



Isolation and Belonging: The Complex Reality of Black Resident Assistants

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THE RESIDENT ASSISTANT (RA) POSITION is one of the most complex and important roles on college and university campuses in the United States. Although these student staff serve many functions, the primary responsibility of RAs is to make their residents feel welcomed and valued in their community. Black students who take on the RA role at Historically White Institutions (HWIs) are charged with creating welcoming environments and making students feel valued in the community while often not feeling welcomed or valued themselves due to stereotypes and racism. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences and development of a sense of belonging for Black students serving in the RA role at HWIs. The study shares the stories and experiences of 10 students using interviews and photovoice. The words and images captured by the participants helped us better understand how Black RAs at HWIs experience the role of resident assistant. Implications for practitioners to consider when working with these students are highlighted.

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The resident assistant (RA) position is one of the most complex and significant roles on college and university campuses in the United States; they serve as peer leaders, conflict mediators, counselors, role models, community builders, and policy enforcers, among other responsibilities. The role requires extensive training and dedication, more so than for other student staff positions on campus (Blimling, 2003; Cheng & Chan, 2020; Letarte, 2013). RAs help residents develop a sense of belonging by facilitating connections among peers, creating environments where they feel valued and respected, and encouraging them to get involved on campus and feel part of a community where their identity, experiences, and contributions are acknowledged and appreciated. Belonging involves having connections with peers, faculty, staff and the institutional culture; when college students feel a strong sense of belonging, they are more likely to be socially integrated on campus, perform better academically, persist, and develop a lasting connection to their institutions (Strayhorn, 2018). For Black students and other marginalized students, a sense of belonging on campus is rooted in feeling seen, supported, and valued, particularly through representation, culturally affirming spaces, and opportunities to connect with peers and mentors who share similar experiences and identities (Strayhorn, 2018).

Black RAs face the challenging task of fostering a feeling of connection among their residents while navigating the systemic inequities and barriers on their campuses that make it difficult for them to develop their own sense of belonging. These challenges can contribute to feelings of isolation and a heightened sense of marginalization (Hardaway, 2020; Harper et al., 2011; Roland & Agosto, 2017). This study explores the lived experiences of Black students at Historically White Institutions (HWIs), focusing on how they experienced a sense of belonging as an RA.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore how Black RAs perceive their lived experiences serving in the role and how they experience a sense of belonging in higher education institutions that are historically White. This article focuses specifically on how the Black RAs who participated in the study described their sense of belonging as they navigated their positions, campuses, and relationships with residents, peers, and supervisors. We posed the following research questions: *How do Black undergraduate students at HWIs experience the RA role? How do Black undergraduate RAs at HWIs describe experiencing a sense of belonging as RAs and students on their campus?*

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Strayhorn's (2018) model of sense of belonging served as the theoretical framework for this study:

Sense of belonging refers to students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers. (p. 4)

Sense of belonging is a strong predictor of student behavior, as students with a greater sense of connection are more likely to be engaged on campus and satisfied with their collegiate experience, and they tend to succeed academically and persist at their institutions (Strayhorn, 2018).

A core element of Strayhorn's (2018) model is its dependence on context, particularly that of students' identities. Black students are one of the specific populations Strayhorn explored, as these students were more likely to feel unwelcome at HWIs and to struggle with feeling stereotyped or invisible. Sense of belonging is even more significant in certain contexts—when, for example, students perceive a setting as unfamiliar. Black students do not feel that they belong at HWIs in the same way that White students do; developing a sense of belonging is more than just fitting in—it is being able to find community and show up authentically on campus as one's true self (Strayhorn, 2018).

BLACK RESIDENT ASSISTANTS: CHALLENGES AND SUPPORT

There is currently a large body of research on the experiences of resident assistants, much of which focuses on their roles and responsibilities, motivation, burnout, and how the role has evolved to become more complex over time (Blimling, 2003; Cheng & Chan, 2020; Manata et al., 2017; Renn, 2020). However, there are few studies that address the specific needs and experiences of Black RAs. (Those who do discuss them typically examine their experiences only in terms of the intersection of their race and gender.)

Several studies have discussed how Black RAs are more susceptible to feeling isolated and experiencing racial microaggressions than are their White peers. Hardaway (2020) conducted a qualitative study involving 19 Black female RAs from four HWIs

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located in the northeastern region of the U.S., focusing on how the intersection of their racial and gender identities contributed to their perceived levels of support and marginalization. Hardaway found that Black female RAs felt fear and anxiety about hosting programs on race and felt overly aware of how they were received as Black women. The participants often felt isolated, unsupported by their peers and supervisors, and relied on creating support networks and counterspaces with other Black students. They also felt they received unfair treatment from their supervisors and that, when they questioned things, they were often seen as being combative. Instead of feeling valued in their positions, they felt dispensable; they did not trust supervisors and were afraid to ask questions, at the risk of being viewed as incompetent.

A qualitative study by Roland and Agosto (2017) explored the experiences of Black female RAs at a large HWI in the southeastern U.S. where 25 of the 151 resident assistants on campus were Black women. The seven participants acknowledged experiencing a considerable amount of stereotyping and often feeling cautious about how they expressed their social identities in environments where they were underrepresented. These women sought support in their relationships with family, friends, and other residential staff who could relate to their experiences.

Harper and colleagues (2011) explored the experiences of Black male RAs using a qualitative research design. The study was conducted across six large HWIs in various regions of the U.S. and involved 52 participants. Across the six institutions sampled, Black men held 69 of the 1,022 resident assistant roles. Participants said they felt isolated, as they were often one of only a few of the RAs of color in the department (Harper et al., 2011). They struggled with being underrepresented and having few sources of support or role models who shared their identities, and they noted that the small number of professional staff of color in the department made them feel even more isolated and unwilling to continue in the position. However, those who had a connection to a Black supervisor felt more prepared and supported in navigating the racial politics on their HWI campus (Harper et al., 2011).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of 10 Black RAs attending HWIs. The study employed interviews and photovoice to capture the participants' perspectives. Photovoice is a research method that originated in the field of public health (Wang & Burris, 1994, 1997) and is now being used in other academic disciplines, such as education (Tsang, 2020). In this process, participants take photos that represent their lives, social issues they experience, or their communities (Wang, 1999). Photovoice was selected for its ability to empower marginalized students to share their experiences in both visual and narrative ways (Duran, 2019).

PARTICIPANTS

Participants had to meet the following criteria in order to take part in this study:

- *Be at least 18 years old*
- *Self-identify as Black (which can include any student identifying as a part of the African diaspora, e.g., African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, Afro-Latin Americans; this can also include students who are multiracial and self-identify as Black)*
- *Be enrolled as a full-time undergraduate student at their institution*
- *Attend a mid-size to large HWI (a college or university where the majority of the student population identifies as White, and the undergraduate student enrollment is at least 5,000)*
- *Currently serve as resident assistants (or similar role) at their institution at the time of data collection or served in the RA role within the last two years at the time of data collection*

The sample included 10 participants from six institutions. Table 1 (*see page 35*) displays the demographics of the participants, who are identified using pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Table 2 (*see page 36*) provides an overview of the six institutions (represented by pseudonyms) sampled in the study.

DATA COLLECTION

The data for this study was collected over the course of three months, from September 2022 through December 2022. Data collection consisted of three parts for each participant: an initial interview, a photovoice project, and a second interview. These were semi-structured interviews that were conducted using Zoom and recorded with their consent.

First, participants were asked to take part in a 30-minute interview that was intended to begin building rapport with them and to explain photovoice and the expectations for participation. For the photovoice portion of the study, participants were asked to use their personal cell phones or cameras to take 3–10 photos of images that reflected their experience. They were given the following prompts: Take a picture that reflects your experience being a Black student and RA on your campus, and take another of how or where you experience belonging and support as an RA. Participants were asked not to take photos of people's faces without their consent (faces in photos were blurred for the sake of privacy) and were informed that photos identifying them or their campuses would not be published. Following the photovoice portion of the study, participants had a 60–90-minute interview to discuss the images they captured and provide a sense of how they made meaning of their experiences.

For data analysis, inductive coding and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) were used to develop themes. IPA was selected because of the small sample size and the study's focus on exploring the lived experiences of participants (Bartoli, 2019). The data analysis process was guided by the six stages developed by Smith and

TABLE 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Black identity	Sexual identity	Spiritual identity	Classification	Institution
Uniqua	Cisgender woman	African American	Heterosexual	Christian	Senior	Big Mountain State University
John	Cisgender man	African American	Heterosexual	Christian	Senior	Garden Grove University
Semira	Cisgender woman	African	Heterosexual	Christian	Junior	Garden Grove University
Jordan	Cisgender woman	African American	Heterosexual	Spiritual	Senior	Garden Grove University
Tara	Cisgender woman	African American	Heterosexual	Other	Junior	Willow University
KiKi	Cisgender woman	African American	Bisexual	Christian	Junior	Boseman University
Faith	Unreported	Unreported	Unreported	Unreported	Senior	Boseman University
Aaliyah	Cisgender woman	African American	Bisexual	Christian	Junior	McIntosh Bay University
JW	Cisgender woman	African American	Bisexual	Baptist	Senior	McIntosh Bay University
Elle	Cisgender woman	African American	Heterosexual	Catholic	Junior	Witherspoon Woods University

Sense of belonging is a strong predictor of student behavior, as students with a greater sense of connection are more likely to be engaged on campus and satisfied with their collegiate experience, and they tend to succeed academically and persist at their institutions.

TABLE 2

Overview of Institutions

Name	Approximate undergraduate population	Approximate percentage of White students	Region
Big Mountain State University	19,000	81%	Midwest
Garden Grove University	19,800	60%	Southeast
Willow University	31,000	70%	Southeast
Boseman University	18,500	80%	Southeast
McIntosh Bay University	14,000	62%	Southeast
Witherspoon Woods University	5,447	64%	Southeast

colleagues (2009) and involved first analyzing the data for each participant and then analyzing the data and their connections across the participants. Thematic analysis was utilized to examine their photos and narratives (Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018; Tsang, 2020).

FINDINGS

One of the key findings was that participants reported feeling isolated both as an RA and as a student. Though they acknowledged sometimes feeling close to and valued by their peers, they also often felt misunderstood by peers, supervisors, and residents, causing them to feel isolated. This sense of separation seems to be a result of their perceptions that others held stereotypical views of Black culture and that there were few Black staff in their departments. They felt excluded and marginalized, and many of them struggled to have meaningful relationships with peers from different cultural identities. This feeling affected their emotional state, job performance, and desire to continue in the RA role.

Tara described the scenario in Figure 1 (*see page 37*), which features her seated by herself in the hallway outside a class she was required to take as an RA. She was one of the few Black students in that class, and the photo was taken by a White peer from inside the classroom. Tara felt it was a strong visual representation of what it felt like to be isolated in that way.

So, this was before our RA class maybe a week or two ago . . . So, I included it for that reason just because it was a funny moment. But then I also included [it], because I was looking at it when you were saying what it feels like to be a Black RA, and I feel like that

kind of describes it at times. Even though the RA that took this picture is White and we have a good relationship, I think a lot of times I do feel isolated as a Black student in general and also as an RA. And there's other Black RAs like I mentioned, and I don't know if that has to do with personally just feeling isolated, or just feeling isolated as a Black student. I'm not really sure. But yeah, definitely just feel isolated in this space sometimes.

FIGURE 1

Before RA Class



Utilizing support networks and counterspaces was a common coping strategy for the participants, who frequently talked about leaning on their relationships with other Black RAs or Black friends.

Uniqua recalled having similar feelings. As the only Black person on her staff, she often grew tired of being around her White staff and sometimes felt disconnected because of cultural differences. To counter this feeling of isolation, she brought her friends, other Black women, to events in the residence halls, so she could be part of a familiar community.

I got tired of being around them a lot. So usually, I was always inviting my friends to come along, which I did ask [co-workers] like "hey is it OK? Is it OK if I invite the rest of my group my usual group?" . . . I'll say it like this, it was really fun to be around them sometimes, and other times it was just like I don't even understand the references they make, or the jokes they make, or sometimes I'm just tired of listening to their music. I don't know. So, I would just try to surround myself with my friends so that I felt a little bit better about where I was.

Uniqua submitted an image (*Figure 2*) of five Black female friends who she referred to as critical sources of support. In short, she had to deliberately create a sense of familiarity around her, because otherwise she would have felt isolated.

FIGURE 2

Uniqua's Friend Group



Practitioners have a responsibility to stand up for Black RAs by showing outward signs of support.

Uniqua submitted another photo (*Figure 3*, see page 39), which featured other RAs on her staff, commenting that she “stood out like a sore thumb” as the one Black woman on the staff. She indicated that she was not dressed formally like her coworkers for their staff banquet, as she was not aware or informed that the rest of the staff were planning to dress up for the event. She recalled feeling uncomfortable when she came down to meet the group and realized how underdressed she looked in comparison to the others. This example highlights how feelings of exclusion and disconnection negatively impacted her sense of belonging. Though feeling underdressed for a banquet may seem like a small thing, it shows how even this minor social expectation made Uniqua feel that she was really not part of the staff.

JW talked about feeling isolated because staff seemed so divided. “And literally you go into our team meetings, and we’re divided. It’s basically segregated. . . . White people on this side and all the People of Color, Black people on this side.” She submitted an

image of the conference room where her staff's meetings are held (*Figure 4, see page 40*) to represent this divide and the tension she feels when staff go into those weekly meetings. Though the room is empty in the picture, she describes the group being literally divided: Whites on one side of the table and Blacks on the other. When asked if others on staff noticed this, JW indicated that her Black coworkers all noticed the divide, but her White peers never seemed to, while supervisors seemed oblivious to the dynamic even when Black staff brought up the concern. The fact that her leadership was doing little to nothing to address the clear racial divide in their staff was alienating and only increased her isolation.

Elle also discussed this disconnection as an almost physical divide. One of the images she submitted (*Figure 5, see page 41*) seemed symbolic of this racial separation that, at times, left her feeling isolated; the photo was taken at a campus dining location

FIGURE 3

Uniqua and Her RA Staff



where Elle was eating with a friend when they both noticed that the lines appeared segregated. To Elle, this spoke to the nature of race relations on her HWI campus, where she witnessed many examples of what she called “petty racism.” Though acknowledging that there were also some blatant acts of racism, she was more aware of microaggressions—subtle, pervasive forms of racism that make Black students feel

FIGURE 4

JW's Staff Conference Room



Though participants sensed a feeling of disconnection, they also expressed appreciation for the experiences they had with peers and other students; the RA position served in many ways as a means of connection.

isolated and unsupported, reinforcing a sense of being othered and making it harder to develop a strong sense of belonging.

DISCUSSION

As the participants revealed, feelings of isolation can make it difficult for Black RAs to develop a sense of belonging (Boettcher et al., 2019; Hardaway, 2020; Harper et al., 2011; Harwood et al., 2012; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Jagers & Iverson, 2012; Paladino et al., 2005). This feeling of disconnection was caused in part by cultural differences and differing preferences (Jagers & Iverson, 2012). Participants were concerned about a wide range of differences, including how they communicated and the things they liked to do, watch, and listen to—differences that became so draining at times that they needed to retreat to being around those with shared interests and cultural backgrounds.

Tara's story and accompanying photo (*Figure 1, page 37*) illustrates the paradox of feeling simultaneously connected and disconnected—sometimes feeling a sense of connection with their peers but also feeling different from and outside the group. The image of her sitting outside the classroom, separate from others, poignantly reflects her struggle to feel included in spaces where she often felt like she was “on the outside looking in.” Though participants sensed a feeling of disconnection, they also expressed appreciation for the experiences they had with peers and other students; the RA position served in many ways as a means of connection.

FIGURE 5**Racial Divide at a Campus Eatery**

Uniqua's story is a good example of how Black students seek familiarity when they feel isolated; she managed this by inviting her friends into the residence hall, which then became a counterspace that provided comfort and support. As Strayhorn (2018) emphasized, sense of belonging is heavily influenced by identity and context, particularly when cultural differences are unacknowledged or misunderstood. When these differences are not appreciated, underrepresented students may feel excluded, misunderstood, or undervalued, which can prevent them from connecting with their peers, thus weakening their sense of belonging.

JW and Elle provided insights into how divides within RA teams led to their feelings of isolation. Both represented this theme with images illustrating actual physical separation in some spaces. JW's observation of a racially divided meeting space and the perceived indifference of her supervisor reflect a culturally unresponsive work environment and represents systemic issues within staff dynamics that perpetuate Black RAs' feelings of exclusion. This indifference hinders collaboration and contributes to a diminished sense of belonging among Black RAs.

Elle's story also illustrates the negative impact of microaggressions on Black students, who feel disconnected and othered by instances of what Elle referred to as "petty racism." These findings are consistent with those of Roland and Agosto (2017), who

found that Black women often felt they had to navigate spaces cautiously rather than authentically in order to avoid reinforcing stereotypes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The findings of this study suggest several implications for higher education and housing and residence life practice. To support Black RAs and foster inclusive environments, residence life professionals can implement the following strategies.

Create Affirming Spaces

Practitioners must help to create and promote intentional support structures and affirming spaces for Black RAs. Utilizing support networks and counterspaces (Hardaway, 2020) was a common coping strategy for the participants, who frequently talked about leaning on their relationships with other Black RAs or Black friends. In fact, relationships with other Black RAs stood out as a key factor for their sense of belonging. One reason that Black RAs feel more isolated in their positions is that they are usually under-represented both on the RA team and in the department (Harper et al., 2011).

Many participants sought support in specific groups (friends or peers) and in spaces (student organizations or campus offices created to serve Black students) where they did not feel so isolated. JW found support in her campus multicultural center, where she felt “that’s actually where the Black professionals were.” JW turned to another staff member who shares her identity as a Black woman and joins her for what she calls walks and talks around their area in the evening when they catch up with each other and talk about their experiences as staff. Participants also appreciated the support of student organizations for Black students, like the Black Student Alliance/Union and (since most participants were women) campus women’s centers. Many also talked about finding community with the other Black RAs on staff, relationships that seemed to be critical for them as outlets for sharing their experiences.

Uniqua shared a story and image (Figure 6, see page 43) that shows a strong example of how practitioners can provide a space for Black RAs.

So this is a picture of all the Blacks [RAs] on our entire campus, which is really sad because we have, I want to say . . . there is a hundred and something total RAs on our campus, and this picture is of the Black RAs, which is like I said, kind of sad, but this was our closing dinner . . . I wanted the research to include the fact that we did always try to get together, and we did have our own group chat and we utilized our group chat to the max.

When asked how the group came together, she referred to one staff member, a Black woman and a graduate student staff member at the time, who organized the group and encouraged the Black RAs to connect with each other. Uniqua expressed appreciation for her efforts.

No one assigned her that role, no one made her do those things. She kind of just stood up and was like, I want us Black people, since we’re such a small group, to be able to have a community outside of this bigger community to feel supported. And it was really nice.

FIGURE 6

Uniqua and Other Black RAs



Practitioners must be intentional about creating spaces for marginalized RAs to connect with others who share their identities and lived experiences. Practitioners should also strive to create affinity groups, identity-based networking, or mentorship opportunities for underrepresented RAs to be paired with professional staff or alumni who share identities or experiences. Creating these spaces and groups can help minimize the feelings of isolation that marginalized RAs experience.

Provide Mental Health Support

Several participants mentioned the support they received from their campus counseling and psychological services. Since the RA job has become so complex and sometimes so stressful that it can lead to burnout and their own mental health issues, more emphasis should be placed on providing access to counseling services, mental health resources, or support groups (Boone et al., 2016; McLaughlin, 2018; Paladino et al., 2005; Stoner, 2017). Departments should put more support behind acknowledging that the job is difficult and should help Black RAs access resources that can help them talk through some of the issues they are experiencing or helping residents with. Participants already seemed to be tapped into their campus counseling centers or therapy but wished there were also resources specifically for them. Although most housing and residence life professionals are not trained counselors and are not hired to play that role, there are still many options that departments could consider, such as hosting open forums and advocacy groups, creating meditation spaces, or bringing counselors into the halls.

Black RAs shouldn't be put in a position where they must always speak up on their own behalf or address staff conflict themselves, as this may isolate them further and reinforce stereotypes from their peers, like being seen as combative.

Recognize and Address Microaggressions

Practitioners should address the microaggressions that their Black and underrepresented students experience. Several participants recalled incidents when supervisors could have intervened in staff issues, explicitly identified the conflict or microaggression, or held staff accountable for harmful things they said or did to their Black RAs. Practitioners have a responsibility to stand up for Black RAs by showing outward signs of support. When staff issues and microaggressions are not addressed directly, Black RAs may feel even more disconnected and unseen, left to manage these challenges on their own. Black RAs shouldn't be put in a position where they must always speak up on their own behalf or address staff conflict themselves, as this may isolate them further and reinforce stereotypes from their peers, like being seen as combative.

Implement Inclusive Hiring Practices

Actively recruiting and hiring diverse staff can ensure better representation in a more inclusive environment. Participants were underrepresented on their campus, which led to feelings of isolation (Bleikamp et al., 2015; Hardaway, 2020; Harper et al., 2011; Healea & Hale, 2016; Paladino et al., 2005). For this reason, departments must make a conscientious effort to reflect on their current recruitment strategies and think about how they can best attract and retain professionals of color. Healea and Hale (2016) found that professional staff of color were more likely to hire RAs of color and make them feel supported throughout the recruitment process; RAs could then go on to help champion the experiences of other students of color (Schuster & Stalker, 2020). Participants acknowledged the importance of having a Black supervisor or a close relationship with a Black professional staff member in the department, and creating space for them can only have a positive impact on their experiences (Schuster & Stalker, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The experiences of Black RAs who participated in this study reveal a critical tension between feelings of isolation and belonging. Though one of the essential roles of RAs is fostering inclusive communities, Black RAs often grapple with feelings of marginalization, which are exacerbated by cultural differences, underrepresentation, and racial stereotypes, impacting their ability to fully engage authentically and find support within residential and campus environments. The isolation experienced by Black RAs at HWIs is a multifaceted issue that requires systemic change. By understanding and addressing the specific challenges faced by Black RAs, housing departments can work to create more inclusive environments for all staff and students. By addressing the nuances and complexities of Black RA experiences, institutions can better support these students, ensuring that they feel valued and empowered in their roles. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some assessment strategies your institution could implement to better understand the Black RA experience on campus?
2. What are some challenges and issues one might face in implementing equitable hiring practices?
3. How might one approach the training of White supervisors to make them more conscious of the unique challenges that Black RAs face?
4. In what way might working at different types of institutions influence the lived experiences of Black RAs?
5. Photovoice is a qualitative tool that allows students to powerfully share their experiences in a visual and narrative way. How might the use of a different methodology have shaped the research findings?
6. How would the results of this study be impacted if the authors focused on the lived experiences of Black graduate student residential life staff at HWIs?

Discussion questions were developed by Mel Carousso and Shavell Jones, Binghamton University in New York.