

Race and Racism in the Experiences of Black Male Resident Assistants at Predominantly White Universities

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Recent research has shown a nexus between active out-of-class engagement and the accrual of unique race/gender-specific educational outcomes among Black male undergraduates. Yet, rarely explored are the racialized experiences of those who become actively engaged and assume leadership positions on campuses where racial diversity is low, hence the purpose of this study. Focus group interviews were conducted with 52 Black male Resident Assistants (RAs) at six large, predominantly White universities. Racist stereotypes and racial microaggressions, the complexities associated with “onlyness” in the RA position, and heightened scrutiny from White supervisors are among the findings reported in this article. Also offered are implications for addressing racial toxins that dissuade Black male student leadership in residence halls and other out-of-class engagement venues.

Strayhorn (2008) found that Black male students' sense of belonging at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) hinges in large part on interacting with peers from different racial/ethnic groups. However, their belongingness is constantly threatened by the reinforcement of racist stereotypes that stigmatize them as unqualified admits who gained access to the institution through affirmative action

or participation on an intercollegiate sports team, underprepared “at-risk” students who all emerged from low-income families and urban ghettos, and dangerous thugs from the local community who pose a security threat to the campus (Cuyjet, 2006; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Harper, 2009a; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). In their 2007 study, Smith, Allen, and Danley found these types of experiences engendered psychological stress and other symptoms of “racial battle fatigue” (e.g., frustration, shock, anger, disappointment, resentment, anxiety, helplessness, hopelessness, and fear) among the Black male undergraduates they interviewed. Participants across the five PWIs in their study (Harvard, Michigan State, UC Berkeley, University of Illinois, and University of Michigan) unanimously perceived their campuses as being more hostile toward Black males than their peers from other racial/ethnic groups.

By contrast, Black male undergraduates attending historically Black colleges and universities often access the support they need without having to routinely contend with the psychological effects of racist stereotypes (Davis, 1994; Palmer, Davis, & Hilton,

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2009; Palmer & Gasman, 2008). Even high-achieving Black male collegians at PWIs are met with suspicion from professors who doubt their intellectual competence as well as White peers who pass them over when selecting group members for collaborative work (Charles, Fischer, Mooney, & Massey, 2009; Cokley, 2003; Fries-Britt, 1997; Harper, 2009a). Consequently, Cokley (2001) reports these experiences oblige many Black male students to become “detached from academics and increasingly associated with activities where there are more Black male role models and perceived opportunities” (p. 485). Most of these activities reside outside the classroom, he notes. Although sometimes compelled by racist in-class experiences, engagement in structured activities and leadership opportunities outside the classroom is generally deemed beneficial for all students (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), including Black males.

Harper (2006a) makes a compelling argument for increasing Black male student engagement in out-of-class activities on college and university campuses. Relying on multiple sources of empirical evidence, he cites the gains and outcomes associated with educationally purposeful engagement for students in general and Black undergraduate men in particular, which led to the following conclusion: “It is clear that African American males who are actively involved in campus organizations and hold leadership positions in student organizations have better experiences and gain more from college than do their uninvolved same-race male peers” (p. 90). Specifically, his research has shown that active engagement enables Black men to acquire social capital and access to resources, politically well-positioned persons, and exclusive information networks (Harper, 2008); craft productive responses to racist stereotypes encountered inside and outside the classroom (Harper, 2009a); develop

political acumen for survival in professional settings and environments in which they are racially underrepresented (Harper, 2006a); negotiate support for achievement among their same-race peers (Harper, 2006b); resolve masculine identity conflicts (Harper, 2004); overcome previous educational deficiencies and socioeconomic disadvantage (Harper, 2007); and develop strong Black identities that incite productive activism on predominantly White campuses (Harper & Quaye, 2007). Despite these benefits, rarely explored are the racialized experiences of those who become actively engaged and assume leadership positions on campuses where racial diversity is low. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to understand the racial context in which these and other outcomes are conferred to Black male Resident Assistants (RAs), a student leadership role that exists on almost every residential college and university campus in the United States (Schuh, 2004).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the known value-added nature of engagement, some scholars (e.g., Allen, 1999; Brown, 2006; Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Harper, 2009b; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006) have called attention to problematic out-of-class engagement trends among Black male undergraduates at both predominantly White and historically Black institutions. Accordingly, most of these students invest their discretionary time into activities other than those that lead to skill acquisition, deep learning, and the production of measurable developmental outcomes. In his analysis of data from 7,923 Black respondents to the College Student Experiences Questionnaire, Flowers (2004) found that male students were generally uninvolved in out-of-class activities on the 192 campuses in the sample. In light of this finding, it seems important to note that

Black male engagement in structured activities, student organizations, and campus leadership positions remains considerably lower than that of their same-race female counterparts (Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, 2009b; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006).

Although emphasis has been justifiably placed on investigating explanatory factors for these disengagement trends, documenting outcomes to make the case for devoting attention and institutional resources to the problem, and offering suggestions for ways to increase Black male participation in educationally purposeful activities, little has been done to explore the actual experiences of those who are actively engaged in key leadership roles on their campuses, such as Black male RAs. Although Black male student leaders comprised samples in the aforementioned Harper engagement studies, two issues make the furnishing of additional research necessary: (a) Emphasis was placed almost exclusively on exploring gains and outcomes associated with the participants' engagement, not on describing the realities and complexities of their leadership experiences; and (b) the findings were not disaggregated by organization or activity type, thus insights into Black men's leadership experiences within certain roles (e.g., RA positions) were not offered.

Although not specific to Black men, Arminio et al. (2000) describe the leadership experiences of undergraduate students of color at PWIs. Several challenges were noted therein, many related to the role of race in the participants' experiences. For instance, Black student leaders in the study described the paradox of being seen as too radical by White administrators and advisors, but not radical enough by their same-race peers. Also, students who held leadership positions in predominantly White organizations felt pressures to assimilate to White mainstream

norms, found it difficult to locate mentors and same-race role models on campus (this was especially true among Black men in their sample), experienced multiple forms of racism and were tokenized because of their race, and had to think carefully about how they spoke and the language they used, for fear of confirming stereotypes their White peers already held about people of color—an anxiety that Steele and Aronson (1995) refer to as “stereotype threat.”

Regarding the latter, Arminio et al. reported that in predominantly White organizations, student leaders of color “spoke less often, and when they did, it was frequently to confront racist remarks or to act as their racial group's spokesperson. They felt if they did not bring up issues regarding race inequities, no one else would” (pp. 502–503). Like the Harper Black male engagement studies, Arminio et al.'s research did not offer detailed accounts of students' experiences in specific roles, such as residence hall leadership. Issues concerning the experiences of RAs have not been racialized in the existing literature nor have they been explored specifically among Black men who serve in the RA position, hence the importance of the present study.

Findings from Sutton and Kimbrough's (2001) study of out-of-class engagement trends among Black student leaders suggest the RA position is either an unpopular venue for leadership or is not as accessible to Blacks as some others; only 11.1% of the participants in the sample served as RAs (the second-lowest among all engagement activities reported). Given that Black women are considerably more engaged than are their same-race male counterparts (Cuyjet, 2006; Harper, 2009b; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006), it seems reasonable to predict that among the small number of Black students who serve as RAs, few are male. Still, much remains to be known about their experiences, particularly

surrounding issues related to race and racism in these positions on predominantly White campuses.

According to Blimling (1998), the RA plays five key roles: Student, administrator, role model, teacher, and counselor. To date, the racial dynamics surrounding these roles for RAs of color have not been investigated and documented in the higher education and student affairs research literature. Furthermore, Schuh (2004) posits, "There probably is no more difficult position in student affairs work than that of the RA, because, quite literally, RAs are expected to live where they work. They are always on call and deal with many problems that can be very challenging" (p. 276). Among these challenges are policy enforcement (Wilson & Hirschy, 2003), confronting diversity issues and struggling to demonstrate multicultural competence (Johnson & Kang, 2006; Watt, Howard-Hamilton, & Fairchild, 2003), balancing academics and residence hall work responsibilities (Blimling, 1998), role ambiguity (Delunga & Winters, 1990), and burnout and emotional exhaustion (Hardy & Dodd, 1998; Paladino, Murray, Newgent, & Gohn, 2005).

It should be noted that none of the previously cited studies regarding challenges RAs face were based on data collected exclusively from Black men or other students of color, and in most cases results were not disaggregated by race. Juxtaposed with the race-related challenges discovered among student leaders of color in Arminio et al.'s (2000) study, the absence of racialized research regarding the experiences of Black male RAs led to the exploration of the following research questions: (a) In what ways do race, racism, and the experiences of Black male RAs converge at PWIs? (b) What race-specific experiences complicate the performance, satisfaction, and job retention of Black male RAs? and (c) How do Black undergraduate men in RA positions

on predominantly White campuses make sense of the racial realities of their experiences?

ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

If postsecondary educators and administrators are to support, retain, and improve the experiences of Black male student leaders (including RAs), understanding the racial realities of their navigational journeys through PWIs is both necessary and important. To this end, critical race theory (CRT) serves as the framework in which the present study is grounded. With its roots in legal studies, CRT is a convergence of scholarly perspectives from law, sociology, history, ethnic studies, education, and women's studies that illuminates the continuation of racial subordination and the inequitable distribution of power and privilege in the United States (Bell, 1987; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993) identified the following defining properties of CRT:

1. CRT recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. CRT expresses skepticism toward dominant claims of neutrality, objectivity, color blindness, and meritocracy.
3. CRT challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of [structures and policies].
4. CRT insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color.
5. CRT is interdisciplinary.
6. CRT works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (p. 6)

Because of its focus on the racialized experiences

of Black male students in leadership positions at PWIs, the present study engages most heavily the second and fourth tenets of CRT.

Recently, CRT has been used as a conceptual lens in education literature in general (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997), and higher education in particular (Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Parker, 1998; Solórzano et al., 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Villalpando, 2004). Characterizing college and university campuses as microcosms of the larger American society, Taylor (2000) suggests that racism is woven into the cultural fabric of most post-secondary educational institutions. Given this, Villalpando (2004) notes that CRT helps to “expose the ways in which so-called race-neutral institutional policies and practices perpetuate racial or ethnic subordination” (p. 42).

One approach critical race theorists use to recognize the experiential knowledge that people of color possess is the exploration of counternarratives that seek voices from those who can speak firsthand about ways in which they have been oppressed by race-based insults, prejudicial disadvantage, and discriminatory acts (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Villalpando, 2004). According to Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995):

Storytelling has been a kind of medicine to heal the wounds of pain caused by racial oppression. The story of one’s condition leads to the realization of how one came to be oppressed. . . . the ‘voice’ component of critical race theory provides a way to communicate the experiences and realities of the oppressed. (pp. 57-58)

Similarly, Delgado (1989) argues that people of color deserve a platform through which to share their own unique lived experiences with racism, recognizing that aspects of these stories will likely differ from or even contradict self-reports offered by White peers

and counterparts.

Naming one’s own reality via counternarratives is an approach to honoring the voices of students of color (Delgado Bernal, 2002). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) present counternarratives as instruments for conveying stories that are often untold among those who have been pushed to the margins. Consequently, counternarratives offer a racially different outlook and challenge the assumed universality of stories told by those who are in power—stories that are erroneously thought to be commonly shared by White students and racial/ethnic minorities alike. These narratives introduce readers to the ways in which students of color have had to quietly endure racial fatigue to survive at PWIs (Parker, 1998).

Storytelling invites recall of lived experiences with racial microaggressions, which Sue et al. (2007) define as “commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271). Swim, Hyers, Cohen, Fitzgerald, and Bylsma (2003) also termed this “everyday racism,” as Black undergraduates in their study kept daily diaries of prejudicial mistreatment, verbal putdowns, bad service, and other subtle racist acts they experienced on a predominantly White campus. These racialized assaults negatively affect the mental health and confidence of people of color (Pierce, 1995; Sue, 2005) as well as feelings of belongingness and perceptions of campus racial climates (Solórzano et al., 2000). Moreover, Swim et al. found that anger was the most common emotional response to the microaggressions their participants experienced, but the Black men in their study were less likely than were their same-race female counterparts (64% vs. 19%) to respond to the perpetrator. This can be explained by the “nice Black male” phenomenon described in Fries-Britt and

Griffin's (2007) study of high-achieving Black students' lived experiences with stereotypes.

Notwithstanding the frequency with which they occur, Sue and Constantine (2007) note that racial microaggressions "are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous" (p. 137). Similarly, Ladson-Billings (1998) contends that most acts of oppression are not readily seen as oppressive by oppressors and those who hold power in educational institutions. The absence of voice from those who experience microaggressions allows racial harm and verbal insults to be cyclically perpetuated. As such, storytelling and the documentation of counternarratives can awaken consciousness among some White educators, administrators, and students regarding the ways in which their actions marginalize people of color. Furthermore, Delgado Bernal (2002) posits that counternarratives can also allow educators to "better understand and appreciate the unique experiences and responses of students of color through a deliberate, conscious, and open type of listening" (p. 116). In the context of the present study, counternarratives will expose some previously unrevealed insights into the racial realities of the Black male RA experience and give voice to racialized accounts that extend beyond the aforementioned documented challenges faced by RAs in general.

METHOD

Sites

This study was conducted at six large, predominantly White public research universities located in different geographic regions of the U.S. Collectively, the institutions enrolled 186,915 undergraduates at the time of data collection; Black students comprised 7.3% of the undergraduates. Thirty-nine percent of the Black students were male, and on average, Black men comprised 2.8% of the

total undergraduate student populations. All of the institutions are predominantly residential, with large housing operations and numerous on-campus residence halls. According to administrators in residence life departments at the participating institutions, 1,022 total undergraduates were employed as RAs during the semester in which this study was conducted. Across the six campuses, only 69 Black men served in the RA position at that time.

Participants

The sample was comprised of 75.4% of all Black men who served as RAs on the six campuses at the time of data collection. Of the 52 participants, 15 were sophomores, 11 were juniors, and 26 were seniors. On average, they lived on campus for 3.1 years and served as RAs for 1.6 years—some students had been in the position for three academic school years, whereas others had served only 1 term. Twenty-nine participants reported that they were responsible for 50 or more student residents; 17 were responsible for 36 to 49 residents; and the remaining six participants served as RAs for 21 to 35 residents. The mean self-reported GPA for the sample was 3.13. In addition to their RA positions, all but four participants were also actively involved and held leadership positions in other student organizations on the six campuses.

Research Design

Qualitative research methods were used in this study, as we attempted to understand and describe the participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Although it could be argued that this study does not technically qualify as a "true phenomenology," several elements from the phenomenological tradition in qualitative inquiry are embedded in its design. For instance, Polkinghorne (1989) suggests the researcher and

readers of a phenomenological research study should be able to say, “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (p. 46), because a phenomenological account gets inside the common experience of a group of people and describes what the participants have experienced, how they have experienced it, and the meanings they make of their shared experience (Moustakas, 1994). This type of qualitative study usually provides rich and insightful self-reports of the phenomenon under study (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which in the case of the present study is the phenomenon of being one of few Black male RAs on a predominantly White campus.

Data Collection

Members of the research team contacted administrators in housing and residence life departments and asked for the names and contact information of all Black undergraduate men who were presently serving as RAs on the six campuses. Contact lists were furnished and all identified students ($n = 69$) were communicated with via telephone or e-mail. We explained to them the purposes and importance of the study and invited them to participate in a 90-minute focus group with other Black male RAs on their respective campuses. As mentioned, 52 students agreed to participate. Focus groups were chosen over individual interviews for a variety of reasons. First, focus groups are effective ways of collecting large amounts of detail-rich information while allowing participants to build on the reflections of others and gain previously unexplored insights into their own experiences (Krueger, 1998; Mertens, 1998). Furthermore, focus groups were used because “the extent to which there is a relatively consistent, shared view or great diversity of views can be quickly assessed” (Patton, 2002, p. 386). On average, 7 Black male RAs participated in each focus group.

A semistructured interview technique was used in the focus groups, which simultaneously permitted authentic participant reflection while maintaining focus, order, and direction (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Although specific questions and an interview protocol were used (see Appendix), discussions often became conversational as comments offered by some participants were confirmed, extended, and occasionally refuted by others. Several questions in the interview protocol elicited reflections on the role of race and racial dynamics in the participants’ RA experiences. Each focus group session was audio-recorded (with the participants’ permission) and cassette tapes were later professionally transcribed.

Data Analysis

To ensure consistency in interpretation, data were analyzed exclusively by the lead researcher. Several techniques prescribed by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Moustakas (1994) were systematically employed to analyze data collected in this study. The analysis process began with a reading of the verbatim interview transcripts from each focus group. Reflective comments (or what Miles and Huberman refer to as “marginal remarks”) and emerging judgments about the data were written alongside the margins of printed copies of each transcript. After reading the transcripts, preliminary textural summaries of *what* each group reported about their experiences and tentative structural summaries of *how* each group reportedly experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994) were written for participants within the context of each individual campus. Next, the transcripts were uploaded and linearly arranged in the NVivo Qualitative Research Software program. Here, pattern coding was used, as code words were assigned to passages of text that would eventually lead to the identification of common ideas, feelings, and

experiences, while discarding cues that were largely unreflective of the participants' shared experiences. A total of 26 code words were used in this phase.

The codes were then recorded and explained in the form of memos. Regarding this important step in the analytical process, Miles and Huberman (1994) report: "Memoing helps the analyst move easily from empirical data to a conceptual level, refining and expanding codes further, developing key categories and showing their relationships, and building toward a more integrated understanding" (p. 74). To this end, memos were constructed that brought together relevant concepts that were related to various aspects of race and racial dynamics in the participants' shared experiences. At the end of the memoing phase, a set of eight explanatory conclusions regarding the phenomenon under study were inductively generated. Two criteria were used to determine the strength of each conclusion: (a) The intensity and insightfulness of key quotes and contributing stories offered by the participants, and (b) the number of times each contributing code word was used in NVivo. Each conclusion was solidified and categorically clustered into three major themes, which are presented and discussed in the Findings section. Throughout the analytical process, outliers and extreme cases were identified; where appropriate, they are mentioned within the context of the three themes.

Trustworthiness and Quality Assurance

To confirm accuracy of the meanings that were made of the participants' shared experiences as Black male RAs on predominantly White campuses, one third of the sample was invited to react to a written summary of our findings. Lincoln and Guba (1986) call this technique "member checks." Twelve participants provided feedback on the ways in which their collective

voices and experiences were represented; they posed questions regarding unclear assertions and recommended elaboration on certain points. And in three different instances, they called attention to situations that were unreflective of their individual experiences. Based on feedback offered during the member check process, revisions were made to the findings that are reported below.

In addition to member checking, we also used case analysis meetings to ensure quality and methodological consistency in this study. Miles and Huberman (1994) assert that case analysis meetings help researchers to "understand quickly and economically what is happening in a case, keep themselves current, and develop coherent constructs to guide later analysis" (p. 76). Because this research was conducted at six different institutions across the country, the lead researcher initiated case analysis meetings with each member of the research team after the focus group was facilitated at the site to which he was assigned. These meetings were used to confirm standardization of protocols and procedures, and afforded team members opportunities to summarize what they had tentatively discovered and experienced at each research site.

Last, throughout the analytical process, and again at the end, we engaged in a process that Morgan (1997) characterizes as group-to-group validation. "Whenever a topic comes up, it generates a consistent level of energy among a consistent proportion of the participants across nearly all the groups" (p. 63). As mentioned in the Findings, there were some rare occasions where some aspect of the phenomenon did not hold entirely true for one of the six institutions. But for the most part, the group-to-group validation procedure enabled us to confirm that most of the experiences reported herein are in fact reflective of the majority of Black men's experiences in RA positions at most of the participating institutions.

FINDINGS

Racialized accounts of the Black male RA experience on predominantly White campuses are presented in this section. The three themes that emerged in this study are filled with rich counternarratives that make known some of the race-specific realities and racial microaggressions encountered by Black men who serve in the RA position.

“What’s Up My Nigga?”—Racist Stereotypes and Racial Insults

Participants described in elaborate detail the ways in which stereotypes affected their work as RAs. “Just being a Black man, you are already stereotyped as being incompetent,” one student noted. Racist misperceptions regarding their aptitude engendered hyperconsciousness and varying degrees of anxiety among many Black men we interviewed, which often compelled them to work harder than their White peers. In one focus group, a participant indicated: “They think African American males aren’t smart enough to do a good job. Most of my energy in this job is spent proving I am competent to White supervisors. White RAs don’t have to deal with this.” Also regarding the issue of competence, another RA reported, “it stresses me out and it is unfair, but I have to keep working hard to prove that Black men aren’t as stupid and lazy as they think we are.”

Some elaborated on the nexus between culturally distinctive apparel and the erroneous assumption of incompetence. “If I wear my baseball cap backwards or just because I wear my pants big doesn’t mean I don’t have anything to say or something positive to contribute.” Others described expressions of surprise among their White colleagues when they demonstrated mastery and effectiveness in their roles and spoke eloquently, but dressed in ways that were not aligned with White standards of professionalism. “I am in a college

setting. Why are you surprised by the way I come across to you or the way I talk or the way I act,” one participant asked. Another posed a similar set of questions:

Why do they act so surprised when I do well or have something thoughtful to offer in staff meetings, but they aren’t nearly as surprised when White RAs do the same? Didn’t they hire us all to do well? Then, why is it a surprise when I do?

The participants believed these expressions of surprise were directly related to faulty stereotypes and race-laden doubts White co-workers had about their abilities. This notion of surprise extended beyond their White supervisors and fellow RAs. In each focus group, participants talked about how most White student residents were usually shocked to have a Black male RA. They attributed this to a lack of prior exposure to people of color in their residents’ home communities of origin. Perhaps this explanation is best captured in the following perspective offered by a 6’3” RA:

You know residents, when they first meet me on opening day and they see a big Black male RA, they don’t say it, but you can tell there is a lot of suspicion . . . a lot of residents may not have seen or many have not been close to Black men. So now they come into the university for the first time and the person in charge of where they are living is a big Black male who they don’t have any experience with. So, I think my biggest thing is race relations with my residents because sometimes they don’t feel comfortable with me, especially because of my size.

Some participants actually deemed this an advantage. For example, one RA recalled seeing a pair of roommates drag a keg of beer into their residence hall room; the students walked right past him without suspecting he was the RA. He believed this occurred because these particular residents were not expecting a Black

man to be in a position of authority in the hall, which later made easy the judicial sanctioning of these underage drinkers.

Participants offered additional examples of ways in which stereotypes aided in their roles as policy enforcers. One leader on an all-White floor believed his residents would not push him to the limits like they would a White RA, mostly because they were afraid of him. On another campus, a participant admitted: "White dudes on my floor are intimidated by me, so I use that to my advantage. At the first floor meeting, I laid down the rules and I scared them . . . from that day on, I haven't had a single problem." Others admitted to purposely putting on "durags," a distinctive form of casual headdress mostly worn by Black men, or looking especially stern when they did rounds in the residence halls. Regarding the former, apparently durags made them look more urban and intimidating. One participant disagreed with this approach because of the discomfort it engendered among residents: "White girls get scared. I don't want them to be scared of me. I can tell somebody who is uncomfortable around me; they get so scared and just go into their rooms quickly. Why are they like that?"

Despite its associated stereotypes, hip-hop music often served as a means through which Black male RAs were able to connect with White residents. For some, shared musical interests were the catalysts for many relationships; they served as icebreakers that enabled residents to realize their RAs were not dangerous, urban-born thugs who would cause them physical harm. Although this was mentioned often, it was not the only approach participants used to foster meaningful relationships with their residents. Many of the same techniques used by White RAs to connect with residents (recreational programs, floor bonding events, etc.) were also employed by the Black male RAs we interviewed, but on their own often

proved insufficient. A second-term RA added: "Listening to music and talking about 50 Cent and Kanye West allows me to break through to my Caucasian residents. I had to figure that out after other things didn't work. Hip-hop makes it easier for them to relate to me."

Shared hip-hop interests was presented as a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, it made the Black male RAs come across as cool and attuned to the latest trends (musical and otherwise). On the other hand, it reinforced stereotypes that White students had about Black men (e.g., they all come from urban ghettos, they all speak the latest hip-hop jargon, and the only way to talk to them is in slang). "I am from the suburbs and I attended a mostly White, private high school. I don't know why my residents insist on speaking to me in slang. They probably know more about hip-hop than do I," one RA laughingly shared. Another initially found slang and hip-hop language useful in breaking down racial barriers and creating a sense of comfort among his White peers until the following situation occurred:

This White guy on my floor had gotten way too comfortable with me. One day he walked past me in the hall and he said, "What's up my Nigga?" And I said, "What the fuck did you just say?" And he was like, "Ah pimp, don't trip, you know I'm just pimpin' homie." Huh? This was a dude I was cool with and we talked all the time on a hip-hop level, but I honestly wanted to beat his ass when he called me a Nigga. But of course I couldn't because I would have gotten fired from my RA job.

As a participant at a different institution explained, White residents "go out of their way to find something in common with you and I don't really fault them for that, but sometimes it hinders progress when they're using stereotypes." In addition to the challenges noted thus far, many participants also felt

insulted by the erroneous assumption that they knew everything that pertained to Black culture. These misconceptions were complicated by the overrepresentation of White RAs, as well as the shortage of Black professional staff persons from whom the participants could seek advice and coping strategies.

Onlyness—Leadership in the Context of Racial Underrepresentation

“If I need confidential assistance from a staff member, I have to go to someone of a different ethnicity; we don’t have anything in common and I don’t know if this person has my best interest at heart, but what choice do I have?” Across all the focus groups, Black male RAs described challenges associated with being one of few student leaders of color in the position and not having enough racial/ethnic minority staff supporters in residence life departments on their campuses. Feelings the participants disclosed might be best characterized as “onlyness”—the psychoemotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one’s same racial or ethnic group. “I get tired of being the only [Black male, Black person, and/or person of color] on my staff,” was expressed numerous times by participants across the focus groups. It was not uncommon for one to be the only Black RA on his floor or in his entire building.

The most frequently cited explanatory factor for the underrepresentation and attrition of Black males in the RA position was the insufficient number of staff members of color serving in full-time roles (hall directors, area coordinators, central office administrators, etc.) in residence life departments. “The problem is that res life says it wants more minorities, but it has no minorities higher up. So how can they expect to attract more of us and make us feel like we belong?” A related reflection

was offered in another interview: “I don’t see anybody like me in these upper-level positions. So that kind of makes me feel like I don’t fit in here.” Other participants also believed the shortage of same-race role models accounted for much of the turnover among Black men in the position. On one campus, the RAs we interviewed talked about three full-time staff persons of color (all area coordinators) who left the university at the end of the previous school term—“this next year, there was not only a drop in the number of Black RAs, but a lot of returners quit because we didn’t have that mentorship and advocacy. I almost quit too.” Another confessed that he too contemplated quitting mid-year and would have done so were it not for the encouragement received from his graduate student supervisor, who was also Black.

Those who had staff supervisors of color highlighted several corresponding benefits. Chief among them was advice on how to best anticipate and negotiate the complexities and racial politics of their departments. Also useful was the availability of someone who could offer culturally comfortable opportunities for engagement, unfiltered feedback and trustworthy perspectives on professional and personal matters, and informal observations of older, same-race staff members and administrators who were effective and seemingly well respected by their White colleagues and students. “Knowing I could always rely on [her] made it easier for me to go back to my dorm and be the only Black RA.” The value of same-race representation was also captured in the following story shared by a first-year RA who worked on a staff with six other Black RAs:

I was going to quit at the end of this semester; there was just too much going wrong and I didn’t feel like I was developing at the rate I needed to. The stress was major—the stress this job puts you through especially with bosses who don’t

look like you. I got to the point where I couldn't deal with it anymore. But I had really close relationships with those six; that is a big part of me staying.

This same student was asked to predict how different his RA experience would have been were those six others not on his staff. He replied, "I would have quit because it all would have been on me to figure it out and represent Black people all by myself."

Other participants discussed the unfair burden of racial representation that was placed on them by residents and co-workers alike. Having to speak on behalf of the entire race was commonplace, as was "explaining that not every Black person fits the stereotype you see on television." Some also noticed they were frequently approached by White RAs to resolve issues that dealt specifically with Black or Latino residents. One participant shared his frustration with White RAs who sought his "expertise" in these situations: "I was like you are on the same level as me, so why are you knocking on my door? Didn't you go through the same training as me at the beginning of the year?" Others recalled instances where they were forced into positions to advance the "angry Black man" stereotype—a threatening disposition of aggression and violence (Smith et al., 2007), opposite of the "nice Black man" phenomenon described by Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007). On one campus, an RA felt like he was the only student who spoke up in staff meetings with supervisors. Reportedly, his White peers would express their frustrations whenever supervisors were not around, but would remain silent in meetings, look to him to raise their collective concerns, and typically would not back him up once those issues were on the table for discussion.

This pisses me off 'cause I feel like they set me up to look like the angry Black man. It is funny too because I feel like these same people who set me up also end up

thinking that I am always angry. I am tired of putting myself out there.

An RA who had decided against returning for a third year of service commented on the ramifications of being viewed as the angry Black man. Accordingly, "[White co-workers] don't encourage or appreciate Black males who come off as threatening to them." A fellow participant in the same focus group followed up by noting that what may be misperceived as threatening is oftentimes a mere cultural difference in verbal communication. Others expounded on the challenge of being put in the silencing position of withstanding racial insults, unfair treatment, and dissatisfaction with various aspects of the job, but maintaining composure to positively thwart the caricature of Black men as angry. These were just some of the challenges associated with being among the few people of color on their residence hall staffs.

All Eyes on Me—White Supervisors, Undue Scrutiny, and Internalized Pressure

As mentioned, the Black male RAs we interviewed felt that their White supervisors often doubted their competence—these doubts were evidenced through perceivably race-laden misunderstandings and racist experiences with which it seemed White RAs were not forced to contend. Here are three illustrative examples of feelings participants expressed in the interviews:

I feel like I have a red bullseye on my back and [Whites] are constantly throwing darts. I don't feel that I am given equal treatment to RA staff members from other races. I think that is where racism has played a role. I feel that I am a bigger target because I am Black.

As an African American RA, I feel like I am under scrutiny all the time. And that scrutiny is coming from everywhere—I

feel like I am getting scrutinized by my staff, scrutinized by my boss, scrutinized by my residents. This definitely makes me feel very, very alone.

If you're White you can get away with a lot more. I have done some of the same things they have done, but I got called on it and they didn't. At first I was like, "this is really messed up," but after a while I got used to it and I realized that I cannot do what the White RAs do because I am not White. But I still feel like it is unfair that there are two sets of standards.

These feelings often compelled the Black male RAs to contemplate resignation. Without prompting, in five of the six focus groups at least one participant (and sometimes more) described an instance where he considered not returning to the RA position the next semester or school year. Additionally, they cited several examples of same-race male peers who they believe were terminated because of unfair and racially inconsistent enforcement of standards.

At the time of the interview, one participant knew he was not returning for an additional year of service—he was not rehired because he had been written up earlier that semester for what he perceived to be a single trivial mistake. This student observed that a first-year White RA in his building had numerous infractions, was often late to RA training and meetings, planned infrequent and marginally successful programs for his residents, and had done several things wrong, which was well-known by the rest of the staff, yet was rehired for a second year of service.

He received no type of reprimand and no type of disciplinary action, whereas the first thing I did wrong as a third-year RA was punished so harshly that I was not invited to come back next year. I gave them 3 years of good work and this is how they treated me. What disappointed me the most is that this was a racial thing; it

wasn't really about the petty thing I did wrong. They don't want me back and I don't want to come back at this point. I really don't have the energy to deal with the scrutiny and all of the racism that comes with the job. It's really their loss because my residents love me.

This story, although unique to this individual student, is in many ways reflective of the variable standards participants described across the focus groups—one set of standards for White RAs, and a higher set for Black men and other RAs of color.

Most students we interviewed did not believe they were given the same "benefit of the doubt" enjoyed by their White counterparts. Even when White RAs had done something wrong, the participants observed that they were usually pulled aside and privately counseled without consequence by their supervisors and administrators in the residence life departments. However, Black male RAs were not privileged and protected in the same ways. Instead, they cited numerous examples of when their White supervisors talked with multiple (sometimes numerous) White colleagues regarding concerns they had regarding the participants' performance, but avoided conveying those concerns directly to the Black male RAs. "The backstabbing and talking behind my back is so unnecessary. It is like they are scared of me or something," one student commented. Another added:

As opposed to coming to you and saying "you are not doing well or meeting my expectations and here are some things you can improve upon"—you know, the same heads-up they give White RAs—they put us in situations to fail and they evaluate that failure unfairly. Other students, White students are usually given forgiveness or a little slap on the wrist before they are fired or written up.

Diminished motivation, mistrust of White supervisors, and the inclination to not return

for an additional year of service in the RA position were among the common reactions participants had to these situations; pressure to represent themselves and their race well was another.

“There are 6 Black males out of 200 RAs, and all 6 of us are seated around this table right now. Every dude you see here has to do his job twice as well as his White peers to make sure our race is looked at well,” one student noted as the other 5 nodded in agreement. On other campuses, participants also described the pressure they felt to perform well so that other Black males would be given fair consideration for the RA position in future years. This anxiety was engendered by their own lived experiences with the inequitable enforcement of standards as well as their observations of other Black men who had been terminated or voluntarily quit the position. “Regardless of the circumstances, when one of us leaves the position, it makes all of us look bad and it makes it harder for the next Black man to get in.” Given this, the participants committed themselves to leaving the door open for others, even if it meant working twice as hard, putting up with stereotypes from residents and unfair scrutiny from White supervisors, and coping with “onlyness” in their positions—these were the realities of race for the 52 Black male RAs we interviewed.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

“By responding only to the standard story, we let it dominate the discourse” (Ikemoto, 1997, p. 136). Published research on the RA experience presents raceless accounts of challenges these students face as well as stories of their complex residential leadership roles. Consequently, RA training and development is largely dominated by discussions of how to best equip these students with skills needed to address commonly known challenges

encountered in their residence halls (Schuh, 2004). Findings from the present study confirm that only a portion of the important challenges faced by RAs are well understood; there are problematic, race-specific others that have gone undisclosed in previous research and consequently unaddressed in residence life departments. Student, administrator, role model, teacher, counselor, and policy enforcer are commonly known duties that RAs perform (Blimling, 1998; Wilson & Hirschy, 2003). CRT, specifically counternarratives and reflections on lived experiences with racial microaggressions, was useful in revealing at least three other tasks that complicate the work of Black male RAs: (a) Resisting and responding productively to racist stereotypes; (b) effectively negotiating relationships in spaces where few others from their same racial backgrounds hold leadership positions; and (c) serving as positive representatives for their racial group.

Their status as student leaders on their campuses did not afford the participants immunity from the racist stereotypes that have been reported in other research on Black students in general (Charles et al., 2009; Cokley, 2003; Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Solórzano et al., 2000; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Swim et al., 2003), and Black male undergraduates in particular (Fries-Britt, 1997; Davis, 1994; Harper, 2009a; Smith et al., 2007). And similar to the student leaders of color in Arminio et al.’s (2000) study, our participants feared being perceived as “angry Black men” by White administrators and other RAs; found it difficult to locate same-race role models and advocates in the residence life departments; and had to think carefully about how they spoke and dressed, for fear of confirming stereotypes their White residents and colleagues already held about Black men. The consistency between our findings and those reported in

previous studies confirms that much remains to be done to make campus environments less racist and more conducive to minority student leadership.

First, educators and administrators should examine more critically their own assumptions about students of color. Participants felt their supervisors often expected them to be the spokespersons for their race, acted surprised when they spoke or performed their jobs well, and held erroneous assumptions about them because of previous experiences with Black men. The onus was on these student leaders to dispel misconceptions and prove their competence, which is consistent with research findings from previous studies of Black achievers (e.g., Fries-Britt & Griffin, 2007; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001; Harper, 2009a). Moreover, the Black male RAs offered numerous examples of situations in which their White supervisors enforced a different, harsher set of standards for them. Reflective self-examination should include questions such as, “How and why do I interact differently with Black male RAs?” Or, “Would I handle this problem less harshly if this student were White?” Also encouraged are increased opportunities for meaningful engagement with RAs and other students who represent a background different from one’s own. Deliberate efforts in this regard would be beneficial to RAs of color who sometimes feel they receive too little support from department administrators, as well as White staff members whose misconceptions about these students would likely decrease as deeper relationships are fostered.

Also requisite for stereotype reduction are honest and difficult communal conversations on race and racism, as well as developing collective consciousness about the undercurrents and harmful effects of racist stereotypes. These dialogues should occur in all facets of residence life—from professional staff orientation and development to RA training

to programming in halls for undergraduate residents. The responsibility for facilitating these conversations should not be placed on racial/ethnic minority staff persons and RAs, a trend that participants in the present study reported as commonplace on their campuses. Instead, the director of residence life should endeavor to become more race conscious and more competent at engaging dialogues regarding race and racism at professional staff meetings; the comfort with which race is handled there should permeate the rest of the department. At RA training, White students and others who may be inexperienced at facilitating conversations on race should be exposed to racially competent professional staff role models, and provided opportunities for learning, stereotype confrontation, and skill acquisition. Participants in this study described how hip-hop music made them more relatable to White residents. Although hip-hop could be used to frame some race-related programming in the halls, it should be done in a manner that challenges residents to develop expanded views of Black men.

A Black male achiever in Bonner’s (2001) study believed he had to be 10 times as smart as White students, and felt his White peers were the beneficiaries of favoritism. The Black male RAs we interviewed similarly realized they had to work much harder than their White counterparts as they offered examples of the racially inequitable enforcement of standards in their residence life departments. Assuming the pressure to work harder, protecting himself from being characterized as an “angry Black man,” and using creative means such as hip-hop music to connect with residents were among the ways in which participants negotiated race. Problematic is that such negotiation was required. But perhaps more troubling is that it typically occurred without the support of a sufficient number of professional staff role models of color. Findings from the present

study make clear that student leaders need advocates and confidants upon whom they can rely for guidance in navigating the racial politics of their departments. Thus, hiring more professional staff members of color—and perhaps minority graduate assistants who can serve as effective role models (as was the case for one participant in our study)—seems essential for improving the performance and retention of Black males in the RA position. Additionally, professional staff members of color can model for RAs of color the skill of maintaining composure when calling attention to racism. They can also help Black male RAs to identify alternatives to strategic intimidation in their work with White residents.

Several of the Black male RAs we interviewed recalled at least one instance where they contemplated not returning to their positions the following semester or school term because of negative encounters with racism. They also gave examples of others who did not return, either by their own choosing or because they were unfairly terminated. These perceptions warrant assessment at the departmental level. Specifically, individual interviews and focus groups should be facilitated with RAs of color who do not return for an additional year of service. Much can be revealed about how these students experienced negative racial climates in the department. Our study certainly helps explain, at least in part, Sutton and Kimbrough's (2001) finding that the RA position is one of the least held student leadership roles among Black undergraduates.

Fries-Britt and Griffin (2007) described the “nice Black man” phenomenon, which counters the caricature of Black men as angry and threatening. Although being polite and cordial are usually desired and commended in professional work situations, doing so often occurs at the expense of Black male students who are suppressing their

true feelings toward racism and oppression encountered in leadership positions at PWIs, one aspect of Smith, Allen, and Danley's (2007) description of “racial battle fatigue.” Therefore, supervisors and administrators in residence life departments should invite these students to share their honest feelings about the department's racial climate as well as lived experiences with racism in their residence halls, without fear of repercussion. This information should be used to improve one's own interactions with diverse populations and stimulate efforts to awaken consciousness among White colleagues and other RAs about ways in which they are complicit in advancing racist stereotypes, sustaining racist work environments, and enforcing more stringent rules for Black male RAs.

It is likely that the main reason we were successful in getting more than three-fourths of all Black male RAs across the six campuses to agree to participate in this study was because they needed an outlet through which to convey their racialized leadership experiences. Stories and insights offered in this study are reflective of 52 lived experiences with racism, and therefore should not be dismissed or deemed unworthy of additional exploration at other PWIs. Several participants confirmed we were first to ask them about the race- and gender-specific complexities of their jobs. Thus, systematic and ongoing assessment with Black male RAs is encouraged if residence life administrators are to attract and retain higher numbers of these students. In most residence life departments, negligence in this regard would signify misalignment of espoused and enacted values concerning diversity—meaning, an institution cannot claim seriousness about fostering inclusive multicultural environments if students' lived experiences with racism remain unexplored, undisclosed, and unaddressed.

Limitations

Despite the efforts undertaken to ensure trustworthiness in this study, four shortcomings are readily apparent. First, Patton (2002) notes that participants with seemingly unpopular or minority points of view may not feel empowered to offer divergent perspectives in focus groups, and subsequently may decide against reporting something different or controversial—a trend better known as “focus group effect.” Although the research team members encouraged participants to openly and honestly reflect on their experiences despite what others in the group reported, we have no way of determining the degrees to which insights the participants offered (or withheld) were negatively affected by what might have been perceived as the dominant and mutually agreed upon perspective of the group. Notwithstanding this limitation, to dismiss, trivialize, or question the authenticity of insights the participants offered regarding their racialized experiences as RAs would be erroneous. Members of the research team have no reason to believe the stories participants shared with us in the interviews were falsely constructed or exaggerated in any way.

The across-site approach to data analysis in this study is a second noteworthy limitation. As mentioned, efforts were devoted to analyzing the participants’ shared experiences across the six participating institutions in the study. Concentrating with more intensity on the experiences of Black male RAs within the context of a single institution may have yielded richer, more detailed descriptions of their experiences. A third limitation is related to data analysis. After each interview, case analysis meetings were held to confirm standardization of protocols and procedures; these conversations also afforded each team member the opportunity to summarize what he had tentatively discovered and experienced

at his particular research site. Beyond this, only the lead author was involved in coding and other data analysis activities. Although this was done to ensure consistency in sensemaking, having other research team members involved may have led to varying interpretations of the data. Last, as with most qualitative research, the findings in this study are time- and context-bound (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Regarding context, residence life departments that employ higher numbers of Black male RAs, have greater racial/ethnic minority representation on their professional staffs, and invest greater degrees of energy and resources into enacting their espoused commitments to diversity and multiculturalism will likely have Black male RAs who report experiences that are different from those disclosed in the present study. Also, because the focus groups were facilitated near the end of the academic school year, perhaps participants had more frustrations and racially problematic stories to share. Conducting the study at the beginning of fall semester may have yielded a different set of insights.

CONCLUSION

“General engagement-related outcomes for all students and the race/gender-specific gains for Black males are too rich and plentiful to handle haphazardly” (Harper, 2009b, p. 142). In recent years, a compelling case has been made for increasing Black male student engagement in educationally purposeful activities and outcomes-productive campus leadership experiences (Brown, 2006; Cuyjet, 1997, 2006; Harper, 2009b; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006). In this study, CRT was useful in exposing how differently Black men experience the RA position on predominantly White campuses. Racist encounters such as those described by our participants could make efforts to increase Black male student engagement

counterproductive. That is, the expenditure of institutional energies on recruiting Black men for RA positions and other leadership roles is unlikely to yield a robust set of educational outcomes if the environment in which these students do their work is replete with racist stereotypes and unjustified perceptions of incompetence, excessive expectations for racial representation, and the racially inconsistent enforcement of standards and consequences. Because of its complexity, the RA position could be one of the most valuable campus leadership experiences to equip students with competencies that are useful in other settings

beyond college. And, if experienced positively, the position might also compel these student leaders to consider careers in higher education and student affairs, specifically residence life. Conversely, if experienced negatively, many will not be retained in their positions and even fewer will convey to their Black male peers the beneficial outcomes associated with serving as an RA.

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APPENDIX.

Focus Group Questions for the Black Male RA Study

1. What initially compelled you to apply to become an RA?
2. What were your expectations of the RA position before you applied—meaning, what kind of experience were you expecting to have in the position?
3. How have your actual experiences differed from the experiences you were expecting to have?
4. What do you enjoy most about being an RA?
5. In case you haven't noticed, there are not a lot of Black male RAs on this campus. Why do you think there are so few of you?
6. How would you describe the racial climate in the housing and residence life department?
7. What roles have race and racial dynamics played in your experiences as Black male RAs?
8. In your role as an RA, tell me about a situation where you felt you experienced something that was directly attributable to your race.
9. One of the main reasons we are conducting this study is because we have noticed that on some campuses many Black male RAs decide not to return for a second year of service. What is it about the position that explains this turnover?
10. Given the challenges you all have noted in this focus group, why have you chosen to continue in the RA position?
11. Earlier, I asked what you liked most about being RAs. Now, I'm interested in knowing what you like least about the position. (FOLLOW-UP PROBE: How does this dissatisfaction affect your performance and motivation to do a good job?)
12. Hypothetically, if another Black male student here came to you and said he was planning to apply to be an RA for next year, what would you say to him about the position—what advice would you give, which of your experiences would you share with him, and what cautionary notes would you offer?

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