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Relationships Matter: The Predictive Effect of Resident Assistant Mattering on Their Levels of Experienced Burnout

EMPLOYEES IN SERVICE-ORIENTED, relationship-based jobs are prone to experiencing feelings of burnout. As such, paraprofessional staff in college housing environments, resident assistants (RAs), are not immune to its effects. Since navigating relationships is the root cause of burnout, it makes sense to focus on the relationships between service-providers and service-recipients or, in the case of housing paraprofessionals, between RAs and their residents. Existing literature on RA burnout has thus far neglected to focus on relationships as having a fundamental association with burnout. To fill this gap in the literature, this study used Rosenberg and McCullough's framework of mattering to explore the relationships between RAs and their residents. The results revealed that the combined factors of RA mattering substantially increased the variance explained in burnout, above and beyond demographic and work characteristics alone. More specifically, mattering was found to significantly predict two of the three dimensions of burnout: depersonalization and personal accomplishment. Put another way, RAs who feel they matter more to their residents experience lower levels of depersonalization and higher feelings of personal accomplishment. Implications and recommendations are discussed.

The phenomenon of burnout is most prevalent in "care-giving and service occupations, where the core of the job [is] the relationships between provider and recipient" (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 400). Substantial research from disciplines outside the college housing industry, such as nursing and teaching, reveals many negative employee outcomes associated with burnout, the most prominent of which are lower job satisfaction and higher position attrition (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Fisher, 2011; Laschinger et al., 2009; Scanlan & Still, 2013). Such negative outcomes threaten organizational productivity and stability (Marshall et al., 2016).

The known consequences of burnout also extend beyond the direct impact on the employees to the recipients of their care (Geving, 2007). This bidirectional impact is not surprising given how burnout research began in relationship-based occupations (e.g., Freudenberg, 1974; Maslach, 1976, 1978) and continued where interactions exist

between a caregiver and the recipients of their attention (e.g., Maslach et al., 2001). One notable position on a college or university campus fitting this relationship parameter is the resident assistant (RA). Because building and facilitating relationships is a cornerstone of the RA position (Denzine & Anderson, 1999; Horvath & Stack, 2013), RAs are not immune to experiencing feelings of burnout. Despite parallels between relationship-based jobs and burnout, little is known about RAs' relationships with their residents and how they influence their levels of burnout.

To address this gap in the literature, this study used data collected from a larger study to explore the concept of mattering as a relationship lens to explore RA burnout. Mattering has four cornerstones uniquely focused on the perceived relationship between people or, in the case of this study, between RAs and their residents. More precisely, RAs feel they matter to their residents when their residents (a) are aware of them, (b) believe they are important, (c) experience them as an ego extension, and (d) rely upon them (France & Finney, 2010). Researching mattering in conjunction with burnout may aid in understanding the root cause of burnout: relationships. Reducing burnout among RAs will lead to positive outcomes in not only the RA job experience but also in the residential experience of students for whom RAs are responsible. Specifically, this study addressed the following research question: Does RA mattering predict the level of burnout experienced by RAs?

EMPLOYEE BURNOUT

The association of burnout with relationship-based jobs has been well articulated since research into the burnout phenomenon began in the 1970s. Two pioneers of this research documented the association: Freudenberger (1974) observed how those prone to burnout make personal sacrifices and work long hours for the individuals whom they serve, and Maslach (1982) found that employees cope with stress by distancing themselves from their clients while also expressing cynical attitudes towards others. Thus, the feeling of burnout was either caused by or was directly affected by the relationships that employees had with their clients, often leading to detachment (Maslach, 1976).

Initial research revealed three dimensions of burnout (Maslach, 1976), all of which remain prominent to this day (Williamson et al., 2018): (a) emotional exhaustion, (b) depersonalization, and (c) personal accomplishment. Emotional exhaustion, or the emotional overextension caused by the work environment, is the hallmark and most obvious symptom of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Depersonalization—also referred to as cynicism—manifests when employees detach from the recipients of their care (Fernet et al., 2004). Higher levels of emotional exhaustion and deperson-

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alization suggest increased feelings of burnout, whereas the third dimension, personal accomplishment, is inverted. Put another way, when employees felt a sense of accomplishment and “successful achievement in one’s work with people” (Maslach & Jackson, 1981, p. 101), they experienced less burnout.

RESIDENT ASSISTANT BURNOUT

Much of the scholarly attention to RA burnout occurred in the 1980s (Benedict & Mondloch, 1989; Fuehrer & McGonagle, 1988; Hetherington et al., 1989; Nowack et al., 1985; Nowack & Hanson, 1983), with limited scholarship since then (e.g., Hardy & Dodd, 1998; Paladino et al., 2005). Recent research has revealed that RAs choosing not to continue their employment the following year had significantly higher depersonalization scores and significantly lower personal accomplishment scores (Stoner, 2017). Similar to others in service-oriented jobs, RAs work daily with large numbers of people (Denzine & Anderson, 1999), but there is a profound difference in the RAs’ work environment and the existing relationships in their position when compared to those in other service-oriented disciplines such as nursing and teaching; these differences are reflected in how RAs “live and work with people 24 hours a day. They live and work with peers, students, and supervisors in an environment where it is difficult to distinguish work from personal time” (Hetherington et al., 1989, p. 266). Such an environment emphasizes the importance of relationships within the job, since RAs live where they work and work where they live.

The existing research on RA burnout neglects to specifically address the relational component of the RA job and how RAs’ relationships with their residents affect their levels of burnout. Nowack and colleagues (1985) came close to addressing this gap by reporting that RAs who were more satisfied with their social support network experienced higher personal accomplishment and lower depersonalization, but this study did not intend to specifically address the relationships between RAs and their residents because the term *social support network* was never defined in the study. This network may have included family members, friends outside their residential community, and even people outside the institution. Therefore, additional research is necessary to fill this gap.

THE CONCEPT OF MATTERING

One framework that may address the identified relationship gap in RA burnout literature is the concept of *mattering*, components of which are all based on relationships with surrounding individuals (Dixon & Tucker, 2008), such as people in residential communities. People who perceive that they matter feel that others notice and pay attention to them (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981), invest in their well-being (France & Finney, 2010), and rely on them (Elliott et al., 2004). Conversely, “if people do not share themselves meaningfully with us, if no one listens to what we have to say, if we are interesting to no one, then we must cope with the realization that we do not matter” (Elliott et al., 2004, p. 339).

Because building and facilitating relationships is a cornerstone of the RA position, RAs are not immune to experiencing feelings of burnout.

Although the core components of mattering have evolved over time, the current understanding of mattering among college students includes four distinct areas: (a) awareness, (b) importance, (c) ego extension, and (d) reliance (France & Finney, 2010, p. 49). Awareness involves others acknowledging and recognizing our existence (Elliott et al., 2004, p. 340); an RA would perceive they mattered if a resident commented on their absence when the RA was away from campus for a weekend. Importance is the belief that other people “care about what we want, think and do” (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 164) or, more generally, the recognition that we are “the object of [another’s] interest and concern” (Elliott et al., 2004, p. 341). When residents care about the success of an RA’s program, the RA may feel as if they matter more due to an increased feeling of importance. People experience ego extension when others respond to situations in the same manner as they do and exhibit similar emotions (France & Finney, 2010). RAs may feel a sense of ego extension when residents share in their excitement or disappointment about an exam or personal issue. Reliance is characterized by others depending on us or needing us (Elliott et al., 2004), and RAs may feel a heightened sense of reliance when a resident comes specifically to them for a counseling or tutoring referral.

Mattering has deep implications on college and university campuses. According to Schlossberg (1989), student mattering exists on a continuum, with marginality on the opposite end. Students who perceive that they matter are more engaged in the college environment (Schlossberg, 1989), while those who depart the institution prior to completing their education feel less engaged (Tinto, 2006). Students who feel as if they matter have an enhanced sense of belonging, which can contribute to their success in college (Wolf-Wendel & Ruel, 1999). The concept of mattering has not been widely applied to the residential environment, and RA mattering in particular has only been studied in the context of their placement (residence halls versus apartments) and their community size (Stoner & Zhang, 2017). RAs living in apartments reported significantly lower feelings of mattering than did their residence hall counterparts, and there was a significant inverse relationship between RA mattering and community size (Stoner & Zhang, 2017). Therefore, the relatively unexplored concept of mattering in college residential settings provides a critical framework to explore the relationships between RAs and their residents, especially when considering their levels of experienced burnout.

METHODS

Data and Sample

In this study, we used data drawn from RAs’ responses to a survey uniquely developed to measure their sense of mattering and levels of burnout. The survey also collected information about RAs’ demographics and working environment characteristics to help establish a baseline model predicting burnout, recognizing that RAs with unique identities and working under different environmental conditions have varied experiences. The

survey was administered early in the spring 2016 semester to every RA at four medium to large public universities with membership in the Upper Midwest Region-Association of College and University Housing Officers. Of the 308 RAs asked to participate, 153 completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 49.7%.

Survey Instrument

The survey adopted items from two validated instruments: a modified version of the University Mattering Scale (UMS; France & Finney, 2010) and the Maslach Burnout Inventory-Educators Survey (MBI-ES; Maslach et al., 1996). Both instruments had been previously validated: the UMS by France and Finney (2010) and the MBI-ES by Gold (1984) and Iwanicki and Schwab (1981).

Iwanicki and Schwab (1981) and Gold (1984) found support for the three-factor model of the MBI. Both studies used samples of teachers to reach this conclusion (469 teachers in Massachusetts and 462 teachers in California, respectively). Cronbach alpha estimates varied slightly in each study for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment: Iwanicki and Schwab found Cronbach alpha estimates of .90, .76, and .76, whereas Gold found estimates of .88, .74, and .72. Maslach and colleagues (1996) stated that “these reliability coefficients parallel those of the MBI-HSS” (p. 29), from which the MBI-ES was modified. The internal consistency and reliability of the UMS was calculated using a Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for each of the four subscales: awareness (.86), importance (.81), ego extension (.71), and reliance (.87). The factor intercorrelations ranged from .73 to .94 (France & Finney, 2010).

The UMS was originally designed using a 5-point Likert scale to assess college students’ perceptions of mattering to their specific overall university community (France & Finney, 2010). For this study, the UMS was modified (with permission of the original authors) to focus on RAs’ mattering to their individual residential community instead of the overall campus community. The term *community* was defined in the instrument instructions as “the students in [the RA’s] specific community (e.g., floor, wing, apartment building, etc.).” The modified UMS was reviewed by one of the original authors and a panel of three upper-level housing administrators. The panel reviewed the modified UMS, evaluating if the consistency and clarity of each item remained the same as in the original UMS. No item was deemed inconsistent or unclear, so the modified UMS was used as developed. Of the 24 items, eight measured awareness, seven measured importance, three measured ego extension, and six measured reliance (France & Finney, 2010) on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

The MBI-ES contained 22 items across the three dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion (9), depersonalization (5), and personal accomplishment (8). The MBI-ES required no alterations for the purposes of this study. Each instrument item was scored on a 7-point Likert scale (0 = *never*, 1 = *a few times a year or less*, 2 = *once a month or less*, 3 = *a few times a month*, 4 = *once a week*, 5 = *a few times a week*, and 6 = *every day*).

People who perceive that they matter feel that others notice and pay attention to them, invest in their well-being, and rely on them.

Data Analysis and Variables

For each analysis, all responses with missing data were excluded under pairwise deletion parameters (Peugh & Enders, 2004). Descriptive analysis provided an overview of the sample. We then conducted three separate multiple linear regression analyses with each dimension of burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment) serving as a dependent variable. The independent variables used in the regression analyses included RAs' gender, race/ethnicity, classification, number of residents for which they were directly responsible, residential area (apartments versus residence halls), and total mattering. Due to lack of reported gender identification outside the male-female binary, gender was coded dichotomously. Race and ethnicity (White versus underrepresented race/ethnicities) were coded dichotomously. Classification of the RAs originally included four categories: sophomore, junior, senior, and graduate students. Due to the graduate student classification containing only two RAs, we analyzed the data with graduate students combined with seniors and individually. Since there was no meaningful difference in the results, we proceeded with the combined classification of Senior+ to reduce the number of groups to three. The type of residential areas was also a dichotomous variable (apartments versus residence halls).

By virtue of Cronbach alpha levels exceeding 0.7 (DeVellis, 2003; Kline, 2005), each dimension of burnout was deemed internally consistent: emotional exhaustion ($\alpha = .928$, $n = 9$); depersonalization ($\alpha = .737$, $n = 5$); and personal accomplishment ($\alpha = .887$, $n = 8$). The original researchers provided specific instruction to consider each burnout dimension independent of the others and not combined (Maslach et al., 1996).

Each component of mattering was also deemed consistent: awareness ($\alpha = .815$, $n = 8$); importance ($\alpha = .839$, $n = 7$); ego extension ($\alpha = .737$, $n = 3$); and reliance ($\alpha = .843$, $n = 6$). Unlike the burnout instrument instruction, no such guidance was articulated for the necessity of treating mattering subscales independently; therefore, due to the high correlations among the mattering subscales, we summed the individual component scores to create a total mattering composite score for use in the regression models ($\alpha = .938$, $n = 24$).

LIMITATIONS

The lack of diversity in the sample (specifically, ethnicity, gender, and regional affiliation) should be cautiously considered when generalizing the results to other populations. Additionally, the dichotomization of variables unfortunately limits the voices of many RAs from underrepresented groups. Limitations also exist with the modified UMS instrument and the associated wording of particular items. For example, the item labeled "Quite a few people in my community look to me for advice on issues of importance" may elicit a different interpretation from participants on what exactly "quite a few people" entails. Additionally, some adverbs used in the instrument may be deemed ambiguous, as demonstrated by usage of the word "sometimes" in the statement "Sometimes in my community, I feel as if I were invisible." Finally, the study

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design yields some limitations, as the study controlled for neither RA performance nor institutional calendar and workload fluctuations existing in the RA position. Factors such as these may skew an RA's perception of mattering or burnout.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analyses

The descriptive statistics revealed that nearly two-thirds of the participants were female (63.8%) and most of them were White (80.5%). Those who selected more than one racial or ethnic category were coded as multiracial, accounting for 6.0% of the sample. The majority of the sample (84.3%) worked in residence halls, while their apartment RA counterparts made up the remaining 15.7%. The sample was almost equally distributed among sophomore (32.0%), junior (38.6%), and senior (28.1%) classifications. A majority of RAs worked in communities comprising mostly first-year students (67.3%), with the remaining RAs roughly split between communities comprising mostly upper-division students (14.4%) and a balanced mix of first-year and upper-division (18.3%). All demographics are further detailed in Table 1 (*see page 102*).

Multiple Linear Regression Analyses

Three separate sequential multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine if adding the total mattering composite score improved the prediction for each burnout dimension above and beyond RA demographics (gender, race, and classification) and work characteristics (number of residents and area of employment). Linearity was established for each model by visual inspection of a scatterplot of each dimension against the total mattering composite score. For each model, the variance inflation factor (VIF) was examined to test the multicollinearity of the independent variables. All the VIF values were below 1.7, indicating that the levels of correlation were acceptable (Allison, 1999). The Durbin-Watson test statistics indicated that the assumption of independency of residuals for all three models was satisfied as the values were close to 2.0, which suggests that the residuals are uncorrelated (Durbin & Watson, 1951). Table 2 (*see page 103*) reports the full statistics for each dimension's regression model.

Demographic and Work Characteristics Predicting Burnout

When examining the relationship between the independent variables and emotional exhaustion, the first model revealed that only "Classification Sophomore" significantly contributed to the prediction of emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -0.204$, $p < .05$), but overall the emotional exhaustion model was not a good fit for the data, $F(6, 139) = 1.211$, $p = .304$. Likewise, the model predicting depersonalization was not a good fit, $F(6, 141) = 0.962$, $p = .453$, with none of the demographic and work characteristics serving as significant

TABLE 1

Demographic Variable Frequencies

VARIABLE	n	PERCENT
Gender	152	–
Male	55	36.2
Female	97	63.8
Ethnicity	149	–
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0.0
Asian	8	5.4
Black or African American	8	5.4
Hispanic or Latino	4	2.7
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0	0.0
White	120	80.5
Multiracial	9	6.0
Classification	153	–
Freshman	0	0.0
Sophomore	49	32.0
Junior	59	38.6
Senior	43	28.1
Graduate	2	1.3
Community composition	153	–
Mostly freshmen	103	67.3
Mostly upper-division	22	14.4
Balanced mix of first-year and upper-division	28	18.3

Note. Variations in *n* are due to missing data or participants selecting “I choose not to respond.” Percentages were calculated based on the number of completed responses for each variable category, and not the total sample.

TABLE 2

Sequential Multiple Regression Statistics

Variable	EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION						DEPERSONALIZATION						PERSONAL ACCOMPLISHMENT					
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 1			Model 2			Model 1			Model 2		
	β	SE		β	SE		β	SE		β	SE		β	SE		β	SE	
Step 1: Background																		
Number of residents	0.090	0.031		0.116	0.031		0.162	0.014		0.229*	0.013		0.182	0.021		0.076	0.016	
Gender	0.124	2.044		0.139	2.029		-0.095	0.901		-0.059	0.820		0.085	1.395		0.036	1.027	
Race/ethnicity	0.023	2.486		0.042	2.475		-0.022	1.103		0.028	1.008		-0.022	1.704		-0.103	1.260	
Classification ^a																		
	-0.204*	2.562		-0.241*	2.573		0.073	1.125		-0.021	1.037		-0.234*	1.742		-0.096	1.298	
Sophomore	-0.166	2.450		-0.185	2.432		0.013	1.074		-0.036	0.979		-0.058	1.663		0.015	1.225	
Junior																		
Area	0.073	3.268		0.126	3.337		0.171	1.443		0.305**	1.352		0.254*	2.227		0.047	1.688	
Step 2: Mattering																		
	-	-		-0.176*	0.069		-	-		-0.444***	0.028		-			0.686***	0.035	
R ²	0.009			0.030			-0.002			0.176			0.056			0.491		
F	1.211			1.650			0.962			5.482***			2.421			21.020***		
ΔR^2	-			0.021			-			0.178			-			0.435		
ΔF	-			0.439			-			4.520			-			18.599		

^a The categorical variable RA classification was dummy coded into two dichotomous variables (sophomore and junior) to compare against senior+.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

contributor variables. Finally, two variables were significant contributors to the prediction of personal accomplishment: Classification Sophomore ($\beta = -0.234, p < .05$) and Area ($\beta = 0.254, p < .05$). Overall, the demographic and work characteristics model was a good fit for the data, $F(6, 139) = 2.421, p < .05$, with 5.6% of the variance in personal accomplishment explained by the demographic and work characteristics.

Mattering Predicting Burnout

The next step in the sequential multiple regression test added total mattering to each of the three burnout dimension models. Upon adding this to the emotional exhaustion model, Classification Sophomore ($\beta = -0.241, p < .05$) and total mattering ($\beta = -0.176, p < .05$) were significant contributors, but the overall model was revealed to not be a good fit for the data, $F(7, 138) = 1.650, p = .126$, with only 3.0% of the variance in emotional exhaustion explained by the model.

The depersonalization model was revealed to be a good fit for the data, $F(7, 140) = 5.482, p < .001$, with number of residents ($\beta = 0.229, p < .05$), area ($\beta = 0.305, p < .01$), and total mattering ($\beta = -0.444, p < .001$) all serving as significant contributors. By including total mattering, the amount of variance in depersonalization explained by the model increased from close to zero to nearly 17.6%.

Finally, in the second model predicting personal accomplishment, Classification Sophomore ($\beta = -0.096, p = .194$) and Area ($\beta = 0.047, p = .533$) both ceased to be significant contributors, while total mattering served as the only significant variable ($\beta = 0.686, p < .001$). The *F*-ratio suggested that the model predicting personal accomplishment remained a good fit for the data, $F(7, 138) = 21.020, p < .001$. The amount of variance in personal accomplishment resulting from the inclusion of total mattering was 49.1%, an apparent increase from 5.6% in the model that did not include total mattering.

DISCUSSION

This research study aimed to fill the gap in the literature about RA relationships and burnout. The results confirm how mattering serves as an appropriate lens with which to begin addressing the relational component of the RA job when targeting burnout experienced by RAs, most notably in the areas of depersonalization and personal accomplishment. How the predictor variables (especially total mattering) interact differently with each dimension of burnout further underscores the importance of considering each of the burnout dimensions independently from the others (Maslach et al., 1996).

Emotional Exhaustion

Of the three dimensions of burnout, emotional exhaustion was the only one that failed to be significantly predicted in either model within the stepwise regression, but the results indicated that female RAs were more likely to experience emotional exhaustion than were their male counterparts. RAs classified as sophomores reported lower levels of emotional exhaustion than did RAs classified as senior or juniors. Neither of the variables related to the RAs' working environment (number of residents and area

assignment) had a significant relationship with the outcome variable. The lack of predictability of emotional exhaustion lends support to the notion that this is less related to relationships than are the other two dimensions (Maslach et al., 2001).

Additionally, the results demonstrated that RAs' sense of mattering was negatively related to their level of emotional exhaustion. In other words, RAs who experienced a stronger sense of mattering were less likely to be emotionally exhausted. Although emotional exhaustion is the most apparent symptom of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001), mattering did little to explain the variance in levels of emotional exhaustion (3.0%).

Depersonalization

None of the demographic characteristics had a significant relationship with depersonalization levels. Conversely, the work-related variables were positively related to depersonalization. That is, RAs serving in residence halls and responsible for more residents were more likely to experience feelings of depersonalization. On first glance, it is surprising to learn that RAs in apartments experience less depersonalization since, at least anecdotally, RAs serving apartment communities tend to experience more challenges in connecting with residents due to their upper-division status and the often associated desire for more autonomy than do RAs in residence halls.

Similar to the emotional exhaustion model, RAs' mattering had a negative relationship with the outcome variable. More specifically, RAs with a higher level of mattering were less likely to feel depersonalized. As such, levels of depersonalization could only be predicted at a significant level when the model included total mattering. With mattering included, the amount of variance explained in depersonalization increased by more than 17%. This finding reveals how increasing feelings of mattering felt by RAs will lead to lower levels of depersonalization.

Personal Accomplishment

While personal accomplishment was the only dimension of burnout significantly predicted without total mattering included, when total mattering was inserted as a predictor variable the amount of variance explained increased substantially, from 5.6% to 49.1%. This finding suggests that RAs' perception of mattering to their residents has a dramatic positive impact on increasing their levels of personal accomplishment.

Total mattering maintains the most influence on personal accomplishment when compared to the impact in the other two dimensions, so any effort to increase RA mattering will manifest more obviously in personal accomplishment. Furthermore, the fact that sophomore status and area size ceased to be significant in the model once total mattering was included suggests how mattering can compensate for natural baseline feelings of burnout in these groups.

Since mattering is a direct function of interpersonal relationships, RAs would benefit from training focused on developing enhanced relationship-building skills, which in turn would reduce depersonalization and increase personal accomplishment.

Often, RAs do not receive direct validation from their residents for their efforts or simply may not understand how much they matter to their residents. Supervisors must fill this gap in recognition, which they can do by frequently challenging RAs to reflect on their experiences and critically think of ways that they impacted, affected, and mattered to their residents.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Practice

From a conceptual standpoint, it is important for practitioners who supervise RAs to minimally have a basic understanding of the four components of mattering: awareness, importance, ego extension, and reliance. Maintaining a basic knowledge of these concepts allows practitioners to focus their intentional efforts, especially for RAs exhibiting symptoms of burnout. Although untested, providing intentional support in the various components of mattering—even in small ways—is a good place to start.

In individual meetings with RAs, supervisors should work to identify and process casual interactions falling under the tenets of mattering that may easily get missed. For example, a simple comment by an RA reporting that “several of my residents asked where I was this weekend” creates an opportunity for the supervisor to reinforce how the RA must matter to those residents because they expressed awareness of their absence. As this study revealed, increasing the feelings of mattering—in this case, their awareness—among individual RAs will have a positive impact on reducing depersonalization and increasing personal accomplishment.

Since mattering is a direct function of interpersonal relationships, RAs would benefit from training focused on developing enhanced relationship-building skills, which in turn would reduce depersonalization and increase personal accomplishment. One example of enhanced relationship-building skills is training—and expecting—RAs to proactively and regularly share their own academic and personal goals with their residents. Not sharing these goals denies residents the opportunity to share and exhibit similar feelings about their success (ego extension), just as RAs share in the successes of their residents. Sharing their failures and difficulties, while likely more challenging due to the necessary vulnerability required, would yield similar results as residents would have the opportunity to provide support and empathy. As a function of their job, RAs often become friends with their residents (Everett & Loftus, 2011), thus reinforcing the bidirectional relationship between RAs and all their residents, which serves to strengthen their social support networks, which in turn will increase mattering (Dixon Rayle & Chung, 2007) and reduce feelings of burnout.

More generally, to ensure the recognition of mattering among RAs, supervisors must also focus on mattering in their individual interactions with RAs. Often, RAs do not receive direct validation from their residents for their efforts or simply may not understand how much they matter to their residents. Supervisors must fill this gap

in recognition, which they can do by frequently challenging RAs to reflect on their experiences and critically think of ways that they impacted, affected, and mattered to their residents. Such reflection needs to be done with specificity; supervisors could ask specific questions such as “who is a resident you believe is more aware of you this week than the previous week and why?” or “who is a resident who relied on you this week and why?” This suggestion could be incorporated in weekly or biweekly reports, self-reflection during RA staff meetings, or one-on-one meetings. The questions posed should rotate through the mattering components so that each one is emphasized and given the appropriate attention.

Implications for Future Research

The first recommendation for additional research targets a limitation of this study: the lack of sample diversity. This study should be replicated in different institution types and geographic regions and at institutions with more diverse RA staffs in order to further understand the feelings of mattering as a contributing factor to burnout among RAs with different identities.

Additionally, this study did not address the role supervisors play in RAs’ feelings of mattering and burnout. Freudenberger (1975) indicated that working for an authoritarian supervisor leads to burnout. Therefore, future research exploring the relationship between RAs and their supervisors may further illuminate not only RAs’ experiences of burnout, but also their feelings of mattering under different supervision styles.

Given the methods employed and the sample, the theoretical lens of mattering did not appear to provide significant results in conjunction with the most apparent symptom of burnout: emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 2001). Future research on RA burnout may reconcile this by revisiting the methods and controlling for demographic variables not considered in this study, such as sexual orientation and socioeconomic status. If deeper study continues to reveal no connection, perhaps considering a different theoretical lens would be warranted. Possible alternatives centered around relationships may include university belonging (Freeman et al., 2007) or relatedness (Moller et al., 2010).

CONCLUSION

This study successfully began filling the gap in the literature about RA relationships and burnout. Mattering is a direct function of the relationships between RAs and their residents, which this study revealed to be a significant predictor of two dimensions of burnout. Any increase in RA mattering results in lower feelings of depersonalization and higher feelings of personal accomplishment. Not only did mattering serve as a significant predictor variable, but it also substantially increased the amount of variance explained in burnout, above and beyond demographic and working condition variables. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The authors note that most of the research on resident assistant (RA) burnout came out in the 1980s, with few publications visible since then. Why do you think there is a time lapse in the recognition of similar studies?
2. What are some short-term and long-term reasons that RA mattering could be an emphasis in our field? What specific trends or discussions are occurring on your campus related to this topic?
3. Relationships appear to be a key theme emerging from the study, both between the RA and supervisor and between the RA and residential students. What associated strategies or activities are currently occurring in your RA training, and what are some ways they can be adapted or expanded based upon the recommendations from this study?
4. The study denotes limitations in the findings with the homogenous demographic characteristics of the participants. In what ways can your campus ensure that data collected about RAs and their experiences includes representation from all student groups?

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