



“I’m Not Your Mammy”: Unearthing the Racially Gendered Experiences of Undergraduate Black Women Resident Assistants at Predominantly White Institutions

By Ayana Tyler Hardaway

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This critical qualitative research study describes and explores the experiences of undergraduate Black women Resident Assistants (RAs) at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). This study explored how women navigate the RA responsibilities and how the intersections of race and gender have an impact on their role. Given the influx of campus hate crimes motivated by race across the United States, and to ensure the success and support of Black women students serving in these roles, it is imperative that we understand their racially gendered experiences within predominantly White contexts. Phenomenological research methods and a series of semi-structured interviews were used to examine the lived experiences of 19 Black undergraduate women. Critical Race Theory, Black Feminist Thought, and Intersectionality were used as frameworks to examine how participants navigate their social identities and associated experiences as an employee and student. Findings from the study indicate that the intersection of Blackness (e.g. race), being a woman (e.g. gender), and serving in the leadership role as an RA, is influenced by oppressive conditions that presented themselves in the following seven themes: Institutional Oppression; Racism; Physical, Emotional, and Psychological Stress; Fear; The Outsider Within; Controlling Images; and Care through Counterspaces. This study’s findings and future recommendations seek to support and inspire Black and other minoritized undergraduate student RAs, illuminate the diverse experiences of undergraduate Black women, and to enhance professional leadership development of residential life practitioners at PWIs.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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BACKGROUND

In this research study, I employ a critical qualitative approach to explore undergraduate Black women Resident Assistant (RA) experiences. This study explores how women navigate the responsibilities of their leadership role and the intersections of race and gender in the context of a predominantly White institution (PWI). During the tumultuous presidential campaign leading up to the 2016 election of Donald Trump, the U.S. experienced an uprising in domestic racial terrorist attacks. These occurrences resulted in an eruption of violence, murders, and protests, which were recorded and streamed on social media (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). These occurrences also affected U.S. universities across the nation who have had to address racial attacks and threats (Reilley, 2016). Black students, and other historically marginalized groups on campuses across the nation, have had to confront a myriad of issues including: institutional and systemic racism in the form of intimidation and harassment (Rogers, 2011), discrimination in admissions policies and hiring (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017), and addressing racist symbols on campus such as bananas hung from trees and confederate flags (Fortin, 2017). According to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of reported campus hate crimes increased by 25 percent from 2015 to 2016 (Campus Safety and Security, 2018). Additionally, college-specific data collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, suggests the election itself played a role in the influx of reported cases. In 2017, law enforcement reported 4,131 hate crime incidents that were motivated by race and ethnicity, of which 10.2 percent occurred on college campuses (Hate Crime Statistics, 2017). Given this surge of racist incidents on college campuses across the United States, and to ensure the success and support of Black women students serving in RA roles, it is imperative that we understand their experiences within a predominantly White context.

To date, the lived experiences of Black women serving in the RA position has received scant attention within the educational literature (Harper, Davis, Jones, McGowan, Ingram, & Platt, 2011; Roland & Agosto, 2017). The major goal of this research brief is to focus on the exclusive experiences of students who serve in the leadership roles as Resident Assistants and to call attention to recent shift in the nation's political and racial climate, which have inevitably affected the ways in which students of color experience college. Specifically, the increase of racist incidents on campuses have resulted in Black women students and professionals on campus having to cope with heightened gendered and racial microaggressions by drawing on various methods

of resistance (Roland & Agosto, 2017). Such methods include rallying and staging protests on campus, raising their voices when slighted, and resisting European standards of beauty (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, & Hunt, 2013). Resident Assistants are tasked with the responsibility of upholding inclusive and safe spaces where students can thrive, live and learn in a community with one another. Currently, educational scholarship questioning how African American students navigate racism on college campus as part of their leadership roles are underexplored (Harper, 2013). Furthermore, scholarship questioning how students who are Black women employed in the student leadership role of resident life paraprofessionals or RAs are explored even less (Roland & Agosto, 2017). Black women who occupy racially hostile campus climates experience isolation and alienation, especially at PWIs (Griffin, Cunningham, & Mwangi, 2016). As a result, this study serves to explore the lived experiences of Black women serving in the RA role.

Additionally, this study serves to challenge the current new model minority myths and narratives associated with Black undergraduate women achievement in higher education (Kaba, 2008). To date, the educational literature is void of in depth, critical analysis of the experiences of Black women and what is presumed to be known has largely been constructed through studies, which were monolithic in nature (Patton & Croom, 2017). As noted by Benjamin (1997), Black women remain "marginalized, misnamed, maligned, and made invisible in the academy" (p. 2). As long as women's voices remain marginalized and invisible within the extant literature, exaggerated and inflated stereotypes about Black college women success will prevail; hence the importance of this study.

This study is also significant as it has the potential to inform policy and practice within higher education institutions (i.e. Student Affairs administrators) in order to enhance campus climate, and supports offered to its Black undergraduate women. To extend the research on campus racial climate, this study focuses on the residence halls, which is a key context for student success and growth at the university (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Decades of higher educational research have supported the claim that students who live on campus typically benefit more academically and socially than those who do not (Harwood, et al, 2012). Students who live on campus not only earn higher grades and graduate at higher rates, they also participate more in university activities, and attain more enhanced psychosocial development (Astin, 1977; Flowers, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; & Tinto, 1993). In order to support the development of Black undergraduate RAs,

institutions of higher education need to be informed by studies, which have appropriately documented such experiences.

Black students at PWIs do not feel integrated into the campus and have reported experiences of alienation, hostility, and discrimination (Allen, 1992). Given the nation's current racial and political climate, coupled with the racial tensions that have permeated college campuses and campus housing recently, such findings beg the question, which asks: What are colleges and universities doing to cultivate supportive and inclusive campus climates while ensuring the safety and wellbeing of their students? Specifically, what are the experiences of Black undergraduate college women given the current socio-political climate? What are the current experiences of Black women RAs who need to support others while experiencing multiple forms of oppression themselves as a result of their leadership role, race, and gender? These guiding questions serve as the impetus of my study and the point of departure to learn more about the experiences of Black women RAs who may be affected by such challenges.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this critical qualitative study is three-fold. First, the study sought to capture Black undergraduate women's descriptions of their leadership role as an RA. Second, this study aimed to explore their racially gendered experiences and how these experiences impact their ability to perform their role as an RA on predominantly White campuses. Lastly, this study aimed to explore how these women navigate the responsibilities of their role and the intersections of race and gender at a PWI. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do undergraduate Black women RAs describe their experiences at Predominantly White Institutions?
2. How do undergraduate Black women students navigate their responsibilities as RAs and their intersecting social identities of race and gender at Predominantly White Institutions?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the present study, I explored the phenomenon of undergraduate Black women negotiating their intersectional identities and roles as RAs using the theoretical lenses of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Black Feminist Thought (BFT), and Intersectionality. The combination of these approaches allowed me to get

at the issues of my participants. These approaches also allowed me to articulate my value orientation towards producing scholarship that was empowering by centering the experiences of Black women leaders from the margins by bringing them to the center (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 1998). My objective was to engage in research that would be emancipatory and transformative for the participants. CRT represents a body of research from scholars that challenged the ways in which power and race are constructed within American law and society (Bell, 1987; Crenshaw, et al, 1995). CRT recognizes that racism is engrained in the systems and fabric of American society. As a theoretical movement, CRT challenges dominant ideology and addresses the pervasiveness of race within existing societal structures of power by focusing on experiential knowledge as an integral part in analyzing and understanding racial inequality. BFT is grounded in Afrocentric feminist epistemology, which is explicated in the work of Patricia Hill Collins, who sought to combine both Afrocentric and feminist standpoints (Collins, 1990). In this way, the ideas in BFT are created by Black women that clarify the point of view of and for Black women. Grounded in both BFT and CRT, Intersectionality describes the multiple oppressions that women and people of color face (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Collins & Bilge, 2016) as a result of having multiple identities. In the present study, Intersectionality enabled me to examine participants' experiences with the consideration of how the various forms of social stratification, such, race, gender, student status as a leader, do not exist separately from each other but are interwoven together. By utilizing the abovementioned frameworks, I was able to incorporate a more multidimensional analysis of the experiences of undergraduate Black women RAs.

RESIDENCE HALLS: A BRIEF HISTORY

Studies have documented the positive outcomes associated with living on campus in residence halls. This research indicates that students participate more in university activities, earn higher grades, and attain more enhanced psychosocial development (Harwood, Hunt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012; Astin, 1977; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1993) A residential hall can be described as a microcosm for the evolving world in which we live. While universities continue to become increasingly diverse, residence hall environments are also encompassing more students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, mental and physical challenges, sexual orientations, political affiliations, and a range of other characteristics (Harper & Quayle, 2009).

One of the ways in which residence halls are expected to support their students is by creating inclusive, socially

just residential living communities that celebrate the diversity of all members regardless of race. Cook and McCoy (2017) maintain that while higher education and student affairs practitioners often push an agenda around the idea of ending racism and striving toward social justice, “within the functional area of residential life, residential life staff must also commit themselves to learning about the deeply complex, insidious nature of racism” (p. 69). The present study served to explore how Black women RAs experience race within their residence halls.

BLACK STUDENTS AND RESIDENCE HALLS

In their study entitled “A House Is Not A Home: Black Students’ Responses to Racism in University Residential Halls”, Hotchkins and Dancy (2017) sought to understand how Black student residents perceive and respond to residential climates on PWI campuses. Through their qualitative constructivist case study of 20 self-identifying Black residents, three major findings emerged. First, participants sought to find “our” space(s), or spaces absent of White peers to distance themselves from experiencing microaggressions within residence halls. Examples of spaces included Black serving organizations (social and academic) outside the residence halls. The second major finding was “absent while present” where participants describes not feeling part of the resident life hall community. They described the lack of Black cultural presence and inability to see themselves in the “residence hall pictures, art, and namesakes” (p. 45). The authors describe participants’ feeling offended, as the absence of Blackness was perceived as a form of environmental macroaggression. The third finding was “perpetual homelessness” in which participants described “experiences with place and space exclusion and/or attempt to locate a racial authenticity” (p. 46). Participants described exchanges with White peers being questioned about their Black identity, frequently being asked by staff and security to show identification upon entering their residence hall, and having to explain their Blackness. The authors contend that their findings confirm previous research about Black students at PWIs who feel subjected to a sense of hyper-surveillance due to criminality assumptions.

Resident Assistants

According to Blimling (1999), Resident Assistants are the eyes and ears of the university and have the responsibility of simultaneously filling the roles of student, administrator, role model, teacher, and counselor. Much of this leadership role is consumed by managing the relationships between residents and developing a community on the residence hall floor through educational and social programming (Letarte,

2013). While serving as peers to their residents, RAs are tasked with the responsibility of having to recognize a crisis and follow proper university protocol to manage that crisis. Schuh (2004) emphasizes the value and complexities of this leadership position by stating that, “There probably is no more difficult position in student affairs work than that of the RA, because, quite literally, RAs are expected to live where they work. They are always on call and deal with many problems that can be challenging” (p. 276). Harper et al. (2011) highlights additional challenges for those students serving within this leadership role which include confronting diversity issues and demonstrating multicultural competence (Johnson & Kang, 2006; Watt, Howard-Hamilton, & Fairchild, 2003), policy enforcement (Wilson & Hirschy, 2003), role ambiguity (Delunga & Winters, 1990), balancing academics and work responsibilities within the residence halls (Blimling, 1998), and burnout caused by emotional exhaustion (Hardy & Dodd, 1998).

A great deal of responsibility and risk come hand in hand with the RA role and research has acknowledged the ways in which RAs, who are some of the most important employees in higher education institutions, are often the most under-trained (Blimling, 1999; Letarte, 2013). RAs are often required to participate in a series of leadership and multicultural training as part of their development and success of their roles. Such workshops aim to equip students with the tools they need to facilitate intercultural sensitivity dialogues, which are often met with imbalances in privilege and power (Petryk, Thompson & Boynton, 2013; Roland & Agosto, 2017). RAs also obtain trainings that will prepare them to support students through hostile campus climates (Harper, 2013). However, studies have shown that such trainings offer minimal strategies to dismantle institutional racism, and this finding is attributed to the lack of skilled facilitators on campus who can mediate such dialogues (Obear & Martinez, 2013).

Black Undergraduate Resident Assistants

Despite the documented challenges noted above, there is a dearth of research within the higher education or student affairs literature which investigates and documents the racial dynamics surrounding the role for RAs of color. Much of the research findings on RAs has focused on White, or mixed-race (White, Korean) populations (Roland & Agosto, 2017). Several have focused on “diverse” populations, however, much of the study findings have not been disaggregated by race (Harper, 2011); hence the importance of my study. Harper et al. (2011) explored the ways in which race and racism and the experiences of Black male RAs converge at PWIs. Three major themes emerged in the findings

which offer rich counternarratives that expose the race-specific realities of Black male RAs. One major finding was that Black male RAs resist and confront racist stereotypes and racial insults which ultimately affect their work as RAs. The second major finding suggests that Black male RAs learn to effectively navigate and negotiate relationships in environments which lack racially diverse leadership. While characterizing the feelings disclosed by participants, the authors coined the term *onlyness*, defined as “the psychoemotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one’s same racial or ethnic group” (p. 190). The third finding reports on the feelings of having to serve as positive representations for their racial group while facing constant scrutiny from White supervisors. Although this study does not offer an intersectional analysis of race and feelings of being the only one, the findings help us understand how race, as the salient identity, is experienced in the context of PWIs.

The only study available within the higher education literature that focuses on the experiences of Black undergraduate women RAs at PWIs using an intersection analysis is one conducted by Roland & Agosto (2017). This study explored how Black undergraduate women navigated the RA leadership role in relation to their social identities in the context of a PWI. Findings revealed that participants navigated the RA role by a) engaging in relational service, b) tentatively negotiating the expression of their social identities and related oppressions, and c) seeking support responsive to their multiple intersecting social identities. Participants described their RA role and social identities “as the provision of relational service to students” (p. 192). Students expressed serving as a bridge or a filter – in a relationship between the institution and the residents. An additional finding from this study suggests that some Black undergraduate women RAs feel obligated to tentatively negotiate and suppress expressions of their social identities while navigating the RA role at a PWI. Other participants discussed the lack of support received by upper administration in responding to racial incidents that targeted residents or staff members. When asked about engaging in dialogue with residents around national and race related issues on campus, participants report that they are not equipped to facilitate such discussions. Finally, participants reported the need to seek safe spaces for support of their personal and professional growth and to gain affirmations of their salient identities.

Overall, most of the published research on the experiences of RAs documents raceless accounts of challenges faced by students serving in these roles.

As a result, traditional RA development and training are primarily focused on providing strategies to help students address commonly known challenges within their resident halls (Schuh, 2004). The research which centers the experiences of Black students complicates these challenges and only confirm that there is much left to be learned and understood within residence life departments.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, I use a critical, phenomenological qualitative research design to examine the racially gendered experiences of Black undergraduate women RAs at a PWI. This study employed elements of Phenomenology as this approach seeks to explore the “different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and various phenomena in, the world around them” (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, p. 82). In this study, participants were asked to describe the essence of their day-to-day leadership experiences as Black undergraduate women RAs. Implementing a phenomenological approach to explore the experience of being a Black woman RA at a White college, according to van Manen (1990), is “a creative attempt to somehow capture a certain phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is both holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive” (1990, p. 39). Finally, the theoretical framework of Black Feminist Thought suggests that there are unique experiences shared by Black women as oppressed individuals, thus supporting the use of phenomenology in this study.

RESEARCH SITES

MAPLEWOOD UNIVERSITY

The first site for this study is Maplewood University, which is a large, predominantly White, urban research university in the northeastern region of the United States. According to their website, the university is comprised of 29,732 undergraduate students; 53% identified as female with a racial breakdown of 12.5%, or approximately 3,718, Black women, as compared to White (non-Hispanic) undergraduate women making up 54%, or approximately 16,453, of total enrollment. During this study, there were approximately 16 undergraduate Black women RAs at Maplewood University.

AVERY STATE UNIVERSITY

The second site for this study is Avery State University, which is public, predominantly White, teaching university in the northeastern region of the United States. According to their website, the university is comprised of 14,567 undergraduate students; 59% identified as female

and 41% identified as male, with a racial breakdown of 74.8% White, 11.3% Black, 2.5% Asian, 6% Latino, and remaining mixed race, or unknown. At the time of this study, there were approximately 51 RAs, of which approximately 17 were Black women.

CEDARBROOK UNIVERSITY

The third site for this study is Cedarbrook University, which is a large, predominantly White, state research university in the northeastern region of the United States. According to its website, the university is comprised of 76,700 undergraduate students; 46% identified as female, and 54% identified as male, with a racial breakdown of 66.41% White, 5.98% Black, 6.13% Asian, 7.21% Hispanic or Latino, Native American, and remaining mixed race, or unknown. During the time of the study, there were up to 21 Black women RAs.

HILLCREST UNIVERSITY

The fourth site for this study is Hillcrest University, which is a private, predominantly White, research university in the northeastern region of the United States. According to its website, the university is comprised of 29,406 undergraduate students; 46% identified as female, and 54% identified as male, with a racial breakdown of 30.6% White, 6.05% Black, 19.5% Asian, 13.5% Hispanic or Latino, and remaining mixed race, or unknown (Institutional Research & Data Integrity, 2018). At the time of this study, there were 14 Black women RAs.

PARTICIPANTS

Nineteen participants were selected through purposeful and snowball sampling (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2002). Participants were all selected based on the following criteria: 1) self-identifying as Black/African American woman, 2) currently enrolled as a full-time undergraduate student, and 3) serve in a Resident Assistant position on campus for at least one year.

DATA COLLECTION

For the data collection process, I used individual participant interviews, demographic surveys, researcher field notes, reflections and memos, descriptive participant journal entries, and descriptive data collected from study site websites in my data corpus. First, participants were asked to provide basic demographic information through a questionnaire, which requested information about their personal backgrounds, majors, involvement in activities, etc. During the first interview, participants were asked questions specifically geared towards understanding their lived experiences as an RA. The second interview built upon themes that emerged during the initial interview and delved deeper into the

participants' lived racial and gendered experiences while being on a predominantly white campus. In addition to the interview data, participants engaged in a secondary data collection method by creating reflective analytic journals. Additionally, to ensure that I was bracketing my own initial thoughts and biases, I engaged in a series of reflective memos after interviews and reading through transcripts. This enabled me to review the data subsequent times with an awareness of my own assumptions.

FINDINGS

The findings of the present study exploring the racially gendered experiences of undergraduate Black women RAs on predominantly white campuses are presented based on the following research questions: 1) How do undergraduate Black women RAs describe their experience at Predominantly White Institutions?; 2) How do undergraduate Black women students navigate their responsibilities as RAs and their intersecting social identities of race and gender at Predominantly White Institutions?

The present study illuminated how the intersection of Blackness (e.g. race), being woman (e.g. gender), and serving in the leadership role as an RA are influenced by oppressive conditions. The following seven themes represent, from the perspective of race and gender, how Black undergraduate women RAs are experiencing predominantly white institutions: Institutional Oppression; Racism; Physical, Emotional, and Psychological Stress; Fear; the Outsider Within; Controlling Images; and Care through Counterspaces.

While their experiences are multifaceted and unique unto themselves, there is much overlap and commonalities which exist. Varying types of institutional oppression emerged as a finding by participants as they felt structurally subjugated within their roles within the ResLife organization. Participants describe being subjected to harsh and unfair treatment from their supervisors and authority figures when their inquiries were interpreted as being threatening. Detailed accounts of fighting for their jobs and reporting discriminatory actions towards executive level administrators demonstrate the multiple forms of oppression they experienced. Participants also felt disregarded and relegated as unimportant by ResLife through their menial attempts to foster diversity through professional development opportunities. Participants generally felt unprepared to address issues related to race with residents and did not feel as though their ResLife departments took into account how their intersectional identities which implicated their ability to do their jobs.

TABLE 1:

Theme or Study Finding	Black Women RA Experiences
Institutional Oppression	<p><i>In my first year, I felt like me and my RD, at first, were really good, but then when the rehiring process came along, I got wait listed, or put on alternate was what that they call it. [He said] you're on the alternate list because I didn't fit well with the dynamic of the residence hall that he wanted. Basically.. He told me this in his own words. He was like, "I want a team that I know will always be on my side..." It was crazy to me when he said it to me...He said to me, "sometimes you're very passionate. Sometimes I don't feel like you fit well in the group dynamic because people don't hang out with you."...But that was what fired me...He was like, "You're not a good dynamic for the job."...and I would always get the criticism like, "Oh, well people are afraid to talk to you because you always speak up"</i></p>
Racism	<p><i>Um, I think kind of one of the most noticeable challenges for me last year was one that I lived in, my residence hall was...a living learning community and basically the top two floors were ROTC [residents] and a lot of them had like Trump flags last year and so it was just very uncomfortable for me just like simply going on rounds...It's just like I didn't, I never wanted to approach that situation or approach anything with them. Like if they were playing music, I didn't really care like I was going to the next floor because I don't know what they believe. Um, and just the simple fact that they had Trump flags in the dorm, in the, um, in their window so that people can see from outside. So it was, that was probably one really big deal, I mean it was never a situation. It was something that I was very cautious of. -</i></p>
Physical, Emotional, and Psychological Stress	<p><i>I would say...just in general going into the position, I always had a lot of apprehension because...I knew going into the school year, a majority of my floor would be white men and the year prior to that, a majority of my floor was white men so I thought the pattern would continue and it did. So going into it, I had just a lot of anxiety about how they would respond to me, if they would respect me, if they would be cool with me or if they would feel comfortable with me. So I would say that was a lot of mental anguish in my own head...But that was, I would definitely say, was a negative experience for me just having to worry about that constantly, like literally all the time I would just be like I don't know what to expect...</i></p>
Fear	<p><i>Last semester, during my first almost year as an RA, there were times that I really didn't feel safe or comfortable talking to my two direct supervisors, whom are white women. I was often told things during our 1:1s that later on I realized was kind of what I wanted to hear. And I also learned later on that behind the scenes, they weren't rallying for me the way they led me to believe</i></p>
The Outsider Within	<p><i>While I found a lot of enjoyment in getting to know my women of color and Black women residents, I found it extremely difficult to have the same connections with their white male counterparts. This difficulty stemmed from my feeling of always feeling like I had to put a mask on in order to communicate with them. I always felt the need to assimilate more towards their "culture" and their interests. As an RA, this was my duty, to get to know my residents and form connections. However, this was sometimes such a scary thought that I would avoid the residence hall all together at times. This led to an even more strained relationship with my residents and comments such as "we never see you" and "where have you been". While I do not believe it was their [white residents] intention to make me uncomfortable, their simple act of being automatically forced me into that mindset. I can't imagine that a white male in the same predicament as me would have had the same results, therefore, this is the main experience I've personally had that has made being a Black woman in residential life particularly difficult.</i></p>
Controlling Images	<p><i>Being a Black woman is such an individual, unique experience that often shapes a majority of our experiences throughout our entire lives. Part of this individual experience is created by the stereotypes that surround the image of Black women. For example, being loud, ratchet, unambitious and the caretakers, like Aunt Jemima's. So a lot of the time as a Black woman who does not subscribe to these stereotypes, a lot of my energy is spent combating them through my actions, how I talk and I conduct myself in public spaces, specifically public spaces where other Black women aren't present. This combat has also translated into the residential life experience.</i></p>
Care through Counterspaces	<p><i>So I would say the Black RA community was definitely kind of my go-to in terms of if I was super stressed about something or if I had questions or if I just wanted to vent to somebody, I would say that definitely Black women RA's but just Black RA's in general, it was like a good community to go to and kind of bounce ideas off of.</i></p>

Participants all described having to navigate racism as part of their role due to the influx of campus racial incidents given the current political climate. Participants described being challenged by how to implement programming, and now to navigate encounters with residents and staff around race related topics, and microaggressions. Participants in this study experience stress, anxiety and fears as a result of having a constant hyper awareness of how they are responded to and perceived as a result of being a Black undergrad RA attending a PWI. Sometimes, the heightened sense of awareness inevitably forces them to maneuver their roles and experiences in inauthentic ways with their staff and residents within ResLife.

Navigating these oppressive conditions resulted in the experiencing of the outsider within, or the daily sets of negotiations that occur at the nexus of being Black, and a woman, while serving in a leadership role, with limited support from staff. While rejecting and combating stereotypes and controlling images about Black women, participants engaged in demonstrating acts and behaviors through self-definition. As an act of self-preservation, participants created and relied on support systems as counterspaces as a liberating act to cope with their Black residents' and their own subjugation.

Overall, the Black undergraduate women RAs in the present study have learned how to negotiate the variety of systemic, institutional impediments that posed unique challenges due to their racially gendered identities, and their leadership roles as an RA. Through the convergence of these identities and with almost no institutional support, Black women were continually subjected to being targets of oppression while their intersectional identities were ignored (King, 1988; Robinson-Wood et al., 2015). Through the current analyses, we are able to understand more clearly how the absence of an intersectional perspective oftentimes resulted in a lack of understanding of Black undergraduate women RAs' racially gendered identities. As a result of flawed institutional practices, participants experienced a continuous relegation of their experiences within ResLife. Table 1 includes selected quotes that reflect some of the collective experiences of the sample.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Navigating Identities and Institutional Oppression

This study has revealed exactly how Black women RAs navigate, persist, and cope with their experiences while leading and simultaneously experiencing racially gendered oppression due to their intersectional identities. Participants in both studies demonstrated a tentativeness and cautious approach in addressing white

residents and professional staff member's due to varying levels of perceived risks. Study findings also illustrates how the absence of an intersectional perspective resulted in a lack of understanding of Black undergraduate women RAs' racially gendered identities. As a result of flawed institutional practices, participants experienced a continuous relegation of their experiences within ResLife. For the participants in this study, oftentimes they must negotiate their identities in order to navigate the space and make their residents comfortable. Additionally, findings suggest that RAs must combat varying forms of institutional oppression while receiving little to no support from ResLife staff. The same way that RAs are tasked with creating safe, socially just spaces for their residents, so too are ResLife administrators at PWIs tasked with protecting and ensuring the safety and well-being of their staff. Based on the counternarratives of participants in this study, they perceive their ResLife departments as operating in a colorblind fashion with respect to their social identities. The next section outlines the theoretical implications of this research, followed by the implications for policy, practice and future research to better support undergraduate Black women serving in the RA role.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Intersectionality as a framework informs my policy suggestions that institutions can implement to ensure justice, racially gendered equity, and the safety of collegiate Black women. While rejecting the hegemonic narratives about Black undergraduate college women as the new model minority (Kaba, 2008), it is my intent to urge student affairs professionals, and higher education administrators to move beyond the rhetoric of "being inclusive" towards a more comprehensive approach that fully acknowledges the root causes of racially gendered biases. I agree with Hotchkins and Dancy (2017) who maintain that "If residential staff understand their halls to be sources of environmental racial microaggressions, as experienced by Black students, accountability can take place, followed by thoughtful, informed program trainings designed to identify and lessen or eliminate racial trauma" (p. 48). Therefore, I make the following recommendations with the goal of enriching higher educational scholarship and encouraging an intersectional approach to researching Black women's experiences: Looking to the Bottom, Promoting Self-Care, and Enacting the Black women's Blueprint in ResLife.

LOOKING TO THE BOTTOM

Consistent with other scholars dedicated to this work, one major recommendation is to expand

existing opportunities to ensure the inclusion of Black women RAs within policy research and programmatic interventions and training (Shaw, 2017; Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). I argue that in order to address the concerns of Black undergraduate women, educational stakeholders must adopt resources that take into account the intersectional identities they possess, “allowing Black women to clarify a standpoint of and for Black women” (Johnson, 2017, p. 167). Participants described their reactions to activities, trainings, and professional development opportunities which relegated their positionality as Black women RAs. Furthermore, many described having engaged in programs and organizations outside of ResLife which centered social justice, and advocacy. ResLife departments should be intentional about soliciting insights and feedback from their returning RA’s, particularly in light of the current political climate. Additionally, as part of the screening and hiring process, ResLife departments are made aware of the leadership experiences of their potential RA candidates. During this process, ResLife should tap into the resources of students. Patton and Haynes (2018) argue that by moving the marginalized to the center, institutional leaders can engage in an act of “looking to the bottom” by inviting Black women to learn from their experiences and seek their counsel. Such intel should be considered through an evaluation of programs, procedures, and services to ensure that the unique needs of Black women are addressed. One way to address Black women RAs experiences would be to engage such experiences within the professional development curriculum.

PROMOTING SELF CARE

An overwhelming finding from this study suggests that while Black women RAs struggled with serving in their roles as leaders while also being members of the target population from race related incidences. Additionally, participants in this study described having racial battle fatigue (Pierce, 1970), which is experienced by psychological symptoms including but not limited to: fear, depression anger, chronic anxiety, frustration, resentment, emotional or social withdrawal, helplessness and avoidance. Miller (2016) maintains that engaging in self-care and finding balance is a necessity in the field of higher education and student affairs, as these occupations requires insistent interactions with diverse groups of people who all have unique sets of wants and needs.

One recommendation would be to offer counseling sessions for all ResLife RAs and professional staff who might need that additional support. Although,

opportunities are made for RAs to discuss their challenges with their direct supervisors, findings from this study suggest that Black women lack trust, and are fearful of asking questions out of fear of losing their job and appearing incapable of performing their role. By hiring an external person as a counselor, outside of ResLife, students might be more inclined to remove their masks and solicit feedback specific to challenges directly experienced by their intersectional positions. Additionally, ResLife departments should be explicit in planning mental health days for staff members. With frequent policy changes, Departments of Housing and Residential life are constantly evolving. Balancing work, extracurricular activities, and being a student can leave RAs more susceptible to experiencing mental health issues.

ENACTING THE BLACK WOMEN’S BLUEPRINT IN RESLIFE

Lastly, I agree with higher education scholars who maintain that administrators must consider structurally, how “institutional climates converge with intersectional identities of Black women when providing supports that could potentially expose them to racial microaggressions and gender-racialized aggressions” (Hotchkins, 2017, p. 153). As a result, I would like to call attention to the implications this research has on institutional leaders to engage in more transformational change which advances racially gendered equity. Findings from this study document how some ResLife departments on predominantly White campuses have missed the mark to show an understanding of how race influences Black women’s’ roles as leaders as well as their intersectional identities. To address this incongruence in understanding and practice, and while building upon Black women scholars Patton & Haynes (2018), I encourage ResLife practitioners to “imagine Black women as possibility models” by moving from “single-axis identity politics to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion [to taking] up intersectionality as a method of engaging in lasting transformational change that promises to advance racial equity in higher education” (p. 1). Patton & Haynes (2018) offer the Black women’s Blueprint for higher education, which admonishes institutional leaders to consider intersectional approaches to campus issues but to develop policies with an understanding that invisibility and erasure are inextricably informed by racialized sexist hegemonic practices. The first step is admitting it. These scholars maintain that in order for institutional leaders to begin the process of imagining Black women as possibility models for change, they must first acknowledge the way controlling images work to perpetuate inherent contradictions about Black women’s labor through educational norms and

traditions. Furthermore, engaging in this work requires institutional leaders to reckon with: (a) the troubling erasure and silencing as a result of these tropes, and (b) the subsequent psychological trauma and social violence imposed upon them through erasure processes (Patton & Haynes, 2018). Professional staff within ResLife should engage in workshops which address their own implicit biases.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The incongruence between the RAs' preparedness to address issues related to race with residents and staff and the messaging around diversity and social justice content as it relates to their intersectional identities have implications for RA professional development training and warrant the need for more research. While residence housing has evolved to become spaces where social justice is enacted through identity - based themes, living-learning communities, and the development of social justice frameworks, scholars acknowledge that such initiatives are consistently scrutinized and met with opposition (McGowen, Zerquera, & Tu, 2017). Despite such scrutiny, future research on diversity and race specific trainings and their effectiveness are needed in order to inform equitable practices for ResLife staff. Additionally, research examining the differences between RA training and development in comparison to their supervisors (Resident Directors, Coordinators, etc.) can help bridge some of the gaps highlighted in the present study around diversity activities and managing conflict with staff. Also, research using Intersectionality to examine the racially gendered experiences of RAs should include a class analysis in addition to a more in-depth structural analysis of ResLife departments. By including a more robust micro and macro level analysis as recommended by Crenshaw (1989, 1991), we can get a more-clear picture into the ways in which structures of domination are maintained and influence the identities of women of color.

CONCLUSION

The intention of the study was to build upon the research exploring the racially gendered experiences of Black undergraduate women RAs attending predominantly White institutions. Furthermore, this study sought to understand how these women navigate their intersectional identities while serving as a leader in the RA role. Prior research, which explores the experiences of RAs, did not fully consider the racially gendered specific challenges of Black women in this leadership role; a gap addressed within this study. The nineteen women who

participated in this study are not a monolith; "as no homogeneous Black women's standpoint exists" (Collins, 2000, p. 32). They have both revealed the unique standpoint of Black women RAs on white campuses and have revealed the diversity even within their standpoint. At the nexus of their converging identities, they experienced oppression, racism, physical, emotional, and psychological stress, fear, the outsider within, controlling images, and counterspaces. Through their respective journeys, most have persisted, and continue to utilize their platforms to engage their peers by creating safe and inclusive living spaces.

In light of the current political landscape and contemporary events which have illuminated the pervasiveness of systemic racism on college campuses, of significant importance "is a consideration of the spaces that students return to after the crowds disperse" (McGowen et. al, 2017, p. 9). Departments of Residential Life and Housing offer critical spaces intended to support students' growth and cultivate their social justice understanding. As a result, intentional opportunities must be made within residence halls and ResLife to actively engage in issues of equity, and social justice with residents as well as ResLife staff. If higher educational stakeholders begin to recognize the impermeable influence of controlling images, and systematic racism on the physical and mental health of Black college women, only then can we begin to disrupt hegemonic practices within institutions of higher education.

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