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Resident Assistants with Minoritized Identities: The Promise of Identity-Affirming Microclimates in Enhancing RA Experiences

THE MINORITIZED IDENTITIES OF MANY RESIDENT ASSISTANTS are rarely a topic of studies that evaluate their campus experiences, yet these identities are crucial in making these experiences positive. This qualitative research study helps fill this gap in the literature by reporting the experiences of 21 resident assistants with minoritized identities attending four different four-year institutions in the United States. Following the methodological strategies of constructivist grounded theory, our findings contribute new theoretical and practical knowledge on how identity-affirming microclimates can complement identity development, capacity building, and empowerment among resident assistants with minoritized identities. Our study's findings can be translated into practical implications that can be used by professional staff to support the creation of identity-affirming microclimates that actively champion skill development, team development, and appreciation through humanizing social justice praxis.

Editor's note: The authors have chosen to lowercase the word White, which would normally be capitalized according to APA guidelines, in order to avoid seeming to center whiteness.

Social justice remains a competency, goal, and process within housing and residence life as well as student affairs (Association of College and University Housing Officers-International [ACUHO-I], 2021; College Student Educators International [ACPA] & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 2015; Wagner & Scott, 2019). Residence halls maintain strong potential to serve as transformative spaces that can engender social change and promote social justice (Otchere et al., 2017; Sears & Tu, 2017). In particular, residence life staff and residence hall student organizations can spark conversations about social change efforts on campus and bring attention to broader campus climate issues through programming and inclusive community living. Professional and paraprofessional residence life staff are well positioned to advise, support, and mentor students through educative processes that result in positive developmental community outcomes (Blimling, 2015; Sears & Tu, 2017).

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Resident assistants (RAs) are integral to these educative processes, and their roles on campus are broad and multifaceted. In addition to serving as institutional representatives who enforce institutional policies and perform administrative tasks, RAs also serve as key peer socialization agents who guide students through the transition to college, host programs to foster residence hall student and community development, and provide resources and referrals to students experiencing a range of social and emotional challenges like homesickness, academic difficulty, and trauma (Blimling, 2015). Through their positions, RAs can contribute to cultivating vibrant and inclusive residence hall communities, supporting positive student development among residents, mediating residential conflicts, and educating residents on pressing topics connected to issues like mental health on campus (Becker & Drum, 2015; Bonfiglio, 2016) and significant national and local events (Johnson & Kang, 2006; Roland & Agosto, 2017; Schuster & Stalker, 2020).

Residence hall environments have strong potential to produce a range of positive outcomes for residential students (Mayhew et al., 2016), though recent research also shows that they can be spaces that allow for the manifestation of microaggressions, identity-contestation, and dehumanization for members of non-dominant identity groups, especially at predominantly white institutions (Harper et al., 2011; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Roland & Agosto, 2017) and/or historically hetero(cis) normative institutions (Blockett, 2017; Kortegast, 2017; Pryor et al., 2016; Tillapaugh, 2015). In this way, campus residence halls may magnify issues related to broader institutional, sociopolitical, and sociohistorical systems and structures embedded within society that produce oppression through racism, sexism, heterosexism, hetero(cis)genderism, classism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia (Bennett et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2015).

Undergraduate students with minoritized identities living in residence halls situated within inhospitable campus climates regularly contend with these forces both inside and outside of the residence hall environment. For these students, the minoritization of their identities is systemically rooted in and enacted through microaggressions, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Garcia, 2016; Nadal, 2013). Students of color and LGBTQ+ students may come up against stereotypes, tokenization, and/or openly discriminatory actions that intend to invalidate their personhood and produce negative outcomes (George Mwangi et al., 2018; Kortegast, 2017; Renn & Reason, 2013; Schuster, 2017, 2021). Such invalidations may be compounded and amplified for students with multiple minoritized identities who contend with overlapping systems of oppression (Kulick et al., 2017; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015).

Understanding the experiences of RAs with minoritized identities is important, but the topic is largely absent in the literature. This qualitative study fills this gap by examining the experiences of undergraduate college students with minoritized identi-

ties serving as RAs. Specifically, this study explores how minoritized RAs' campus experiences contributed to the ways in which they made sense of their identities alongside the RA role.

RESIDENT ASSISTANTS WITH MINORITIZED IDENTITIES

While RAs have important campus roles, there is little research on their campus and leadership experiences, and studies conducted on RAs often employ identity-neutral perspectives. In our review of the literature, we located three studies that researched RAs with minoritized racial identities (Foste & Johnson, 2021; Harper et al., 2011; Johnson & Kang, 2006), two studies that considered the experiences of women RAs (Cousineau & Chambers, 2015; Posner & Brodsky, 1993), one study that considered RAs' minoritized racial and gender identities (Roland & Agosto, 2017), and no studies on RAs identifying as LGBTQ+, though several studies did include them within a broader sample of LGBQ residential students (Anderson-Martinez & Vianden, 2014; Evans et al., 2001; Mollett et al., 2020; Tillapaugh, 2015). Trans* students have also been largely ignored in the literature, though many institutions' policies for forcing trans* students into separate gender-neutral housing or onto floors arranged by sex assigned at birth (Kortegast, 2017; Mollett et al., 2020) can create barriers that dampen their aspirations to openly serve in RA capacities (Martin et al., 2018). Additionally, with the exception of the work of Roland and Agosto (2017), there are no recent peer-reviewed studies that investigate RAs with multiple minoritized identities.

In spite of the scarcity of literature about these student populations, we can utilize the findings from across these studies to synthesize how students with minoritized identities serving in RA roles continue to encounter and work to rebuff the deleterious effects associated with marginalization and oppression occurring on campus, especially within predominantly white or historically hetero(cis)normative institutions.

Trends culled from these studies indicate that RAs with minoritized identities are often compelled to perform their racialized and gendered identities for their dominant identity peers, residents, and supervisors in ways that account for otherwise absent or underrepresented student populations (Roland & Agosto, 2017), disprove harmful negative stereotypes (Harper et al., 2011), and conform to expected gendered roles and behaviors (Anderson-Martinez & Vianden, 2014; Cousineau & Chambers, 2015; Posner & Brodsky, 1993; Roland & Agosto, 2017; Tillapaugh, 2015; Wagner & Tillapaugh, 2018). Supervisors, peers, and residents with dominant (i.e., nonmarginalized) racial and gender identities may hold biased racialized, heteronormative, and hetero(cis)gendered expectations for RA job performance that result in minoritized RAs experiencing increased scrutiny of their leadership, role authority, and decision-making capacities (Cousineau & Chambers, 2015; Posner & Brodsky, 1993; Roland & Agosto, 2017). They may feel increased pressure to combat these stereotypes by silencing or by overperforming salient aspects of their identities in order to be hired into or succeed in the role (Anderson-Martinez & Vianden, 2014; Harper et al., 2011; Tillapaugh, 2015). While minoritized RAs frequently see themselves as representing a visible pathway for other students with minoritized identities to serve in the RA position in the

future (Evans et al., 2001; Harper et al., 2011), the unbalanced expectations imposed upon them reify hierarchical, raced, and gendered leadership norms (Muhr & Sullivan, 2013) that can make minoritized students feel so isolated or lonely (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Mollett et al., 2020; Tillapaugh, 2015) that they depart the position (Harper et al., 2011).

Further, students with minoritized identities in undergraduate leadership roles, like RAs, may be expected to proselytize an institutional diversity message that does not match their lived experience (Linley, 2018). Additionally, they may be expected to facilitate dialogues on issues related to social justice and inclusion (Foste & Johnson, 2021; Johnson & Kang, 2006; Roland & Agosto, 2017) as tokenized or hyper-visible representatives of their identity group (Harper et al., 2011; Roland & Agosto, 2017). Furthermore, all RAs can and do feel the effects of secondary trauma, especially as it relates to the crisis response aspects of the position (Hardy & Dodd, 1998; Lynch, 2017; Stoner, 2017). These tendencies for burnout may be heightened for RAs with minoritized identities who can feel racial battle fatigue (Foste & Johnson, 2021; Smith et al., 2007), queer battle fatigue (Wozolek et al., 2015), and/or social justice fatigue (Furr, 2018) because they continually navigate social justice conversations inside and outside of their residence hall community. While the lived experiences associated with each identity group based on their minoritized racial, gender, and/or sexual orientation identities are differently experienced in unique and nuanced ways, these trends synthesized from current research represent several broad-based experiential and affective similarities recurring across this literature base.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study followed Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory approach to account for and represent the lived experiences of college and university students with minoritized identities serving as RAs. As a methodology, our use of constructivist grounded theory focused on building conceptual categories aimed to generate a theory about broader social processes as well as the underlying power mechanisms that sustain these systems (Charmaz, 2011, 2014). We found that constructivist grounded theory offered both the flexibility and structure to distinguish variation as well as centralizing similarities associated with the lived experiences and felt realities of participants in our study (Kassam et al., 2020). Constructivist grounded theory was especially useful as a means to centralize study participants' voices in ways that incorporated social justice, which is both a strength of this methodology (Charmaz, 2011, 2017; Kassam et al., 2020) and a goal of residence life (Wagner et al., 2019).

Data Collection and Study Participants

We collected data through semi-structured interviews that took place throughout the 2018-19 academic year. Interviews generally lasted for about an hour and were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. In interviews, participants were invited to talk about (a) the intersections of their personal, social, and RA roles and identities; (b) their experiences within their residence hall role; and (c) their supervisory relationships. Incorporating a social justice perspective into the research, we followed an overarching

goal of qualitative interviewing by developing in each interview “an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9).

In all, 21 resident assistants attending four different four-year institutions in different geographical regions of the United States participated in interviews. Nearly all students in the study attended a public university (82%). Table 1 offers additional information that speaks to the sample’s heterogeneity. Throughout this paper, we use pseudonyms when referring to study participants.

TABLE 1

Study Participants

PSEUDONYM	GENDER	RACE/ETHNICITY	SEXUAL ORIENTATION	CLASS YEAR	# YEARS as RA
Angelina	Woman	White, Hispanic	Straight	2	1
Braelynn	Woman	Black	Straight	4	3
Brandon	Man	Pacific Islander, African American	Gay	3	1
Breanna	Woman	White	Straight	4	1
Emere***	Woman	Pacific Islander, Asian	Not disclosed	2	1
Hailey	Woman	White, Black	Not disclosed	2	1
Jesslyn	Woman	White	Straight	4	2
Joziah	Man	White	Gay	4	3
Makayla	Woman	African American, White	Not disclosed	3	2
Missy***	Woman	Asian	Straight	4	2
Nicky	Nonbinary	Pacific Islander (Chamorro)	Gay	4	2
Olivia**	Woman	White	Bisexual	3	1
P. J.**	Trans* man	White	Straight	2	1
Pooja***	Woman	South Asian	Straight	2	1
Renata***	Woman	Latina, White	Straight	3	1
Shawn**	Man	African American (Ethiopian)	Straight	4	1
Spencer	Trans* man	White	Queer	4	1
Sydney***	Woman	Hispanic	Straight	4	2
Tau	Man	Black	Straight	3	2
Tomas***	Man	Latino	Straight	3	1
Zac**	Man	African American	Bisexual	3	2

** indicates transfer student, *** indicates first-generation student

Note: Gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation are presented in participants’ own language.

Analysis

In line with constructivist grounded theory, we followed an inductive and iterative path toward category generation that involved continually engaging with the data (Charmaz, 2014). Data analysis within constructivist grounded theory encourages researchers to move beyond descriptive trends evidenced by the data to include abstract interpretations of participants' experiences as a means to reveal invisible structures (Charmaz, 2011). We began this analysis by reading and rereading interview transcripts in order to generate initial impressions of the data. Next, we met to establish tentative keywords for initial codes in order to ensure consistency in this phase of the data reduction and organization process. Then we returned to the transcripts and worked together to develop focused codes that aimed to provide detail and nuance to the trends observed so far in the data. Throughout these initial stages, we remained open to the emergence of new codes and ideas.

After these meetings and rounds of coding, we wrote reflexive and analytic memos in order to begin building and teasing out categories (Charmaz, 2014). We used research team meetings to discuss memos and reach consensus about the categories we developed. During this time, new interviews were still being conducted, which allowed us to test preliminary categories through what Charmaz (2014) termed theoretical sampling. This advanced-stage sampling technique served as a strength within constructivist grounded theory research studies because the technique allowed for a fuller range of category-building to occur by engaging participants in conversations related to trends appearing in the data. The focused nature of this theoretical sampling resulted in data saturation in ways that allowed us to construct rich conceptual categories that incorporated a range of participants' lived experiences (Charmaz, 2011, 2014; Kassam et al., 2020).

We situated ourselves within this study as white cisgender researchers with a social justice orientation and a commitment to honoring the lived experiences of the study participants. Our perspectives and experiences in higher education are most shaped and challenged by its enduring heteropatriarchal systems and structures, which were also felt by many study participants. The iterative and collaborative nature of this research design allowed us to jointly grapple with our positionalities and identities across all phases of the present study.

FINDINGS

In approaching our analysis, we recognize that people's lived experiences, shaped by multiple privileged and minoritized identities, are unique, varied, complex, and nuanced. While this study synthesizes trends described by participants and consistently evidenced by the data, we invite readers to further situate research participants' stories through the lens of intersectionality (see Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991) as a way to enrich the understandings of participants' experiences and consider underlying power structures at play.

The findings that follow demonstrate that the presence of an identity-affirming microclimate situated within a resident assistant staff and supported by residential life structures (e.g., central office team, resident director relationships, and/or floor communities) complemented minoritized RAs' experiences with identity development, capacity-building, and motivations to re-invest in other minoritized students as mentors and role models. The interconnected categories developed from our analysis point to opportunities for the microclimate created by these uniquely situated student teams to serve as a critical growth space through which social justice principles can be enacted and students with minoritized identities can feel validated and humanized.

Identity-Affirming Microclimates

Throughout the interviews, RAs with minoritized identities described their experiences as members of RA staffs in ways that illustrated the potential for these spaces to serve as identity-affirming microclimates that valued whole relationships and were attuned to social justice. A primary marker of identity-affirming microclimates for RAs with minoritized identities was the presence of authentic relationships with other RAs as well as residence life professional staff, who students described as transcending their roles as supervisors to be mentors that taught, appreciated, and listened. The fullness of these relationships made RAs with minoritized identities feel humanized rather than feeling flattened by others into only these identities. Reflecting on her transition to the RA role, Missy discussed overcoming feelings of trepidation around being tokenized at the intersections of her minoritized identities as an Asian woman:

At first, I was nervous [I would have to] make sure [residence life] sees that I'm not a one-dimensional kind of figure [defined solely by an identity]. They see a very authentic version of me, who I am around my closest friends. It's very monumental.

In a separate interview, P.J. exemplified the sentiments expressed by other participants about the special connections made within this microclimate, which were “really, really solid relationships and very accepting ones, too. [RAs and residence life professional staff] want to learn more about you, and they want to respect you, respect who you are.” By speaking about their identities being respected within this space, RAs with minoritized identities felt they were able to present themselves authentically. This was particularly important because some talked about being forced to minimize salient aspects of themselves in other on- and off-campus contexts.

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Being within a residence life office that hosted social justice-oriented professional development and trainings was particularly helpful in allowing these identity-affirming microclimates to form and positively shaped RAs' experiences. As Zac explained,

On campus, the nature of the [residence life] community is very "woke," if you will. People are open to having a good dialogue with students from different backgrounds and very good at connecting to students from different backgrounds. Even if they're not part of that demographic, they're aware of it and still engage. If they don't know something, they're very upfront and forward . . . They try to at least learn.

Emere echoed this appreciation for the openness and acceptance that she experienced:

People in residence life are just very open and understanding of different identities and paths. People in that office have extensive training on acceptance, microaggressions, and things like that. This means they're very mindful about the way they approach some subjects and things. That made me more comfortable coming to [them].

Hosting expertly organized social justice trainings for professional staff and RAs contributed to an overall atmosphere that made RAs with minoritized identities feel that they could enter their positions fully.

Another element enhanced by an identity-affirming microclimate for students within this study was connecting to peers or mentors with shared or similar minoritized identities. Although students with minoritized identities spoke of establishing positive relationships with mentors and peers with a dominant identity, who were knowledgeable about social justice topics and honest about the individual self-growth work they had left to do, some RAs in the study highlighted how relationships with those having the same or a similar minoritized identity added layers of richness to their residence life experience. As Braelynn shared,

My [early residence life mentor] was also an African American woman and she had that perspective, which was very encouraging to me—for her to instantly accept me as me . . . Another [residence life mentor in my second year as an RA], we shared the same gender identity and religious identity. She helped me make connections among the intersections of being in academia, a woman, and religious. They both reassured me by being role models who shared my identities and they did their jobs well.

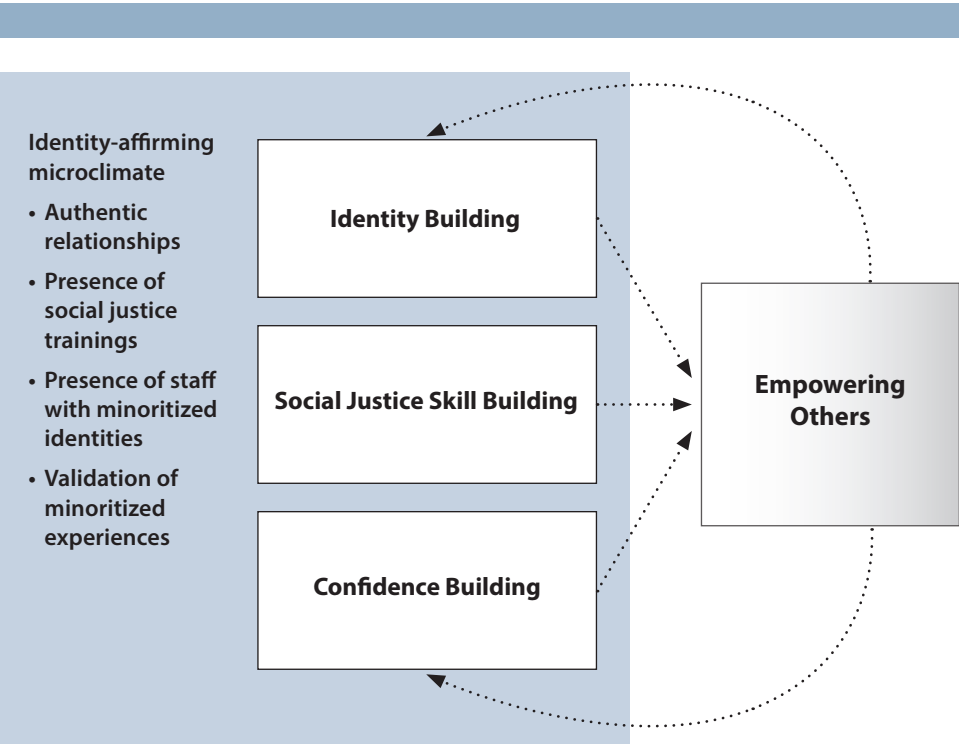
Relationships with other students or staff in residence life with shared identities or deep commitments to social justice created an empowering space for minoritized students that enhanced their RA experiences. As Jesslyn explained, "The women around me on my RA staff shaped me; the other women on my staff empowered me; my [women] residents empowered me."

Building Identity and Capacity

An identity-affirming microclimate helped cultivate an atmosphere in which RAs with minoritized identities effectively engaged with their identities and built out their capacities as leaders and educators. As indicated in Figure 1 (*see page 19*), the categories

maintain some fluidity and interconnectedness, theoretically suggesting that the complementary and porous relationships among these categories take on increased personal and developmental significance for RAs with minoritized identities.

FIGURE 1
Conditions and Outcomes of Identity-Affirming Microclimates



Identity building. Prior to becoming RAs, all students in this study had engaged in identity work related to better understanding their social, collective, experiential, and personal identities. Additionally, a number of participants encountered overt and covert encounters with identity-based discrimination, oppression, and microaggressions that sought to undermine their humanity and limit their potential (see Schuster & Stalker, 2020). This was especially the case for students of color, queer students, and students with multiple minoritized identities. Yet students in the study said that they were generally resilient, thus leveraging the RA role in ways that enriched their conceptualizations about themselves, their identities, their capabilities to lead, and their drive for the future. As RAs with minoritized identities described,

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residence life professional staff served vital roles as supportive mentors bolstering the solidity of their identities. For example, Makayla's experience, combined with the ongoing guidance she received from her residence life mentor, supported her in defining new ways of understanding her racial identities:

The experiences here as an RA and with my boss [who was also African American] made me more comfortable identifying as African American and white, and I think that just kind of was like, "Yeah. You have the right to speak about racial issues." Because I'm experiencing them, not necessarily just like any other Black woman would, but I am experiencing similar issues and therefore, yes, I can talk about those [issues]. After those conversations, I was like, "Cool!" It was probably the most striking thing.

Similarly, Zac understood new dimensions of his identities by serving as an RA and used his overall identity as a driver to actively participate in and engage with decision-making structures within the institution:

Being queer, I think having come to terms with that throughout my RA experience, it gave me a stronger foundation to embrace myself as a person regardless of my race or sexual orientation. Now, I use these identities to drive me, push me to do different things like civil rights and all that jazz. As a queer person, I make sure to come to the forefront of the group and say, "Hey. Let me have a seat at the table. Let me be an active part of the conversation."

For Brandon, his salient minoritized identities, which were, likewise, explored throughout his RA experience, made the RA role feel as if it were a new extension of who he was: "[Because I was developing my identity in this role], I see myself now in all that I do as an RA because I can't see myself as anything else." Not only did being situated within an identity-affirming microclimate contribute to the identity building that students in the study were doing, but it also contributed to feelings of self-empowerment that were occurring simultaneously.

Confidence building. Participants generally credited the RA position with affording them the opportunity to develop a range of transferable skills, including interpersonal communication, conflict management, leadership, time management, and organization. However, RAs with minoritized identities repeatedly spoke specifically of how serving as an RA instilled within them stronger self-confidence. As Jesslyn indicated,

Being an RA is the best thing that ever happened to me in college hands down. I have learned so much from it. It's been the most rewarding thing. I felt empowered by being an RA. I'm definitely more confident in who I am as a leader, my abilities, being more comfortable with myself and being open and honest with people about me.

Spencer expressed similar feelings:

I got more confident with being able to lead, especially just learning about myself and my [trans] identity . . . becoming more confident with who I am as a person and that helped me feel confident with how I presented myself as a leader through the RA position.*

These students indicated enriched conceptualizations of the intersections of their minoritized identities and their leadership roles, which fostered stronger self-confidence. Representing a perspective shared by many participants, Missy reflected on how the RA experience was powerful in increasing her confidence in her identity, her self-awareness, and her leadership potential beyond this role:

Whenever I applied to be an RA, I didn't think I would want to do it because I didn't have a lot of self-confidence. Being an RA was the one thing that shifted me from being really self-conscious or self-doubtful to being a completely different person from my first year of college. It gave me confidence. I discovered that I, in a sense, was very limitless.

The increased self-confidence that students in the study singularly attributed to serving in the RA position instilled within them a new sense of future possibility for who they could be and what they could do.

Social justice skill building. Engaging with social justice topics through their roles as RAs provided participants with opportunities to create educational residence hall programs that promoted community, provided social justice perspectives, and remained authentic to their sense of identity in pursuing important causes. Creating a floor environment that was attuned to social justice remained a key feature of the RA role that initially drew many students in the study to the position. Through their positions on campus, RAs practiced and refined their skills related to social justice education and collective consciousness raising by facilitating dialogue and navigating conversations around difficult topics. As RAs reflected on how they were developing their social justice skillset, they described how intentional conversations frequently lent themselves to prompting residents to reflect, providing topical education, re-establishing parameters for acceptability on the floor, and ensuring paths forward for residents. Joziah offered an example:

I had one student who was saying things not appropriate, calling someone on the floor by their race instead of their name. I just sat down with him and engaged with him, just questioning him so he can unpack it himself. My role was bringing awareness to a larger idea through my questioning.

Nicky understood the importance of having all residents feel a sense of inclusion:

I just wanted it to be a genuine conversation, constructive conversation. I still want that resident to feel like he can still be part of the community . . . I don't want him to feel like they don't belong even after he's said some hurtful things [related to LGBTQ+ identities]. There has to be a path forward.

In addition to individual conversations, RAs with minoritized identities engaged with residents about social justice topics through programming and community building. Nicky expressed excitement about being highly active in organizing several social justice programs on their floor, describing their rationale for engaging residents in community development in this manner:

I've done a lot of programs bringing in different clubs or bringing in the library archives to talk about the history of where this place is—the land that our university was built on since it is Native American land. So just trying to educate everyone on something, to make them feel common community they can go to while they're on campus.

Social justice programming and educational conversations required a skillset from RAs that they were actively building through practice, and RAs in the study viewed these efforts to be closely tied to the development of their residential floor communities.

Empowering others. RAs with minoritized identities felt a personal responsibility to utilize these campus leadership positions to generate empowerment in other students with minoritized identities, providing mentorship to them in ways that inspired future pathways to serve in student leadership roles and be successful within the institution. RAs also saw themselves as representatives or role models for members of minoritized communities outside the university setting, such as family and friends. For Brandon, this meant serving as a source of empowerment for his family members by demonstrating what is possible through university student leadership roles:

When I go home, I'm telling them about college and my being an RA leader, being a good example for my cousins and brothers—there's a lot of pressure. I make sure I'm being a good example for the people that I'm supposed to inspire.

Braelynn talked about building connections with other women of color at her institution and supporting them on their journeys:

I kind of mentor in layers, women of color on my floor and women in general. It isn't an either/or type of thing—there's overlap. I'm happy to be that representation and when someone tells me I empowered them by pushing them to do something [like an academic or leadership opportunity] it makes me feel awesome or empowered that I had an impact.

For Braelynn, seeing the difference she made in other minoritized students' college experience generated empowerment within her as well. Similarly, Missy noticed that the work of mentoring other students and serving as representation within her communities contributed to her identity development: "You have to mold [others] and be a role model,

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and in that sense, it kind of shapes who you are as well.” By serving in the RA position, students felt responsibilities to represent their communities and to give back by mentoring others, which in turn further cultivated their self-confidence and shaped their identities.

IMPLICATIONS

This research contributes new knowledge about how RAs with minoritized identities experience their residence hall roles alongside their social and collective identities. Specifically, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that an identity-affirming microclimate has strong potential to enrich experiences within the RA role for students with minoritized identities. This key finding connects to several recent studies that similarly conclude that identity-positive microclimates function as important spaces for students, faculty, and/or staff with minoritized identities (Garcia, 2016; Hill et al., 2020; Keels, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). Additionally, this study offers new understandings of how identity-affirming microclimates enrich students’ identities, capacities, and empowerment. Through these findings, we offer a new way of thinking about RA staff development aimed at enriching RAs’ experiences through the intentional cultivation of an identity-affirming microclimate.

ENHANCING RA EXPERIENCES: A NEW MODEL FOR RA STAFF DEVELOPMENT

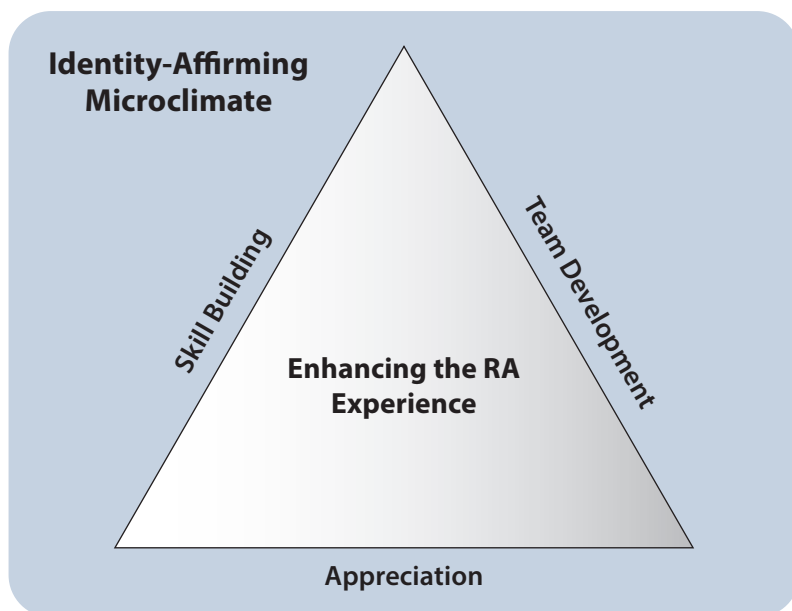
Identity-Affirming Microclimate

As detailed throughout our findings, the presence of an identity-affirming microclimate enriched the ways in which students with minoritized identities experienced other facets of their positions as RAs (Figure 2, page 24). Developing an identity-affirming microclimate takes concerted effort and requires support from broader departmental structures and residence life leadership. In order to begin to foster an identity-affirming microclimate, residence life units need to first commit to recognizing, naming, and displacing broader societal forces that produce identity-based marginalization. From there, residence life units can design and implement ongoing (and increasingly advanced) social justice trainings that explore power and privilege through topics related to LGBTQ+ issues, racial justice, and identity-conscious mentorship. Simultaneously, residential units should continue to increase the compositional representation of minoritized professional staff and RA staffs through re-envisioned recruitment and hiring processes (see Schuster & Stalker, 2020). While these actions are only starting

points, our findings show that these moves are especially meaningful to RAs with minoritized identities and provide possibilities for authentic and full relationships to form, for minoritized identities to be affirmed in asset-based ways, and for social justice principles to be enacted.

FIGURE 2

Model for Enhancing RA Experiences



Skill Building

As participants noted throughout the study, the RA position became a way for them to explore and refine their identities, to practice social justice education skills, and to empower other students through relationship building and mentorship. While previous research has shown that RAs generally benefit from the position (Benjamin & Davis, 2016), we suggest that residence life units refocus and redefine learning outcomes for their RA positions in order to become more inclusive of emerging outcomes like self-confidence, identity development, leadership capacity, relationship building, social justice education, self-concept, and agency. To offer ongoing opportunities for RAs to work toward these learning outcomes, we suggest that weekly RA staff meetings and one-on-one meetings borrow from flipped classroom models (Talbert, 2017) in order

to repurpose these times to offer intentionally designed trainings that cultivate these more expansive developmental outcomes. Making this change means shifting from traditional staff meeting models that prioritize announcements and information sharing to models that incorporate active exploration, experiential learning, and thoughtful dialogue. Within this new framework, professional staff may even draw from newer high-impact learning strategies, such as identity caucusing (Obear & martinez, 2013) and spoken word poetry (Jenkins et al., 2017).

Team Development

Positive RA team dynamics serve as sources of peer connection and empowerment for RAs with minoritized identities. In line with previous research (Guthrie et al., 2013), our study confirms that this group of minoritized student leaders valued collectivist connections that did not tokenize their minoritized identities. Opportunities for RA team development can be instituted during flipped staff meetings and should include clear ground rules that do not demand additional labor from minoritized students for performing their identities in order to educate dominant-identity peers. These expectations may reduce the number of incidents that produce identity-based fatigue. Beyond the RA staff, residence life can expand opportunities for peer connection by giving space for intersecting identity-based student collaboratives to form across institutional silos. For example, a queer student leaders of color collective might extend invitations to leaders in student government, student life organizations, and academic-based student groups (e.g., peer tutors, undergraduate researchers). While it is important to give the space needed for these collectives to flourish, it is even more important to support minoritized students in owning and operating these groups on their terms.

Appreciation

We view appreciation as being a foundational element to fulfilling this model and constructing an identity-affirming microclimate within RA staffs. Within this model, appreciation needs to be incorporated as a regular part of ongoing practice. While individual appreciation in the form of handwritten notes, mementos, and celebrations are important, so too are recognizing and emphasizing collective achievements and accomplishments among groups and coalitions of RAs. Emphasizing collective accomplishments might also be part of the rubrics for the often highly individualized RA rehire processes. In addition to these starting points, appreciation needs to extend further and include the continual investment in authentic relationships that allow professional staff to transcend their roles as supervisors to become encouraging and door-opening mentors. Threaded throughout the elements presented in this model is the cultivation of humanity and trust.

... an identity-affirming microclimate has strong potential to enrich experiences within the RA role for students with minoritized identities.

LIMITATIONS

There are two main limitations in the present study. First, this research included a sample of RAs who did and did not share the same minoritized identities. While findings indicate trends and categories consistent across participant interviews, caution should be used when transferring these findings to *all* RAs with *any* minoritized identity. We encourage readers to draw from newer research studies to tailor the broad-based implications for practice discussed in this article in order to meet the needs of the specific identities represented on their staffs. Second, though RAs in our study spoke positively of how the RA position enhanced their understandings of their multiple identities, it is important to note that not all RAs with minoritized identities will gain enriched conceptualizations of their multiple identities through the RA position. While other research we have conducted with this dataset demonstrates how this group of RAs contended with identity-based microaggressions in other campus contexts (see Schuster & Stalker, 2020), data in this study was not able to include perspectives of RAs who did not have this developmental identity experience because RAs in our sample did not express those views.

CONCLUSION

This article reported a qualitative research study describing the lived experiences of resident assistants with minoritized identities. The findings from this research reveal that an identity-affirming microclimate has strong potential to enrich the RA experience for students with minoritized identities by enhancing identity building and capacity building as well as empowering RAs to more effectively mentor others. The findings from this study can be used practically across residence life units as they continue to develop impactful residential communities. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can your residence hall staff and residence hall student organizations spark conversations about social change efforts being made on or off campus?
2. The article suggests that the first step for creating an identity-affirming microclimate is for residence life “to first commit to recognizing, naming, and displacing broader societal forces that produce identity-based marginalization.” How would you rate your residence life unit using this criterion? Discuss ways that you need to enhance, change, and improve current practices.
3. Discuss how you have helped cultivate an atmosphere in which RAs with minoritized identities effectively engaged with their identities and built out their capacities as leaders and educators. What are ways that you can build an overall identity-affirming microclimate for your RAs?
4. How do you currently recruit and hire professional and student staff? What are ways you can re-envision the recruitment and hiring process to increase compositional representation?
5. Are there opportunities for identity-conscious mentorship for staff? If not, how can you make that happen?
6. Skill building is a large piece of the RA position. The authors suggest that learning outcomes become “more inclusive of emerging outcomes” such as self-confidence and leadership skills. What are some ways that you can re-imagine professional development or training?
7. Team dynamics and appreciation are integral to a staff’s development. What identify-affirming practices do you implement?

Discussion questions developed by Katie Boone, Virginia Commonwealth University