Expected to Connect with Residents Through Stronger Relationships Than Men

The dividing line for gender is more visible in the relationships that the participants were expected to have with their residents which they then compared to their male coworkers. Lorelai stated that she talked to approximately 1/3 of her residents each week (approximately 10 or 11 residents) because she was accustomed to having her residents knock on her door or ask questions while she was in the floor lounge area. She said she was in the lounge because she knew that this would be how she could interact with the most residents. She said she “spent a good majority of my time in the dorm or around the dorm,” to see create the relationships, which was easy since the majority of her classes were online. “I saw them [the residents] a lot more and did a lot more things

with other RAs or other RAs' residents." She said this helped her create a relationship with residents because "chances are they aren't going to email you about the issue" if they knock and the RA is away. She also had a marker board for residents to write anonymous requests. This was not the case for her male counterparts who she said were often not home and did not assist their residents with problems or tasks. "Guys checking emails just doesn't work very well, or they would just forget," she said. This led to a habit of the residents asking other RAs for help. For example, she said that if a male RA was asked a question, they would send the resident down to the front desk and then forget to do any follow-up check-ins that the question could have required. She witnessed this first-hand when she was working at the desk and would then ask the male RA if a more major complaint (i.e. cockroaches, etc.) were still around and the RA would not have an answer.

This difference based on gender was also evident at Sophia's institution. She said that the males would simply not engage in the longer, more in-depth conversations with their residents. This lack of conversation was especially evident within the first week when the RAs administered roommate contracts. For example, she would sit down with each roommate pair and go line by line within the contract to ensure there would be as few conflicts as possible. The men, however, would give out the contracts and not see them again until the male residents handed them in, from what she understood after talking to her coworkers. Sophia put in extra time and effort to help eliminate future roommate conflicts. She said, "everyone at the beginning of the year had to sign up with

their roommate for a time, and we had to design a roommate contract together,” which took about half an hour per roommate pair.

Rose also noticed a discrepancy at her institution. She said the male RAs would also seek her out because they were unsure of how to handle situations. She said that the more difficult conversations would be handed off to her because the RAs assumed she would be able to handle the situation better based on her experience and gender, which led to residents also contacting her instead of male RAs. She said, “the residents really kind of fed into those stereotypes of like, if it’s something deep or serious or feelings, I’m going to talk to the female always, and not so much the male.” She said this could also have to do with the male RAs being around the residence hall less often. She said the full staff was trained in mental health crises, but “most of the guys didn’t know how to handle that, so if the resident came to them... they would call one of us female RAs.” This created an extra burden of stress and time given to the job of the female RAs.

Blanche also expressed that the duties of mental health checks fell on her shoulders. She said her male co-RA on the floor was and admitted to being lazy, which created a variety of difficulties within the role. For example, she said “I had no support with incidents. I had no support with programming. I had no support in mediation, I had no support, and I did it all by myself.” This led Blanche to believe she had to be the one on staff to complete the tasks and spearhead projects that she said should have included more people’s efforts, particularly, her co-RA.

Dorothy also agreed that the female RAs had more work to do and gave more effort at her institution, but also shared that the stereotype of women being more talkative

than men sometimes appeared true. This was because she experienced her female residents talking more than the males on the floor. She also, like other RAs I spoke to, worked with residents she did not know because their male RAs did not assist them. She said, “any problem anyone has, it's very first going to the female-identifying RA, and then the males if they can't reach out to the female.” She admitted this could have multiple causes, but saw it happen as a pattern throughout her tenure as an RA.

It was clear the division of labor leaned toward privileging male RAs, according to these participants. These aspects of the job being more difficult and requiring more time appear to become the responsibility of women. This privilege gives men extra time in their days to focus on their academics, recreational activities, and career development than their female counterparts. It follows that male RAs who had fewer responsibilities and demands on their time from the RA job probably had to carry less stress and, in some cases, trauma than their female counterparts who took on more of the tasks and were involved in more of the complex interpersonal and mental health issues facing residents. In addition to generally being expected to take on more work, the female RAs had greater expectations placed on them specifically related to arts and crafts, which I explore in the next section.

The Stereotype of Women Enjoying Arts and Crafts More Than Men Inundating Housing

One major area within the RA role across the participants' campuses was the emphasis on bulletin boards, sometimes called passives short for passive learning opportunities. Resident hall expectations range from having two boards that need

updating once a semester to some campuses requiring four boards to be updated each month. Every school and every hall is different and the supervisor often has the final say in what they would like to see from each bulletin board. For example, my RD was particular about how many staples we needed to use for each letter we had on the board. However, Sophia was not allowed to use staples at all, and her RD was focused on ensuring every inch of the board was covered in paper of some sort.

These standards were not equal across the board at any of the institutions participants worked for as RAs. For instance, Rose mentioned that the males did not put in the time on bulletin boards whereas the women were expected to by their supervisor, even if they did not enjoy crafting. The differences were also incorporated when the boards were completed. “We had problems with people even putting stuff up on time, and all the women somehow managed to get all of their stuff up on time,” Rose said. She said talking to the males did not help because they made it clear they did not care.

Blanche echoed this sentiment as well when she said that the men would give less effort than the women. “My boards were...Pinterest, one of a kind, I mean like to the T, so now, as soon as [men said] ‘I can't do this. I'm tired,’ I'm like, ‘I did it. You could do it, too’” she said. She mentioned the men would wait until near the due date to then ask for help so that the women would do the work for them.

Lorelai commented on this idea as well. She explained that her institution asked RAs to have their boards switched out each month, which led to at least six boards a semester along with new door name tags (door decs – short for decorations) for the residents, RAs, and staff. This led to a lot of work on crafts, so she would start them over

summer break. This unfortunately led to having to pay her own money (upwards of \$100 over the years) which was a hassle to reimburse. “I’d rather get it done and save time and spend \$20 here to get nice papers... [because] I had all summer to do it, so I’d rather do it here and there than be in a room trying to make door decks during Midterms week,” she said. However, the male RAs did not put forth this increased effort and would end up asking for help from the women because the women were perceived as crafty and proactive. “[The men’s] effort was definitely that they could slack off more than we could,” she said. She mentioned that another female RA would repeatedly help the same male RA with his boards and then complain that she wished she did not have to do so. This led to Lorelai wondering what the correct action would have been-- to let the male RA struggle with his boards or to be used for her craftiness.

This is similar to how Sophia acknowledged the gendered split. She mentioned that her institution had campus-wide standards, including door decs that had three elements. While her supervisor was adamant about keeping within that standard for the female residence hall, this was not the case in the male residence hall. She said she made about 50 of each door dec, with each containing the three elements such as a button, extra layers of paper, additional string, and so forth. “There’s no way to like just mass produce those. You can’t just print them all off,” she said. “I think some of the men’s were not always 3 elements, or if they were, you were like, ‘okay? Well, you just like wiped some glitter, glue on it and called it good,’” which she compared to her experience in which she, “spent hours on those things, and ... would recruit [her] friends and family and make assembly lines, and it was a huge time suck for [her].” These additional hours were not

rewarded or compensated, which leads to an extra perk of being a male RA who did not have to work as hard on the same décor.

This idea of women being expected to finish their boards well and early contains undertones that relate to how women are expected to complete the task and then be around to help their male counterparts in ways that males would not be expected to do. The males did not go to other males for assistance, in any case, I heard about it except for one. In the case where males went to other males for help, they would find the male who identified as gay and ask for his help first. This is also ridden with stereotypes and ideas of femininity.

Division of Allowed Behaviors

Acker (1990) asserts that there tends to be a divide in what different people can do or how the rules are enacted on certain groups of people based on their gender identity. This idea was prevalent in participants' experiences in the residence halls and I discuss these aspects next.

Men Having More Relaxed Rules Than Women

There was a clear divide in how male and female RAs were treated regarding rules enforcement and punitive actions. While this was evident in the standards for floor decoration discussed previously, it also appeared in other aspects of the RA role. For example, Rose noted that the men were allowed to miss deadlines on their bulletin boards while women were held to keeping with the deadline. Aside from bulletin boards, Rose also said that there was a divide in punishment for missing duty nights. For example,

there was a night in which one male RA did not check in for duty so the RAs texted him to see if he was on his way. They then found out that he was not on campus, or even in the state. Instead, he was having a vacation in Las Vegas. Rose noted that this vacation would have been preplanned and the duty could have been covered with ease, but instead, the remaining RAs were tasked with covering the duty at the last minute once they found out he was not there. She said, “At this point, we had our doors open all the time, and people just like, come out, and we were pretty good about covering for people ... but like he didn't tell anyone or anything.” This RA did not appear to be punished but instead was told that he should have let people know he would not be available for duty that evening.

Lorelai also found a division among how the rules were enforced on RAs. She noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a strict “no guest” policy for all residents. There were women fired for having guests over and getting caught, but when men brought someone home, they were given more chances to try and do better. At the same university, Lorelai found that she was required to make up any missed meetings with her RD as well as the other women on her staff. However, the males would often call off their meetings, and she said they talked about having no intention to reschedule. At these one-on-ones, she said that “complaints and issues [were] brought up to us [women], whereas the guys’ [issues] were more pushed under.” She said these issues also allowed policy violations such as residents not signing in their guests. She said this put her in an awkward position. “I was trying my best to like be approachable, but not like super rule-bound” while also keeping up with the roles she held in her job since the

women made sure every guest was signed in but the men did not and would even bring guests that were against policy at the time.

The divide was also evident in Blanche's experience. She found that the men, predominantly White men, were allowed to make "snarky" jokes, whereas the women had to stay on their toes to avoid conflict with the supervisor, including being accused of attempting to date the supervisor's boyfriend. The women had to be careful in how they talked to the supervisor and Blanche was deliberate in staying out of the staff cliques or the drama those included. Blanche even saw this disconnect in that the same people were always chosen to attend conferences, even though attendance was said to be chosen based on a written request and explanation of why they deserved to go.

Sophia also mentioned a separation between what women and men could be seen doing. For example, Sophia's campus was wet but had guidelines regarding alcohol. This included parties requiring a bartender and a strict 21+ drinking restriction. Sophia and the other female RAs took this to heart and knew they could not go to certain parties, even though she was the president of the sorority involved. This was not the case for men going to fraternity parties on campus. The rule said that RAs could not be seen drinking with minors or at a function that broke any of the other guidelines. The fraternity parties often did break these rules and the male RAs were comfortable attending them. Sophia shared, "I'm thinking of one individual in particular, where he was president of his fraternity, and he definitely was still at this event, whereas I was president of my sorority at the time, and I still was like, 'I can't be present at those events and like that's hard.'" she said. She had to explain this to her chapter and said, "I know you would all rather I be

there. I know I would rather be there. But this is the contract I sign. This is the rules I follow kind of a thing.” Sophia said this spoke to the idea that males were allowed to do more bending and breaking of the rules because they could not be replaced in their RA role as easily as the women could. Her campus had a difficult time recruiting male RAs, so she consistently felt as though the campus was letting violations slide for the convenience of not having to find another man to fill the job opening.

All of these examples give way to the idea that men are given more lenience in the rules upheld by their job contracts than women. These examples can appear as minor, but when they are partnered with each other and amplified by the stress of undergraduate school, they can add up. This can cause harm to the female RAs and the campus as a whole if an incident goes unreported or is handled ineffectively.

Organizational Logic

Acker (1990) explained the construction of organizational logic also impacts people based on their gender within an organization. This can be seen when social structures are upheld through an organization’s written policies, a manager’s expectations, and job evaluations among others. It is important to note that this construction and the themes and overall essence I found through my interviews and research could overlap with other areas of Acker’s constructions.

Women Taking the Role as a Mothering Figure Where Men Are Seen as a Friendly Authority

The idea of mothering was brought up first in my literature review from Cousineau and Chambers (2015). They found that female RAs often felt as though they had to step in as the mother figure to take care of and raise the residents. In my position, this looked like comforting a resident after she failed an exam, teaching residents how to use the oven in the downstairs kitchen, and programming a wireless printer. This was evident in my research as well. For example, Blanche shared that she would often have to assist with RA tasks via text even if she was not in the residence hall or was off campus for an extracurricular activity, which she felt was because she often felt like the “grandma” on the staff. She took on the nickname with endearment because she loves things that older people tend to like, and she does not enjoy going out to the bars or staying up late. However, this also led to her working more hours than her male colleagues. When she was in the residence hall, she was expected to take on extra mental health cases. She said, “I became, more seasoned if you would, and having more mental health-based conversations because we usually were with students or at that point mentally.” She said that she experienced workplace trauma based on how often she was engaging with residents in crisis. It did not help the situation that, according to Blanche, she “also had a supervisor that wasn't doing their job. So, a lot of the situations, unfortunately, fell on me that I should have had some more support in.” This can be seen as a job requirement because these cases can fall under assisting residents through their

needs, but the root comes from society's idea that women are more caring and can take care of a person in crisis.

Sophia also said she experienced this idea of having to step in as the mom on the floor and it was not an easy role to take on. She said the female RAs were seen differently after encountering an incident, whereas her male colleagues would be able to maintain the same friendship with their residents after a write-up. For example, Sophia did not share which sorority she was a part of because she felt it would be detrimental to recruiting if a resident were to find out, especially if they had been involved in an incident in the past. However, the males involved in Greek life would use their time on their floors to recruit new members. She said, "men being an RA was almost a recruitment tool because it was like, 'Look at this really cool dude [he is] an RA and he's in our frat don't you want to join us?'" She noted that her university's recruitment took place in the second semester. This would have been after the residents had settled into the residence halls and potentially experienced an incident, resulting in an RA writing a report of misconduct.

Rose also mentioned that she felt as though she could not stop being the mom of the staff and hall because she was unsure if the men would be able to pick up the work she left behind. This was based on an example she shared about how the staff was throwing an event and one of the male RAs mentioned that he thought someone was throwing up. He said it casually and went on with his day. It was only the female RAs that jumped into action regarding finding out more information, getting the person into the bathroom or near a trash can, starting the clean-up process where the vomit was, and

conducting crowd control. She said that the male RAs were good at doing as they were told, but they did not have the same instinct as the women had been expected to by society, the residents, and housing.

The women also mentioned the idea that setting their expectations of themselves high had antithetical outcomes. All four of them said in their own way that it would feel as though they are being punished for doing a good job in their role. This connects to them being perceived as mothering figures because women are expected to keep up with everything all at once and keep up with high expectations. This is discussed further in the next chapter.

Women Being Expected to Host Stronger Events

Aside from bulletin boards, another large portion of the RA's role is to put together events that cater to one's residents. This can be an easy task or one that meets you with unexpected difficulty. It can all depend on one's skill in hosting as well as the expectations set behind them. For example, some institutions require events to be advertised for a certain amount of time, to meet certain requirements, or to coincide with various university values. Participants found these requirements were sometimes enforced differently based on gender.

For example, Lorelai shared that the male RAs would often throw together spontaneous sports-oriented events for ease and personal benefit and the women would have time dedicated to planning a more intricate event. In other words, the female RAs would plan an event with a theme and behind-the-scenes efforts and advertising. Then the male RAs would tell their residents they were going to go outside and play some pick-up

sports. While male residents enjoyed this and would attend the spontaneous events, there was also a potentially unethical motivation or unfair consequence of these events. At Lorelai's institution, there was not enough storage for leftover items from events, so the male RAs would reap free sports equipment for themselves with any sports event they threw.

Blanche also shared a similar sentiment about the amount of effort and planning she spent on events. She shared that she hosted thought-through and preplanned events each month, such as an Oscars event revolving around the award ceremony. This was not balanced by the male RA events, especially the larger scale events in which the males would fall back on and let the women lead. Blanche was not against this idea because she said, "If I work on a project, I'll be leading the project, because over my dead body am I getting not an A." But this also created extra time and energy that she needed to spend in comparison to her male coworkers who reaped the benefit of her taking charge.

Sophia said that the males put less time into planning and creating their events, but they had more residents attend them. The events were supposed to cater to a theme from the university, so Sophia said she would spend time working through how to make the connection between a theme and her event. Then her male colleagues were allowed to text in the group chat something along the lines of "'Oh, my gosh! I have this new video game,' and then they'd pretend it related to the theme," Sophia said. This is compared to how she "really thoroughly researched and looked up events online, trying to figure out the best option" for her events to meet the standards. The events did not count for the month if the RAs did not receive the right number of residents checking in. If it did not

receive enough traction, the RA would need to think of a new event and try again. This dives into the question of how an event can be considered successful which can be covered in a different paper. But overall, Sophia and the other participants were acutely aware of the time difference in commitment to the role and events in particular.

Conclusion and Essence

Overall, it is clear that the participants I interviewed experienced their RA role differently than what they witnessed from their male counterparts. The essence of their experience appears as though university campuses and the RA role still veers toward giving males the easier course of action. This essence is given weight in each theme because there was not a space in which men were given a more difficult job than women. This inequality was then often pursued further by lack of policy or being affected by stereotypes and supervisors' either innate or explicit separate expectations. This creates a gendered organization and an inequitable working environment for a variety of reasons. The participants did not often complain about the differences, but each woman shared that the job would have been easier in one way or another had they not been a woman working as an RA. The women that did not complain during their time as an RA told me that they did not do so for fear of retaliation, fear of wasting their time, or simply not realizing the issue until they were able to look back on the experience through the interview process for this research.

In the next chapter, I discuss what these findings mean and how they connect to Acker's theory of gendered organizations. I then speak on what else could be researched in the future since this is only a sliver of the RA experience.

Chapter 5

Discussion

In the findings chapter, I explained how the RAs underwent or are currently experiencing their roles on their campuses. These findings were aligned with several constructions from Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations. More specifically, within the division of labor, these women were expected to connect with residents through stronger relationships than men, and the stereotype of women being more apt to enjoy or excel at arts and crafts was reported. Another area of Acker's (1990) constructions was the division of allowed behaviors. Aligned with that type of construction, I found that the participants expressed that men have more relaxed rules and fewer punishments than the female RAs. Moving to the construction of organizational logic, participants explained that women were expected both by their colleagues and their residents to take on the mothering role whereas the men were seen as a friend who happens to have authority in the residence hall.

There was also the theme that women were expected to have stronger events for their residents. It is important to note that each of these findings could also have fit into another construction or division. That was one limit of using Acker's (1990) theory- there seemed to be some overlap within the categories. For example, the finding that the stereotype surrounding women enjoying arts and crafts more than men being within housing could have also been understood through the lens of organizational logic as opposed to how I understood it through the lens of the division of labor. There is also the

theme of women being expected to host stronger events within organizational logic that could have been analyzed through workplace interactions or divisions of labor.

Lastly, from my point of view, I understood women being the mother figure as a theme within the organizational logic construction, but it could also be looked at as an example of workplace interactions or individual identities. However, no matter how they are viewed within the theory, each finding is important and offers areas for learning for housing staff and higher education professionals. Next, I connect my findings to other sources in the literature.

Connections to and Departures from Existing Literature

While the literature on the gendered experience of female RAs on campus for an institution of higher education is sparse, there are still a few studies that connect to what I have learned through my research.

As mentioned in the Findings chapter, the female RAs were expected to take on the role of an on-campus mother figure. This was also found in the Cousineau and Chambers (2015) study, wherein they found that women were seen as “surrogate mothers,” an idea that participants in this study connected to as well (p. 29). The idea is that the women are there for the more emotional or energy-draining incidents and the males were seen on the floor as a friend to only hang out with. This idea permeates residence halls and can cause female RAs to endure more stress within the role since they are consistently working through residents’ trauma and emotions.

Participants also shared the sentiment that they felt as though they were being punished for working hard. The idea of women being asked to do more because

historically they have always put in the extra work connects to the idea of “performance punishment,” which is when one feels as though they are being punished with more work for always doing a good job on difficult tasks (Kelly, 2022). The idea has circulated on social media and my participants tended to agree with the sentiment that as soon as they were caught up, they would be given more. This can feel like a compliment at first but turns into the individual being overworked and likely overwhelmed, which my participants mentioned happened cyclically. They would start excited about the trust they received and in turn, be exhausted by the extra work they garnered.

Participants’ experiences do not directly conflict with the research that exists on the topic of the RA role or gendered organizations. This research is more specifically about women's experiences as an RA than the majority of the articles I was able to find about the RA job. The existing literature tends to focus on the RA experience without considering differences by gender. This study can fill a gap in the literature by exploring the RA experience in a gendered organization.

I did not find any existing articles or studies that used Acker’s (1990) theory of gendered organizations to explain the experience of female RAs. This was new to the field of study and allowed for a new perspective on RA experiences and on residence life as a functional area. While Cousineau and Chambers (2015) did study female RAs and their lives, it was not using the lens of the gendered organizational theory. Using Acker’s theory helps readers understand the RA experience because Acker (1990) allows us to understand the ways organized groups have some to all of the constructions she mentioned in the theory.

As previously mentioned, literature on the gendered experience of female RAs on a college or university campus is scarce. However, Loftus and Everett (2011) did discuss the idea of role conflict, which came up, especially within Sophia's interviews. Put simply, role conflict occurs when one person's roles on campus or in their worlds contradict one another. This connects to the finding that men and women have different expectations placed on them by housing departments, residents, and supervisors. However, the 2011 study did not differentiate between men's and women's experiences in the role. The idea that women were unable to show their true colors- or in Sophia's case, their Greek house letters- reflects how the role can be quite confusing. While it is important to be true to oneself and authenticity can be valuable to connect with residents, there is also the conflicting role of needing to enforce the student code of conduct. And while this is mentioned in Loftus and Everett's (2011) study overall, it is vital to note the difference in gendered experiences. These different experiences include spending a different amount of time with the residents and working with them, having different events and expectations about them, and being seen as a different type of authority figure based on one's gender.

The idea that women must be closer to their residents and create a stronger relationship with them is not new. It connects back to the history of the Deans of Women (Schwartz, 1997). The deans were also expected to create a close-knit relationship and look after the women in similar ways to how the female RAs were asked to look after the residents they had on their floors. The difference here that stands out to me is that the female RAs now sometimes had men and women on their floors, so the expectation was

also to create relationships with the male students. It is also important to remember that the RAs today must also create events and engage with the residents at all hours of the night in case of an emergency or incident. These relationships, similar to when professors were also the RAs, can be rocky. This mixing of roles can be messy for residents and RAs to care for each other while also keeping in coherence with the student code of conduct. This is like when the professors would have a resident in class. Students do not want to be told to do their homework when they are relaxing in their campus homes just as much as they do not want to attend an event thrown by the RA that wrote them up for a noisy party the night before.

Departure from Literature

In preface to this section, I must admit that I am just one human being with access to the Internet and a supply of resources from my campus library. A source that relates to my research is how Manata et al. (2017) and Davidson et al. (2016) described the expectations of the RA and how the role has evolved. They explain the tasks included in the RA role such as managing a group of students and being on duty to respond to resident and building needs that come up. They describe how some expectations vary from institution to institution, like some are required to work the front desk.

My research adds to the literature by examining residence life through Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations to identify the ways that cisgender women's experiences were different from cisgender men's. I found that Acker's theory was a useful way to examine the experiences of cisgender female RAs. Using it allowed me to

identify and describe ways that the women in my study experienced inequitable treatment in the RA role.

Looking more specifically at my findings, the stereotype that “women are crafty” was not mentioned in the literature. This idea may be seen as too small to matter because the other topics may seem more important in the study, but I would argue the opposite. This is an important finding because of the amount of time that goes into creating intricate and creative bulletin boards. Each participant noted that they spent more of their time working on bulletin boards and door decs than the majority of their male counterparts, which equates to time not being spent doing other homework, personal things, or other RA activities. The time spent on door decs and bulletin boards can look as though it was optional, but it became evident through the interviews that it was instead imposed upon the participants by their supervisor.

Another finding that was not included in the existing research was that male RAs had looser rule regulations than female RAs. This finding gives a clear topic to learn about further. These punishments for women can lead to bad references from their RDs about their work, which can lead to a problem if they have a bad reference while looking for jobs. This also creates an abundance of stress on the RA that she experiences that her male coworkers do not experience because they are less likely to be reprimanded for breaking residence life rules. It also is important to note that some rules and regulations are in place for safety or health precautions, so if they are not enforced for one gender, it opens more possibilities for harm.

The possibility of more stress on female RAs than male RAs also relates to the idea that women were expected to have stronger events than males. The idea of a strong event could be interpreted differently by different supervisors but all the participants described how they felt higher expectations around their events than what they witnessed of their male counterparts. This finding points to several different areas of concern within the housing department on campuses. For example, there is a needed conversation about what it means to have a strong event. For some supervisors, this means that the people that came had a good time. For others, it can be based on how much was spent or how many residents attended the event. This idea is becoming outdated because more emphasis is being put on the experience the residents had at the event than the capitalistic idea of paying as little as possible per person's experience. However, for my participants, stereotypes about women abounded. These stereotypes lead to different expectations, which can lead to discrimination. The supervisors and RDs expecting the female RA to plan and put together intricate events such as Blanche's Grammy event are not creating an equitable environment. The event could be enjoyable, but if her floor was not into awards ceremonies, it would have been in vain. Whereas it was generally accepted for males to host sporting events without an expectation that they assess the resident's interests. This leads to men not being required to think creatively or understand what their residents enjoyed. This can create an environment on the floor that conveys that the RA and in turn, at times, the university, does not care about non-athletes. These gendered understandings of the RA experience add to the literature about the RA role and the operations of residence life.

Areas for Future Research

RAs are found in nearly every institution of higher education and are likely on every campus that involves any sort of residential living. There is a lot more to unpack about the RA role that came up in my study. I was not able to cover everything since I was focused on using Acker's theory to understand my participants' experiences in residence life as a gendered organization, but there are many areas that I thought about during my research that could add to the literature base and professional practice in residence life and student affairs. I thought of these ideas throughout the research process and especially within the interview procedures. When the participants mentioned an interesting fact or experience, I would make a note of it. These ideas were able to keep me wondering what could come next while keeping to one research question in this thesis.

I have many ideas for future research. First, a qualitative understanding of the trans* RA experience because I was only able to cover cisgender women in this study. I am not ignorant of the idea that trans* folks may encounter vastly different findings. I would also recommend studying the gendered experience of RAs from a male perspective because it could point out differences and points of impact that I was not aware of and could not cover. This could also strengthen my thesis if a male study found similar findings that the men admit benefit them. There could also be a study on how an RA's sexuality impacts their experience because the intersecting of their identities can create a different experience for them that I was not able to cover. There is also work to be done to understand the experience of a non-traditional college student as an RA. This would

shine a light on the experience of a group of people that can make up a large portion of campus but are often overlooked. I would also recommend looking further into the racial experience as an RA, which came up in Blanche's interviews. She was one of only two People of Color among my participants and mentioned that it can be difficult to see where the discrimination changed from being because of one identity or the other. It would also be interesting to learn more about gendered burnout in the RA role. This idea is personal but also makes me wonder about the difference in experiences because the males I learned about had much lower expectations. It would benefit higher education to learn about if women are burning out faster than men and how we can work on that issue. It would connect to and could even stem from Hardy and Dodd's (1998) research on burnout based on gender and floor assignments that is no longer readily available online.

The sexuality idea stems from one participant's experience in which gay men also experienced being stereotyped to be crafty and enjoy making art and bulletin boards pretty. The dating relationships between residents and RAs could also be studied with the idea in mind that some institutions allow it and others do not. This idea came about when one participant noted that residents who were dating, specifically, male RAs would sign up to live on his floor the following year, and the participant noted that the relationships did not tend to last and created an awkward floor environment.

There is also room in the existing literature to learn either quantitatively or qualitatively about the trauma and compassion fatigue from the RA role and how former RAs process all they have been through. My research found women tend to be given more emotionally driven incidents, so the study could rely on the female perspective. A

study about trauma in RAs would allow the campus to learn if their RA role was healthy and then engage in learning how to create a more evenly beneficial role for the RA and the residents they are expected to assist.

Another topic that stems from my finding about differential rules enforcement for infractions by men and women is why there is a gendered difference in who applies to be an RA. This idea was formulated when a participant shared that she felt as though the female RAs were more replaceable because her campus had more women than men apply for the role and males could not be replaced as easily due to lack of interest. This would likely need to be a mixed methods study to first see if it is true across the board that women apply to be an RA more often than men and then to find out why.

There is also much to be studied about how the supervisor relationship can impact the RA role in a deeper sense than I was able to explore given my research question. For example, one could study how the gender of the RD impacts the RA experience for all genders, the impact of praise, validation, or criticism from a supervisor on an RA, or how the RD's sexuality impacts the RAs they supervise. Given the way supervision can impact employees, it would also be interesting and important to study the hierarchy of decision-making within housing departments with an emphasis on learning how many decisions about RA duties include RAs in the conversation before enacting the expectation. This could also include finding whether there are departmental or institutional standards in place for tasks like events or decorations on campuses. Having RAs in the conversation would allow the team to have a hands-on approach since the

RAs would be the people enforcing the standards they create. They would have first-hand experience deciding if the expectations were reasonable.

Implications

Due to the nature of this research, it would be amiss to leave without ideas for changes that could be implemented for housing departments. It is important to remember that each campus is different and has different needs; these suggestions would be beneficial to university campuses as a starting point for work needed to address gender equity. The participants had a mix of any gender and came from different-sized institutions. Each department worked slightly differently but there was always a large housing department and at least one supervisor working with the RAs as a staff.

Implications for Professionals

Resident directors (RDs) and other housing professionals have their hands full and are working quite difficult jobs. This makes it difficult to take on more responsibilities and tasks or let go of a task to shift toward caring for their staff. However, there is an institutional responsibility to work for equity so staff should develop and enact plans for addressing inequities identified through this study. Doing an internal check-in to see what they are assigning and to see if they are treating the RA role in an equitable fashion would be one option.

One way to practice this is to picture an hour-by-hour schedule for the week or month and designate hours for female RAs and then again for males. If the calendars do not align, this can be a sign that one group is being assigned more tasks and time

allotment than the other. From there, it would be impressive to have a conversation with each RA during their one-on-one to see if they believe they are being given their fair share of the work. This idea came from my findings that women are asked to spend much more time on their RA role than men. This can help with the bulletin board discussion as well as the mental health conversations with residents and RAs.

Another recommendation that the institution can take responsibility for is to ensure the full staff is not only trained on but feels comfortable with mental health crises. If only women are trusted with mental health, it would benefit the residence hall to train the males on mental health crises so that they are more comfortable working through difficult situations. This would alleviate the conversations in my findings that women were expected to mother the residents and in turn, took on more crises. This could be done through activities such as Behind Closed Doors, in which an RA roleplays with the staff examples of unknown situations and the staff helps them through the situation. Having the staff together act out incidents they may encounter can make everyone more comfortable when something occurs in real life.

I would also encourage RDs with male RAs who do not talk to their residents as often to find a way to have more conversations and check-ins with male residents. The institution could also work to develop expectations that could vary depending on the residential setting and developmental needs of students living there as a way to promote transparency and equity. These conversations should not shy away from mental health, as males are more likely to complete suicide if ideation and plans are in their heads (AFSP, 2022). RAs are on the floor for many reasons, but one vital one is to ensure their

residents always have someone they can turn to. If a floor has an RA who does not connect with residents and is not around often enough for a resident to feel comfortable having a conversation with them the RA needs to evaluate their commitment to the role and engage in a conversation with their supervisor to decide if they should continue in the role. That extends to female and trans* RAs as well. Regardless of what brought a person to the position, once they hold it, there is a level of necessity for being a comforting presence and support person for the others who live on the floor. Now that I've discussed the implications for professionals, I move on to discuss the implications for RAs.

I would also recommend the professional staff in housing departments create a campus-wide policy or standard about the major tasks within the RA role. For example, passives should have a set standard regarding the look and quantity that is effectively enforced regardless of gender. This allows the women to know what they have to do and offers them the opportunity to go above and beyond, but not expect it. It would also allow space for men to know what they need to do. This could include a rubric or set list of requirements with examples of what is and is not acceptable per the standard. The housing team should also create a policy regarding event standards. This policy could include details about what types of events can qualify and what would be extra time spent with residents. This would assist in allowing women the ability to spend less time planning their events or the men to need to work harder on planning events outside of video games or sports in the common spaces. This would also allow the university administration to have a better idea of how the funds are utilized by each RA and see if they are making the impact they hope to. If the RA has a pattern of not creating the

intended impact, that leaves room for discussion with the RD in a one-on-one meeting. These policies would need some training for the RDs across campus to ensure everyone is enforcing them equitably and a support network for RAs to reach out to in the event that a policy is not being enforced fairly.

With these policies comes enforcing them and working toward a system in which they are actually followed, and housing as a whole can lead the charge in gender-equal expectations. But these policies will create extra work that many RAs may not be used to the full job commitments. This could lead to RAs having less desire to do the job for the current benefits such as their stipends and housing or meal plans. Having higher expectations for all genders could also impact recruiting, so housing departments could look into raising stipends or increasing funds allocated to each floor for events. It should also be unexpected and surprising for students to use their own funds for RA-related activities or responsibilities like when one participant spent her own money on her passives. This spending can defer quality candidates from applying. The RAs must be compensated and treated well so they are made aware and are appreciated for the hard and important work that they should be doing.

Implications for RAs

RAs can also take action in light of this research. However, it is first and foremost important that RAs who have experienced a gendered organization learn that they are not alone. The more I talked to my participants and friends about my research topic, the more it came about that we agreed we each had a unique experience. Each participant had different ideas of what the job would look like, but it became evident quite quickly that

the RA job cannot be truly explained until you live through it. While it became clear that my experience was one of the worst, each participant went through experiences that were not fair or equitable.

It is also important for RAs to learn to stand up for themselves and what they believe in, especially in terms of the inequities they experience. For example, I had participants say they realized there was a problem on their campuses, but they did not think the issue was a large enough scale to raise the point in a meeting or create a fuss about it. However, since the effects of the inequity can create unnecessary stress and time consumption, it is allowed and valid to put oneself first. This can be a small step like talking to one's RD about bulletin board regulations or a big one such as unionizing the undergraduate housing staff to create a more equitable environment. However, this burden should not only be placed on the women. The men should also take action whether it be through bystander intervention or taking accountability for their own work. The men should also stand accountable for their own work. When they ask women for help and assume and expect that they will, it socializes the women to believe they will always be used to make men's lives easier. It also socializes the men to believe they do not have to work as hard to get the same pay-out as women if not more praise based on stereotypes that men reinforce.

In line with that, female RAs can also recognize that they do not have to hold up their male coworkers if they would not do the same in return. My participants, Sophia, Blanche, Lorelai, Rose, and Dorothy noted that the women were more likely to cover duty or assist with bulletin boards for nothing in return. This is not necessary, and it does

not mean that someone who is not constantly giving away their time and effort is a bad person. It allows each RA to have their boundaries and efforts and women can support other women through this boundary setting since there did not appear to be a punishment for not stepping up to do the extra work. This has the potential to even create a stronger staff since the expectation that women automatically take charge would fall away and each member of the staff would be able to share the load and give input on events or initiatives that the others had not thought of or experienced at that time.

Men's Agency

It is also important to note that the work is not only on female RA's shoulders. Instead, men should also take action to disrupt the gendered experience of RAs. Men can help with creating a more equal culture by doing their own work first and foremost. This can look like simply putting up a passive on time and per the guidelines, but it could also go further. Men can also advocate for changes to training so that they are comfortable doing the full extent of their job. After being trained and gaining comfort in difficult situations, the men should be able to do their part in mental health crises.

Men can also work toward a more equal job by putting forth the effort to become close to their residents. This would allow the residents to feel comfortable going to the man in case anything is wrong. This could range from a broken thermostat to an emotional or mental crisis. When the relationship is strong and the RA is present, the residents will be able to rely on them to get the help they need. It will also take the burden off of the women in the building who have their own residents to work with and talk to through problems and conversations.

Lasting Impact

Men working toward righting this inequity will affect them and their female peers both in their time as RAs and beyond. When women get used to a social structure in the RA role that allows men to do less for more or equal credit, women can internalize this and take it with them to the rest of their work lives. This can lead them to continue to do extra work for less credit, which can inhibit their ability to be promoted or given extra benefits. Gender inequity also has been studied in the faculty role (For example Guarino & Borden, 2017). Although not the focus of this study, the faculty role has been widely studied and it reflects how higher education is gendered and how women are expected to take on more responsibilities, especially relationship-oriented responsibilities like caring for students, colleagues, and the organization. This kind of work can take up time and resources that could be dedicated to work on research or writing, which would lead to attaining tenure. This is only one example of how extra mentoring and relationship-building could hinder women's success. The idea that women need to do the extra work and create the culture of the workplace or classroom is likely a global experience that should also be studied to see the other and more specific lasting impacts that I am not able to fully unpack.

Male RDs and housing administrators can also lessen the workload and expectation gap for women RAs and other housing professionals. By disrupting cultural norms, women could be saved from stress and unequal burdens. There are several different ways this can look, but I would recommend that men do some internal work first. Just as I asked the participants to imagine their workload was given to a person of

another gender, administrators could also lay out the differences in what they expect from women and compare it to a male counterpart. If there is a difference, even in who gets CCed to extra emails or who is referred to for more emotional conversations, the administrator should think about why those differences exist and where they stem from. This could also help the administrator see who is being promoted or given more managerial tasks.

If the housing department has a fully gendered residence hall assignment process, such as an all-women/all-men residence hall or designation per floor, the housing administrators could also question this usefulness. By allowing more than one gender on a floor with an RA of differing gender, this could also disrupt some norms in housing departments. This could lead to more residents being able to reach out to an RA with identities that match closer to theirs. This could also create a space for the RA to host events that are less stereotypical and bring forth a variety of activities for the residents since there are more identities within their floors. Any of these intentional changes should be monitored and adjusted based on resident and RA feedback so that the RAs and residents are part of the more impactful and best experience possible given the resources.

Conclusion

My research was a phenomenology about female RAs on the campus of an institution of higher education. This research was done via interviews with five participants who shared what it was like to be a woman in the role and how that differed from their male coworkers and peers. I used these interviews to seek out the essence of the participants' experiences as RAs and how they worked together to create a more

cohesive story and experience. I framed the research through the lens of Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations. With this in mind, I was able to find several different themes that at least a majority of the participants shared within their experiences.

These findings included some from Acker's (1990) construction of the division of labor, such as the idea that women are expected to have a stronger relationship with their residents than men. This construction also encompassed the idea that housing was not immune to the stereotype that women enjoy arts and are better at crafts than men. This idea came about through the expectations regarding residence hall decoration and bulletin boards. There was also a finding from the construction of the division of allowed behaviors in which men were treated with looser rules and regulations than women encountered. The last construction with significant findings was Acker's (1990) construction of organizational logic. The first finding I picked up from the interviews was that women were expected to take on a mothering role on their floor by both the residents and the supervisor. Men were not seen as father figures but instead viewed as more of a friend. This construction also allowed for the finding that women were more likely and expected to have stronger floor and hall events.

Each of these findings allows future researchers to see a perspective that is not often studied. The RA role is not entirely ignored in existing literature, but it is not highlighted either. This research also gives way for housing professionals to take a look inward to see if they are part of the solution or the problem, especially since RAs are not always likely to bring up their concerns while they are in the role and may not process

them thoroughly once they have graduated from the housing position, whether by choice or physical graduation from college or university.

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Appendix A- Interview Questions

Interview Questions:

First Interview-

Participants will first be asked for their contact information via a form along with their name and pronouns and background demographics about when and where they were an RA. The first 90-minute interview will include the following questions:

3. What do you do now?
4. Is this influenced by your work as an RA?
5. What was your experience like as a female RA?
 - a. Tell me more about this
6. What made you want to be an RA?
7. Did you feel your sex/gender influenced your position as an RA?
8. Was your role as an RA what you expected?
 - a. How so?
9. What was your favorite part of being an RA?
10. What would you have changed about being an RA?
11. What was your relationship like with your staff?
 - a. Tell me about that
12. Did any other part of the job look different for males vs. females?
13. Please list as much of your job description based on what you do as you can with an estimation of time spent on each activity each month:

a. For each item on the job description indicate whether you do the same, less, or more work than other Ras you know. Indicate whether your supervisor or others noticed, praised, or critiqued each kind of work. What kind of evidence do you have that the work expected is similar to or different from people of another gender or other identity you hold?

16. Before we leave, is there anything on your chest you want me to know that I haven't asked about?

After this interview and before the second, they will be asked to fill out an optional worksheet asking the following:

1. How did you feel after the first interview?
2. What stood out to you after the interview occurred?
 - a. Why did that topic resonate with you?
4. Do you feel the RA role was a healthy role for students to hold? Fair? Equitable across your staff? Across campus?
 - a. If no to any of these, what is going wrong? Who is at fault?

The second interview will consist of the following questions:

1. How have you been since the last time we visited?
2. Did you think of anything after we left our conversation that you wanted to bring up or share?
3. As an RA, what did your time commitment look like?
 - a. Would you say this was about the same, more, or less than others on your staff?
 - b. What were the genders of people you have talked about
4. Do you feel expectations for the job varied based on any details about individuals?
5. Now look at your list and imagine you are an RA who is of another gender, what is your initial reaction?
 - a. How do you feel? Tell me what you believe would change and share any thoughts that stand out to you.
 - a. For you, did you feel like some aspects of the job were harder for you or expectations were higher for you related to your gender? Have you thought about this much before today? Why or why not?
6. What was your relationship with your supervisor like?
 - a. What led to this dynamic?
 - b. Did you feel you had ample support?

- c. Did you believe the level or kind of support you received was related at all to your gender?
7. What were your relationships with your residents like?
 - a. What led to this?
8. What was the RA environment (social? Everyone in their own rooms/floors? Dramatic? Friendly?) like on your campus?
 - a. Did that change at any point in time?
 - b. If so, can you connect the change to the source? What caused this change?
9. Did you feel respected on your campus in your position by your supervisor, other RAs, students on your floor, and others outside res life?
 - a. How did this make you feel?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share?

The third and final interview will allow me to check with the participants to see if I have the right stories written down and made the same meaning of their experiences.

Appendix B- IRB Approval



Official Approval Letter for IRB project #22305 - New Project Form

December 2, 2022

Christa Rahl
Department of Educational Administration
GUAN 302 UNL NE 685880450

Stephanie Bondi
Department of Educational Administration
TEAC 117 UNL NE 685880360

IRB Number: 20221222305EX
Project ID: 22305
Project Title: Educational Administration Student Affairs Thesis- The Gendered Experience of Housing Employment on University Campuses

Dear Christa:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project for the Protection of Human Subjects. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects at 45 CFR 46 2018 Requirements and has been classified as exempt. Exempt categories are listed within HRPP Policy #4.001: Exempt Research available at: <https://research.unl.edu/researchcompliance/policies-procedures/>.

- o Date of Final Exemption: 12/2/2022
- o Certification of Exemption Valid-Until: 12/2/2027
- o Review conducted using exempt category 2(ii) at 45 CFR 46.104
- o Funding (Grant congruency, OSP Project/Form ID and Funding Sponsor Award Number, if applicable): N/A

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Final Approval: 12/2/2022

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- * Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- * Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- * Any protocol violation or protocol deviation
- * An incarceration of a research participant in a protocol that was not approved to include prisoners
- * Any knowledge of adverse audits or enforcement actions required by Sponsors
- * Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- * Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- * Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 402-472-6965.

Sincerely,

Becky R. Freeman, CIP
for the IRB



Appendix C- Recruitment Messages

Emails-

Hello!

My name is Christa Rahl and I am hoping to gain volunteers for my thesis project about the gendered experience of resident assistants on university campuses. I am looking for 5-6 women 19 years old or older who have been an RA for at least a year within the last five years.

The project will include two interviews with an optional worksheet/journal between the two. The interviews will be conducted via Zoom.

If you or someone you know are interested in sharing your experience, please fill out this form with [this link](#) .

If you have questions, please contact me at christa.rahl@huskers.unl.edu or my advisor Dr. Stephanie Bondi at sbondi2@unl.edu.

Thank you for sharing and for your participation!

Christa Rahl

Facebook and Linked In-

Hi everyone!

I am hoping to gain volunteers for my thesis project about the gendered experience of resident assistants on university campuses. I am looking for 5-6 women 19 years old or older who have been an RA for at least a year within the last five years.

The project will include two interviews with an optional worksheet/journal between the two. The interviews will be conducted via Zoom.

If you or someone you know are interested in sharing your experience, please fill out this form with this link- <https://unleducation.az1.qualtrics.com/.../SV...>

If you have questions, please contact me at christa.rahl@huskers.unl.edu or my advisor Dr. Stephanie Bondi via me to not post her information on social.

Thank you for sharing and for your participation!

Appendix D- Qualtrics and Demographic Questions

EDAD Thesis Interview Volunteers

1. Name
2. Email
3. Phone Number
4. Preferred Method of Communication for Interview Reminders
5. Where were you an RA (Resident Assistant/ Advisor)?
6. When were you an RA?
7. How long did you hold the RA role?
8. Is there anything you would like me to know immediately about your experience?

Follow-Up Demographic Questions Via Text and Email

Good evening!

I know I said I wouldn't be contacting anyone until I was discussing findings with you all.... but I was wrong. To write an intro paragraph about each participant in my study, I would like to have additional demographic information about you. Each question is optional.

1. Name
2. Pronouns
3. Race/Ethnicity

4. Religious Identity
5. Age
6. Sexuality
7. Any other salient identities

Appendix E Informed Consent

IRB Project ID #: 22305

Participant Study Title: *Educational Administration Student Affairs Thesis- The Gendered Experience of Housing Employment on University Campuses*

Hello!

I am conducting a research study. The purpose of this research is to explore the experience of cis-gender women working as resident assistants/advisors on university or higher education campus. If you are a cis-gender woman 19 years old or older and have held the RA position for at least a year in the last five years, you may participate in this research.

Participation in this study will require approximately four hours broken down between two interviews and a follow-up. You will be asked to describe your experience as an RA. Participation will take place on Zoom.

The risks of this research are potential discomfort when recalling negative experiences.

You may benefit from participating in this research by having a chance to reflect on your experience in housing and how it looked based on your identity. Society may benefit by

elucidating the issue of the gendered experience in a workplace that is often overlooked. This will give way for qualitative research to explore your experiences in university housing employment. This research will add to a very low amount of existing research on the topic and give outside individuals the ability to see that they are not alone if they feel they have gone through a similar experience.

Reasonable steps will be taken to protect the privacy and the confidentiality of your study data; however, in some circumstances, we cannot guarantee absolute privacy and/or confidentiality. Research records will be stored on my password-protected computer and my password-protected OneDrive through UNL. Records will only be seen by the research team and/or those authorized to view, access, or use the records during and after the study is complete.

If you have questions about this project, you may contact Christa Rahl at christa.rahl@huskers.unl.edu. You may also contact Dr. Stephanie Bondi, Christa's advisor, at sbondi2@unl.edu with questions.

If you have questions about your rights or complaints about the research, contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (402)472-6965 or irb@unl.edu.

To minimize discomfort, participants are encouraged to change subjects that trigger major discomfort. Participants will not be urged to share sensitive information.

Participants are able to reach out to their support networks and UNL students can utilize CAPs for support if needed.

You can decide not to be in this research study, or you can withdraw at any time before, during, or after the research begins for any reason. Deciding not to be in this research study or deciding to withdraw will not affect your relationship with the investigator, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. You will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. By participating in this research you have given your consent to participate in the research. You should print/keep a copy of this page for your records.

If you have decided to participate in this study, please sign up using this link-

https://unleducation.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_b7rgI4y26uUQBRI