The Effect of Perception on Resident Assistant Job Performance

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Taylor Thurlow

Thesis Advisor
Charles Cherry

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

December 2014

Expected Date of Graduation
May 2015
Abstract

 Resident Assistants (RAs) have a challenging position. They are in charge of a floor or a hall of college students and perform various duties to ensure the best success of the students. For some universities, the RAs are required to enforce housing policies as well as encouraged to be helpful and supportive for residents. Enforcing policy can have negative results, because by enforcing policy an RA may upset a resident and possibly change a resident’s views of the RA. In this analysis, the perceptions RAs think residents have of them (and what perceptions residents actually have) will be studied. The study will also look at whether or not, or to what degree, the perception residents have of RAs affects how RAs perform their responsibilities. This study was based on information collected from thirty-eight Resident Assistants at Ball State University, as well as twenty-nine residents living in various campus residence halls. This study is in no way exhaustive and should only be used as a means to gain insight and reasons for further investigation on possible factors that cause poor RA performance.

Acknowledgements

I am thankful to those who supported me through this process. Emily and Charle pushed me to do greater than I had imagined I could. Charle really helped me turn this into something to be proud of. I have learned so much through this process and am thankful for the opportunity.
## Table of Contents

Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 3
Methodology ..................................................................................................................... 3
Literature Review .............................................................................................................. 5
  RAs ................................................................................................................................ 5
  Perception of Authority Figures ....................................................................................... 7
  Job Performance Factors ................................................................................................. 9
Findings ............................................................................................................................ 11
  Adjectives That Describe an RA ..................................................................................... 11
  Being an Authority Figure-RA ........................................................................................ 14
  Being an Authority Figure- Residents ........................................................................... 22
  Resident Perception of RAs- RAs ................................................................................ 27
  How You Want Authority Expressed- Residents ............................................................ 32
  Perception Affect on RA Job Performance ................................................................... 35
Discussion and Implications for Practice ....................................................................... 40
Limitations ........................................................................................................................ 44
Future Research ............................................................................................................... 45
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 45
References ....................................................................................................................... 46
Interview Questions ......................................................................................................... 50
Appendix A---Resident Assistant Transcriptions ............................................................... 51
Appendix B---Resident Transcriptions ............................................................................ 85
Appendix C--- IRB and CITI Certifications ..................................................................... 102
The Effect of Perception on Resident Assistant Job Performance

Introduction

Resident Assistants (RAs) are college students who live within university housing and support the other students (residents) living on campus. They take on many roles to best help students be successful and enjoy their college experience. At Ball State University, some of these roles include encouraging campus involvement, stimulating community development, handling crisis situations, being a positive role model, helping residents become independent, and policy enforcement (Job Description, 2014). RAs have ongoing interactions with the residents and their behaviors and roles create a perception in the eyes of residents. RAs may wonder what the residents’ perception of them is. If RAs are to change their behavior based upon the perceptions they believe residents have of them, it may mean a change in job performance.

This study looks at whether or not the perceptions RAs believe their residents have of them affects how they behave as authoritative figures. It also looks at how RAs think residents perceive them and how accurate they actually are. The findings from this study can be used in Ball State Resident Assistant training to help RAs improve job performance. Findings may encourage Housing and Residence Life management to develop training sessions to advise RAs how to avoid changes in job performance.

Methodology

This study focused on experiences and perceptions of residents and Resident Assistants (RAs). This was accomplished through interviews conducted in multiple Residence Halls across the Ball State University campus. For RA recruitment, an email was sent by Residence Hall Director and Thesis Advisor Charles Cherry to other Residence Hall Directors informing them of the study. This was followed up with a visit by the investigators to every Residence Hall to speak with the RAs about what the interviews would entail. At the meetings, RAs were informed of the research as well as times that the investigators would come to their respective hall to conduct the interviews. RAs were recruited by other RAs who
participated. In order to participate, RAs had to have held the position for at least one full semester, so that the RA would have enough experience as an RA to be able to give valuable input.

For resident recruitment, an email was sent by the investigators to Residence Hall Directors to inform them that the investigators would be visiting the Residence Halls at specific times to conduct interviews. During the times in the Residence Halls, the investigators were given permission to ask residents in the Residence Hall if they would like to volunteer for an interview. Residents had to be at least 18 years of age and younger than 24 years of age in order to participate in the interviews.

Certain measures were taken to ensure anonymity with the RAs and residents. Interviews were audio recorded and stored on a password protected file until transcribed. Interviewees were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. To ensure participant safety, each participant was given the information of the Ball State University Counseling Center should he or she have issues with the questions due to previous negative experiences. Lastly, RAs and residents were interviewed in private areas to ensure that no one would overhear the information given.

The interview team consisted of the two co-primary investigators, but each individual had the option to be only interviewed by one. This was because co-primary investigator Taylor Thurlow was currently an RA in a Residence Hall, which could have impacted residents' responses. Interviews lasted between one and five minutes. Interviews consisted of four questions for RAs and three for residents, but interviewees had the option to not answer any or all of the questions, if they chose to do so. When making interview questions, the interviewers attempted to make open ended questions that would allow interviewees to fully express their feelings on the question. The interview team also made certain questions with one-word-adjective only responses, to best be able to categorize answers. Resident questions were designed to gather information as to how residents felt about RAs, whereas questions for RAs were designed to find out what RAs thought residents believe and the effect of those
The Effect of Perception on Resident Assistant Job Performance

assumptions. Certain questions were asked to both RAs and residents, to gather a direct comparison of answers. The full list of questions can be found at the end of the study.

In the data analysis process, responses to questions were analyzed using the grounded theory method. The method first requires the researcher to find patterns and codes in the data. These codes are grouped into themes and are then used to direct where to collect new data or what new questions to ask.

Lit Review

RAs

Resident Assistants (RAs) are given many responsibilities and roles within campus housing. Some of the duties for RAs include role modeling positive academic and social behavior, planning and organizing programs to stimulate learning and to create a pleasant community to live within, responding to emergencies, and enforcing university and housing policy (Everett & Loftus, 2011). According to Paladino & Murray (2005), “an RA is a frontline worker in university programs when responding to and managing a multitude of diverse issues in residence halls” (p. 18).

At Ball State University, Resident Assistants are given specific job requirements and guidelines demonstrating behaviors of successful RAs. According to Ball State’s Resident Assistant Job Description, successful RAs are responsible for the following:

- Facilitate community development through personal interactions, meetings and activities;
- Utilize appropriate personnel and procedures to handle crisis, discipline, and duty situations to consistently enforce Ball State and Housing and Residence Life policies to foster a safe and comfortable community;
- Complete administrative responsibilities including, but not limited to, meetings, bulletin boards, training, and opening and closing hall procedures;
- Encourage student involvement and personal growth through leadership experiences;
The Effect of Perception on Resident Assistant Job Performance

- Collaborate with hall staff to complete staff and hall projects;
- Communicate with directors regularly about discipline, activities, and the hall community;
- Support and promote the Housing and Residence Life Mission and Diversity Statements and Department Initiatives;
- Be a positive role model through personal example and demonstrate a commitment and pride for Ball State and Housing and Residence Life through respectful language and behavior;
- Support and respect the dignity of all individuals;
- Uphold and abide by all federal, state, local laws and statutes and Ball State and Housing and Residence Life policies (Job Description, 2014).

RAs are taught in training that they represent the Housing and Residence Hall and the University as a whole. This is to encourage RAs to behave properly. They are also encouraged to support Ball State University (BSU) initiatives and advertise various programs and events. Community development is very important for halls at BSU, and RAs “are expected to be the catalyst” for such (Ball State University, 2014-2015, p. 19). In order to do so, Resident Assistants need to know their residents. One-on-one interactions, especially purposeful interactions that go beyond casual greetings, can help an RA get to know his or her residents. Knowing residents makes it easiest to identify and solve issues that the students are having. The RAs are also in charge of various hall decorations and bulletin boards to stimulate learning and to make the floor feel like a home. In addition, RAs must be show fairness among all residents, to keep a welcoming feel in the hall.

One of the most important parts to creating a safe environment falls under “duty.” It is advertised that each residence hall at Ball State will have an RA “on duty” if help is needed. During these evening duties, an RA may be called for administrative tasks, crises, or policy violations. This can also be a time to build community by creating or nurturing relationships, assisting with issues, and encouraging involvement. “Residents should not be fearful of a duty staff member or view them as unapproachable”
The Effect of Perception on Resident Assistant Job Performance

(Ball State University, 2014-2015, p. 24). This demonstrates the department’s desire for RAs to be authority figures, without being intimidating.

The Ball State University Office of Housing and Residence Life has designated learning outcomes for the students who live in the residence halls. The RAs have a responsibility to help residents achieve those outcomes. When designing programs for residents, RAs are asked to focus on these learning outcomes (Ball State University, 2014-2015, p. 34):

- Communicate in a clear, concise and respectful manner;
- Incorporate a variety of viewpoints into their understanding of the world;
- Respect their environment and individuals within it;
- Establish healthy interdependence;
- Constructively demonstrate societal rights and responsibilities;
- Explore their values.

Perception of Authority Figures

Rotter’s (1966) Internal-External Locus of Control study has proven to be useful in predicting human behavior caused by perception. People with an internal locus of control are said to perceive consequences as results of their actions and behaviors. Those with an external locus of control do not see consequences dependent upon their actions. They perceive the results to be luck, chance, or destiny. Katkovsky, Crandall, and Good (1967) investigated correlations with parental behavior and an internal or external locus. They found that parents who were positive reinforcers had children with internal loci and parents who were negative reinforcers had children with external loci. They also found that a mother who supports and encourages when a child faces difficulty leads to an internal loci, while criticism and rejection fosters an external locus.

Studies done on college-aged students by found that those who thought their parents actions were more predictable had an internal locus of control, while those whose parents were said to be sporadic
and inconsistent in reprimand had an external locus of control (MacDonald, 1971; David & Phares, 1969). In addition to predictability, explaining or giving reasoning behind rational also has an impact on the locus of control. Baumrind (1968) found that parents who are authoritarian have children who are externally oriented and parents who are authoritative have children who are internally oriented. Authoritarian parents give discipline based upon a set of standards which are rigid with little verbal leniency which makes it hard for the children to understand the reasoning behind instructions. Authoritative parents give discipline based on reason and explain their motives to the children. Authoritative parents are still firm on rules, but respect their child’s autonomy.

Because a child’s first authority figure is his or her parents, the perceptions a child has of his or her parents are the perceptions the child will utilize when confronted with new authority figures (Ferguson & Kennelly, 1974). It can be reasoned that if a child’s perception of her or his parents is either internally or externally based, then she or he will see other authorities from similar perspectives. Those with internal locus of control look at authority figures as sources of help and support in time of frustration. People with external centers look at authorities as sources of restriction and rejection. The internally oriented people see authorities as positive reinforcers and see their standards as reasonable and predictable, while the externally oriented perceive authorities as being negative reinforcers and having unreasonable and inconsistent standards.

Also important in understanding the perception of authority is legitimacy. According to Tyler (2006), those in positions of authority must make others believe that they deserve to have the power to influence the lives of subordinates in order to rule effectively. Tyler also stated that it is argued whether or not people can rule with just power, but it is widely agreed that if most subordinates believe that orders from a ruler are legitimate (the ruler is entitled to make those orders) then it will be much easier to rule. Kelman and Hamilton (1989) argued that when an authority is legitimate, individuals obey the authorities because they “see themselves as having no choice” (p. 16). Legitimacy is a perception that
people hold of authority figures and allows the authorities to wield more power. It causes people to feel that they should or ought to do what their leader says.

In addition to how subordinates view their leaders, the way in which leaders view themselves is important. Similarly to how subordinates view their leaders, the leaders also have ideas of how they are viewed by subordinates. Moy and Hales (1973) state “How leaders behave and how they perceive their own behavior often becomes the substance of interpersonal misunderstanding among members of an organization” (p. 33). According to Moy and Hales, leaders can believe they operate a certain way, while subordinates believe they behave differently. This shows the difference in perception between superior and subordinates. Authority figures behaving differently than they view themselves causes confusion in communication and ineffective leadership.

**Job Performance Factors**

How well a person performs in their job can be affected by different factors. An important factor is personality traits. Barrick and Mount (1991) describe the Five Factor Model or “Big Five.” It is a well known group of personality characteristics which have been clustered into five themes. There is a large agreement on the number of factors and the traits associated, but the precise meaning is debated. The first of the five is referred to as Extraversion or Surgency. Associated traits include sociability, assertiveness, talkative, etc. Hogan (1986) interprets this area as being comprised of Ambition and Sociability. The second factor is often called Emotional Stability, Stability, Emotionality, and Neuroticism. Descriptors for this personality include insecurity, depression, anger, anxious, and emotional. The first two of the five dimensions are widely agreed upon (Barrick & Mount, 1991).

The third theme is generally considered Agreeableness or Likability (Barrick & Mount, 1991). It is also referred to as Friendliness, Compliance versus Hostile Non-Compliance, or Love, and descriptors for this include courteous, good natured, soft hearted, cooperative, and tolerant. The fourth dimension has been disagreed upon (Digman, 1989; Peabody & Goldberg, 1989), but is called Conscientiousness,
Conscience, Conformity, or Dependability. The weight of research shows that this dimension also includes terms associated with willingness, such as hardworking and achievement-oriented (Barrick & Mount). The last of the “Big Five” has been the hardest to pinpoint. It is often referred to as Intellect or Intellectence, but is also referred to Openness to Experience. Some traits for this dimension include culture, curious, original, intelligent, and imaginative.

These factors were studied along with job performance in certain jobs to see if any of the personality traits could predict job performance. Barrick and Mount (1991) found that the Conscientiousness trait was a valid predictor for all occupations studied (Professionals, Police, Managers, Sales, and Skilled/Semi-Skilled). Extraversion was also a valid predictor for Managers and Sales, which involve interpersonal skills. Openness to Experience predicted training proficiency, as well Extraversion.

Masson and Deluga (2000) concluded that extraversion was also a good predictor for RA performance, while conscientiousness did not have an effect. They also noted that an additional personality trait would predict RA effectiveness. This trait is referred to as “positive affect”. Affect relates to a person’s mood or feelings: positive affect meaning a person would have favorable emotions. People high in positive affect see themselves as effective with interpersonal relationships and self-efficacious. Staw and Barsade (1993) concluded that people who were “high in dispositional affect may also perform better on tasks that involve decision making and interpersonal relations” (p. 325). RAs with positive affect would have an optimistic look on life, want to help others, be skilled at negotiating conflict, and have quality interactions with others.

Other factors have impact on job performance besides personality traits. A study done by Raja and Butt (2013) showed that job satisfaction in combination with the above mentioned positive or negative affect can have an impact on job performance. Those with a negative affect and negative job satisfaction have lower job performances than those who don’t. When job satisfaction was high, positive affect was found to not be correlated. Affect and job satisfaction can be moderated by other
factors. According to McDaniel, Schmidt, and Hunter (1986), job experience also has an impact on job performance, in both high and low complexity jobs.

**Findings**

Resident Assistant (RA) and resident interviewees were asked a series of questions to gather an understanding of affects to RA job performance due to perception. Thirty-eight RAs were interviewed and twenty-nine residents were interviewed. RAs and Residents were first asked “What are three adjectives that describe an RA?” Residents were then asked “Describe how your RA has acted as an authoritative figure.” The final question for residents was “If your RA had to express their authority to you and you were in the wrong, how would you like your RA to do that?” The second question asked of RAs was “How do you act as an authoritative figure?” This was followed with “What do you think is the general perception of an RA as an authoritative figure?” The final question for RAs was “Does that general perception affect how you act in your job?”

**Adjectives That Describe an RA**

The first question, “What are three adjectives that describe an RA?” was asked of residents and RAs. This was to observe how each group perceived what an RA is. For the most part, each respondent answered with three adjectives, but a few did not. Two residents responded only using two adjectives and two also responded using four. Three RAs responded with four adjective descriptors, one used two, and one only responded with one term. Responses were grouped via grounded theory method and the following themes arose: caring and compassionate, hardworking, role model and leader, social, informative and helpful, responsible, time management, involved, and policy enforcer.

**Caring and compassionate.** The largest group of responses for both RAs and residents was caring and compassionate. Descriptors for RAs under this category included compassionate, caring, counselor, empathetic, reliable, sympathetic, thoughtful, trustworthy, understanding, and open minded. Fifteen of the thirty-eight RAs responded with one of the above mentioned synonyms. For residents, the phrases
in this theme included nice, caring, compassionate, friendly, respectful, sympathetic, really nice to be around, and interested. Twelve of the twenty-nine resident interviewees used at least one of the terms above.

**Hardworking.** Tied with the caring and compassionate theme with RAs was the theme of hardworking. Terms from this group were used by fifteen of thirty-eight interviewees. Descriptors in this category included hardworking, determined, dedicated, organized, devoted, motivated, and attentive. Although it was tied for the most used grouping of descriptors for RAs, only three of the twenty-nine residents were grouped in the hardworking theme. For RAs, the position can represent work and effort. Residents see and focus on the results or fruit of the labor (from RAs), but not so much the labor.

**Role model and leader.** Thirteen RAs and eight residents used descriptors from the role model and leader classification. Terms in this category were role model, good role model, inspirational, leader, leadership, go-getter, confident, strong, strong-willed, and organizer. RAs understand that they are to be role models, and residents look up to them as role models, explaining the similar amount of usage for both groups.

**Social.** The social theme was used by twelve RAs. RAs in the social grouping used terms such as social, unique, fun, friendly, friend, excited, creative, outgoing, charismatic, and passionate. One of these RAs, Rose, replied with all four answers from this category, showing her perception of an RA being very social.

Ten of the twenty-nine residents were grouped into this category. Terms in this category included fun, funny, communicator, communicative, outgoing, excited, really entertaining, relatable, and personable. Six of the ten used a term from the caring and compassionate grouping, perhaps signaling that residents see those who talk more to them as someone who cares more about them.
Informative and helpful. One of the smaller themes for RAs was that of informative and helpful. Adjectives in this grouping included informational disseminator, resource, resourceful, campus representative, and helpful. Only four RAs responded with an answer in this theme, but one, Declan, had all three of his responses in this theme, showing his views of the main roles of an RA.

Informative and helpful was more popular with residents than RAs, being used by nine of the residents. RAs are often the people who residents direct their questions regarding campus life to, which explains why residents would think of an RA in this light. Residents who answered in this grouping used words such as helpful, assistor, knowledgeable, and informative. Four of the nine combined it with a term from the social category and the same number used it with caring and compassionate. These combined usages point out that in the eyes of residents, RAs who are more social can be seen as more informative and helpful, because they are talking to the residents more. They could also be seen as caring and compassionate because they give the residents valuable information for being successful.

Responsible. More than a quarter of RAs (ten of thirty-eight) thought of a term from the responsible category. The descriptors in this theme for RAs included calm, mature, responsible, collected, level headed, and well-rounded. Four combined it with a term from the hardworking theme, displaying the correlation RAs see between someone who is responsible and hardworking.

Residents used this term almost as much, with seven out of twenty-nine interviewees using either responsible, responsibility, dependable, or reliable in their response. All three responses from resident Lily were in this category, which pointed out her ideas of the main role as an RA.

Time management. Time management was a theme found mainly with RAs as opposed to residents. Nine RAs used a term from the category. Terms included time management, busy, and flexible. Five of the nine used this grouping in combination with the hardworking theme. Both groupings are related to working or handling responsibilities, which could explain their more frequent use together. Only one resident described RAs in this theme with the phrase “good with time management.” Residents would
likely not think about the work that RAs do as much as the RAs think about it, or be aware of the time commitments the job entails, explaining the lack of responses in this theme from residents.

**Involved.** Involved was used by five residents as an adjective that describes an RA. It was only used once by an RA and was never combined with phrases from other themes. RAs may not have mentioned this theme as much because they may see their involvements as responsibilities or work instead of involvements.

**Policy enforcer.** Policy enforcer was the least used theme in total for RAs and residents. Two RAs described an RA with policy enforcer or policy enforcement and three residents responded using rule, strict, or lawful. The low usage of this theme for both populations shows that neither group views policy enforcer as a primary role of an RA.

**Being an Authority Figure- RAs**

Residents and Resident Assistants (RAs) were asked similar questions regarding authority. Residents were asked how their RAs acted as authoritative figures and how they expressed authority. RAs were asked how they acted as authoritative figures. This created a variety of answers, but common phrases and descriptors were found and grouped according to the grounded theory method. Themes found rarely matched for the two groups interviewed. Common answers from RAs were categorized into ten types of responses: friendly and respectful, attitude and behavior, informative, enforce rules, straightforward, laid-back, boundaries, and being an example. Table 1 displays the themes and their corresponding number of responses.
### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Being an Authority Figure- RAs</th>
<th># Out of 38</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendly and Respectful</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude and Behavior</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enforce Rules</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straightforward</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laid-back</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundaries</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being an Example</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Friendly and respectful.** When asked how they express authority, a large portion of RAs stated that they are friendly and respectful with their residents. This helps RAs establish friendships and can help an RA be liked by his or her residents. Terms and phrases commonly used in this group included friendly, friend, nice, not domineering, understanding, good rapport, forming bonds, respect, respectful, and relate.

Dorothy found that being friendly with her residents made it easier for her to exert her authority without resistance. "I have never really had a problem with people questioning my authority or disrespecting me because I have a good, respectful relationship with my residents as well as being chill and cool with them."

Joann felt that by being friendly with residents, they would respect her more and not want to hurt their friendship. "They don't necessarily see me as an authoritative figure, but they see me as a friend they don't want to betray."

Another RA, Lucy, believed that her community determined her behavior towards residents. She thought that "we don't tend to have the issues that require strict authority." RAs like Lucy who responded in this theme used their friendliness as a way to gain respect and to avoid hostility when
handling situations. They found that it did not hinder their appearance to residents as an authority and did not allow residents to take advantage of them.

Several RAs who were in the friendly and respectful grouping would make sure to tell residents that they were "just doing their job." Four of the RAs from the friendly and respectful category made a reference to what they did as being a necessity of their job. The RAs did this when confronting a resident about policies. These RAs wanted to make sure that their residents knew they were not out to get them, but just following through with the requirements of the RA position. This was to maintain the relationship between the RA and resident. RAs wanted to let their residents know that if they weren't required to document the misbehavior, they would not be doing so.

RA Tom explained why he behaved nicely with his residents. Tom said that behaving nicely with residents helps avoid hostility.

I express my authority by first letting them know I am a student in the same place. That way there isn't as much hostility towards me when correcting them. Then when we do handle it, it is more of a, "I have to do this," and making sure that we are on the same page instead of "I am doing this to be mad at you."

He also stated that he avoids expressing his authoritative position so that his residents understand that he was not "doing this to be mad at you."

These RAs felt that if the residents thought that the RAs had to do what they were doing, then the residents would be friendlier with them. All four RAs were in the friendly and respectful theme because they did not search for policy violations. When they came upon violations, they were kind and respectful to the residents, and sometimes let them know that they did not like having to follow through with the documentation of policy violation.

**Attitude and behavior.** Body language and tone of voice are important to RAs when trying to express authority. By changing body positions or the seriousness of speech, an RA can let a resident know that
The situation has changed. Phrases and descriptors in this category included behavior, stern, tone, voice, expression, serious, give a look, seriousness, and attitude.

One RA, Beth, described how changes in behavior helped her express authority. She stated that her residents could pick up on her behavioral cues.

They know when I am acting as a friend and just want to talk and [sic] then when my voice changes or my attitude or behavior changes, that's when you know I am being serious and that this isn't a joke anymore. Making those behavioral changes has worked really well for me in the past and I haven't had any issues when I made that line.

Chris also stated that changing his behavior helps him express his authority which he finds difficult otherwise. He said, "I am a quiet person, so whenever my voice is deep or my facial expressions change with certain residents, they know I am upset and I am not usually like that."

Many RAs found that by changing their tone of voice, they could change the mood in a situation. For some, this is an easier and gentler method than using direct verbal communication to state that the mood or situation has changed. Some RAs use this method of expressing authority because otherwise it would be difficult for residents to understand that the RA was being authoritative. RA Leah expressed this when she said:

Usually I put on more of a stern tone because usually I laugh a lot. But when I have to show my authority I am very stern and business-like. So I am not really cracking jokes like I usually do and people know I am not behaving in my natural state and that kind of pushes that authoritarian persona.

Informative. Informing residents was another popular way that RAs said they expressed their authority. The descriptors form the classification included inform, inform rules, letting them know, warning, and announce authority. Four out of the eleven RAs who described themselves within this
classification also said they expressed authority by enforcing the rules. These two themes could be related due to the amount of information given by an RA on hall policies during a documentation.

These RAs felt that by informing the residents of the rules or their position as a Resident Assistant, it would stop any confrontation from residents. They also felt that announcing their position as the RA would express their authority to the resident and could change the mood of the situation. Dwight thought that informing the policies would stop confrontation when he said:

I clearly state what policy has been broken and by doing that I disarm any argument the resident may have by stating, “You were in the wrong. This is why you were in the wrong,” and that is generally the end of it.

Gloria felt that an RA could not handle situations involving broken rules if the residents weren’t aware of the rules in the first place. She stated:

I make sure they know there is a line and they know that if they do anything against the rules they are going to be documented. I make sure that they know the rules, because you can’t really be an authority on rules that your residents really don’t know.

**Enforce rules.** When asked how they acted as authoritative figures, a number of RAs felt that being firm on enforcing policy was essential to their role as an authority figure. These RAs did not say that they went out of their way to find policy violations and enforce them, but rather when they were presented with a policy violation, they were firm with carrying out their documentation responsibilities.

At Ball State University, when an RA discovers a policy violation, he or she must fill out a report which documents the situation and submit it to his or her hall director. The Hall Director then reviews the case and meets with the person who potentially broke the policy to determine if sanctioning is necessary. RAs expressed that not backing down when confronting policy violations helped them maintain authority. The RAs who fell into this category used phrases such as enforce, enforcing, policy, firm, follow through, strict at the beginning, ramps up, and forceful at the beginning.
Donna expressed her behavior with residents when she said, “If something happens I am always nice about it but policy is policy. You signed the dotted line.” Melanie felt similarly when she said, “I would say I express that authority by being firm when necessary but by being understanding in other circumstances as well.” These RAs thought that it was important to their authority that they stay firm on the policies. Staying firm allows these RAs to have control of their authority. Richard followed through with what he told residents he would do so that they would not undermine his authority. He mentioned twice that if an RA was not forceful in the beginning, then residents would “walk all over you.”

Bella fell into the informative and boundaries groupings, in addition to enforce rules. She wanted to inform her residents of what policies were, make sure that boundaries were established, and then follow through with the standards she had set. Not doing so would reverse the work that she had done to establish guidelines for her residents. Bella felt that,

establishing those boundaries in the beginning so that they know what I expect of them and what they can expect of me and letting it go from there. So I actually enforce what I say I am going to enforce and follow through with things.

Straightforward. Some RAs found that when expressing authority, it helped if they were straightforward with what the issue was. They did not want to avoid the issue and cause confusion or delay the process. Seven RAs responded with either straightforward, to the point, or up front.

Lacy thought that being upfront would help avoid any confusion between her and residents. She stated:

I am very upfront about it. I tell them basically this is what it is. This is what I go for and this is what I don’t go for. So it is out there and clear cut and there should be no second-guessing it because it is the first thing that is stated when I introduce myself.
Clarence felt the same way. He remarked, “I be[sic] straight up with them and don’t try to beat around the bush. I usually raise my voice and that usually gets my point across quickly.” Clarence was up front with his residents to help get his point across quickly. He wanted his residents to know what was going on or why he was acting the way he was as quickly as possible.

**Laid-back.** Instead of being harsh on rules immediately, the RAs in the laid-back theme tend to not look for trouble. This allows the RAs to gain respect from residents and to show that they don’t just want to get the residents in trouble. Terms used in this theme included laid-back, relaxed, passive, and calm.

Susan wanted her residents to learn how to be independent and she thought that taking a laid-back approach with her floor of residents would help the residents do so. She stated:

I prefer to have people come to me. I like to kind of build that open relationship with my residents, but I also push them to be independent and to grow within themselves especially because they are a lot of freshmen. So, I try to make sure they know I am not that mom role but I am a person they can come to. So, I have my door open to people, but I don’t prefer to go around and hug people every day because I want them to be independent, and come to me and reach out to me and like kind of gain experience in various situations in that matter.

Susan felt that if she were more hands-on with her residents, it wouldn’t help them learn to grow by themselves. She also didn’t want to have to pamper her residents, or be seen as a “mom.” Declan said he wanted to hide his authority from his residents when he stated,

In terms of authority I try to be as subtle of a leader as I can in terms of what I have to do. If I have to be authoritative in terms of policy enforcement or in any other time of leadership, normally I get pretty stern, if it’s having to do with something in the hall or confrontational, otherwise it is passive leadership.
Declan did not take a laid-back approach to policy enforcement, but did with other aspects of the position.

Joe was relaxed with his residents because he wanted to be a forgiving authority figure. He shared:

I tend to be more, I know some other RAs try to intimidate or have a demeaning type of stance or kind of an authority stance. I am more laid back about it because I realize especially with a mainly freshman population on my floor they are going to make mistakes especially initially so I don’t want them to think that my only goal is to get on them or jump on them for being in trouble.

Joe makes the point that policy violations are more common in freshmen residences. He felt that since his residents were going to make mistakes, there was no point in being harsh and tense around them. He also did not want his residents to have the perception that he was just trying to get them into trouble. Joe also compares his approach to other RAs. Two of the RAs from this theme mentioned specifically that they took a different approach from other RAs, indicating that certain expressions of authority produced the desire in others to do the opposite.

Boundaries. Boundaries are important to Resident Assistants in a number of ways. RAs can become close with residents and form great relationships, but they are told to have boundaries so that they can best perform their jobs. An RA who has to enforce policy with a resident who has become a close friend has a much harder time following through with policy enforcement. RAs also have set boundaries for what is inappropriate and appropriate as far as policy. Certain policies are not precisely defined, so RAs can have different ranges of acceptable behavior.

Beth wanted to have a distinct boundary between being a friend and being an RA. She felt that having that line would allow her residents to know when she was being nice, and when she was being stern. Beth saw the importance of,

having that line between being a friend and a boss. So that they know when I am acting as a friend and just want to talk and then when my voice changes or my attitude or behavior changes that’s
when you know I am being serious and that this isn’t a joke anymore.

Bella felt similarly when she said,

I make sure that in the beginning I let them know that yes I am here for you but this is my job so I will be your friend but this is my job first. So kind of establishing those boundaries in the beginning so that they know what I expect of them and what they can expect of me.

Bella wanted her residents to know that she wanted to help them, but wouldn’t break rules to do so.

She had boundaries to protect herself from facing repercussions of not following through with her job.

RAs want to help their residents as much as they can, but these RAs have pre-set lines that define what is acceptable to them.

Being an example. RAs mentioned that a large role as an RA is being an example for residents to follow. Many RAs behave as they would like their residents to behave. This is very important in the Resident Assistant position due to the “fishbowl effect” that Karen referred to. This analogy relates RAs to a fish inside of a fishbowl, being viewed by everyone in the outside world. RAs are often watched by people in the community, many times without the RAs being aware of it. By role modeling proper behavior, RAs can affect their residents’ actions.

Karen said, “I lead by example, because I feel that my residents will see me”. Donna similarly said, “I express authority in my job by being a role model, following the rules and like being a good example for the residents.” Becky made sure that her residents were informed of the policies, but she followed the rules herself. Following the rules herself helped to establish what was right or wrong in the hall. She stated, “I just constantly remind them of policies and keep them informed as well as obeying them myself.”

Being an Authority Figure-Residents

Residents were asked how their RAs acted as authoritative figures and how they expressed authority.

Common answers from residents were categorized into ten types of responses: caring and fair, relaxed
until issues, informed, mandatory meetings and duty rounds, address issues, presence, and behavior.

Table 2 displays these themes and their number of responses out of the total residents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th># Out of 29</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caring and Fair</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxed until Issues</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandatory Meetings and Social Rounds</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address Issues</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Caring and Fair.** When residents were asked how their RAs acted as an authority figure, the largest common response was that of caring and fair. Phrases used by these residents included weren’t overly pushy, nice, nicely, really nice, cares, helped me, fun to be around, has fun with us, kind, fair, fairly, listens to all sides, hears both sides, friend, not overly authoritative, and makes sure everyone feels comfortable. Three of the residents who were grouped into this category also had responses from the easy-going without issues category. Two of these residents also responded with a term from the informed and another two also used phrases from the addressed issues theme.

These residents did not think of their RA as a rude, controlling leader. They liked their RAs, but still viewed them as in charge. Liam viewed his RA like this and stated:

They made it so that you knew that you by yourself could approach them on a personal level, but at the same time you still knew that they were the authority figure at the same time. And like I said, they didn’t make it pushy like . . . “I’m the leader or the head of this or if you do this, this is going happen”. They made it more free and open.

Eli thought that the main way his RA expressed authority was “Making sure that everyone felt comfortable in that environment my RAs made sure that everyone felt invited to floor event.”
Eliza was a resident who claimed that she had been in trouble before. She felt that her RA handled the situation well, and did not show anger or resentment in her statements. She commented, “I’ve even been in trouble, I get noise complaints pretty often and I feel like she always handles the situation calmly and fairly.” The largest category of residents thought their RA cared about them and had positive feelings towards the RA.

**Relaxed until Issues.** A theme closely linked with kind and fair is relaxed until issues. The residents who answered within this classification spoke of how their RA changed behavior once a problem or issue arose. These residents noticed that their RA behaved a certain way around them, generally nice, and once someone broke a policy or neared the policy boundary, the RA would change behavior to handle the situation. The four residents thought that their RA behaved as the authority figure when authority was needed. Otherwise, the RA would not express his or her authority. Nick felt this way when he said, “It seems like they aren’t really too pushy with a lot of rules until you get really belligerent and act out of control and then it starts to become a problem.”

LeBron had similar thoughts, with addition points. He shared, “He gets after us if he needs when we need it, but if we’re not doing anything wrong, he likes to have fun with us.” LeBron’s statement exhibits the point that these residents feel that their RA is nice and fun when interacting with the residents, but is not afraid to switch to a strict authority. By handling the policies and incorrect behaviors, an RA can show his or her authority, while still retaining a positive relationship with the residents. None of these four residents had negative feelings when it came to how the RAs switched to a more authoritative behavior. They all shared that they felt the RA was doing what was right and the residents’ actions merited the behavior change.

**Informed.** Certain residents felt that they knew their RA was the authority, because the RA was informed. Amongst the residents who felt this way, the residents thought that their RAs were informed
about rules, procedures, and events. By being informed on rules, the RAs casted a perception on the residents that they were the authority figure.

Natalie said her RA lets “us know what the general rules are whenever she feels as if we’re kind of straying from it.” June felt that her RA expressed authority by informing them of rules and procedures. She stated, “She always tells us whenever we have meetings, go [sic] over the rules and everything and make sure we that [sic]everyone is [sic] knows what to do when we leave for breaks and everything like that.” Informing resident of policies acted as a reminder to the residents of who was the authority.

**Mandatory meetings and social rounds.** Another way that residents saw their RAs express authority was by way of mandatory meetings and social rounds. Periodically throughout a school year, Resident Assistants will host meetings with required attendance for all of their residents for various reasons. Some common reasons for floor meetings are informational meetings for holiday break procedures, discussion and voting for community contracts, and any issues that may come up which pertain to a floor’s residents. For residents who are away from the floor often, have an RA who is away often, or just do not see their RA much, these floor meetings are some of the main interactions they have with their RA. “Rounds” are a term referring to an RA’s duty patrols, in which an RA goes around the building to interact with residents, identify policy violations, and check on resident safety. These rounds are another main way that residents interact with the RAs. Four of the five residents from the informed also responded with a phrase from mandatory meetings and social rounds, which suggests that the residents who see authority in their RA form mandatory meetings and social rounds feel that the RAs are informed. This could be due to the high amount of information RAs present at floor meetings.

Duke saw his RA as an authority figure when he took “control of the meetings.” Amber’s view of her RAs authority was almost entirely based upon meetings and rounds. She stated, “She definitely enforces the rules. I feel like I honestly don’t see much of her unless like [sic] we’re passing in the halls or we have meetings or stuff.”
The Effect of Perception on Resident Assistant Job Performance

**Address Issues.** Part of an RA’s responsibilities is to handle policy violations. For residents who see this happen, this can be a way that the RA exhibits his or her authority. Documenting policy violations directly communicated to the residents that the RA was in charge and had authority in the situation. Phrases used by the residents were give discipline, enforce the rules, responded to noise complaints, address it, and addressed.

Natalie was very aware of her RA’s actions addressing issues. She stated, “She’s definitely responded to noise complaints throughout the halls. She’s gotten on people for alcohol usage in the halls.” George noted that his RA also responded to issues and handled them accordingly. He said, “When there’s a behavior issue or someone is doing something wrong to kind of manage it and kind of give the discipline.” The other residents noted that their RA would handle situations when it needed to be handled. In addition to those who are reprimanded for bad behavior, those who are not directly being reprimanded see the interactions and gain insight into how their RA acts as an authority.

**Presence.** When thinking of their RA’s authority, a few residents thought of how their RA was present on the floor. Just being around gave the RAs authority in the eyes of these residents. Ethan noted that his RA’s authority came from his “presence around the hall.” LeBron had an RA who was around and could thereby be an example to him, concurring with his statement that his RA “leads by example.” Jessica knew that her RA was “there if we ever needed her.” Kiley had strong appreciation for her RA, because “I know that I can always go to her if I have like a problem.” For these residents, knowing that their RA was present had a big impact on their perception of the RA.

**Behavior.** Three residents thought of their RA’s behavior when thinking about the RA’s expression of authority. These terms included gives a look, body language, calmly, calm, and tone of voice. Each of the three residents stated that their RA would handle situations calmly. In addition, the two of the three residents noted that the RA would use non-verbal communication to express authority. Without specifically speaking anything to the residents, the RAs manifested their authority to the residents.
Resident Perception of RAs - RAs

RAs were asked the question “What do you think is the general perception of an RA as an authoritative figure?” This was to compare with what residents actually stated they thought of RAs. Responses from RAs were categorized into themes based on similarity of responses. The following classifications emerged: respect and fond of, police, mean and rude, power, and parent. Out of all of the responses, the only theme with a positive view toward RAs was respect and fond of. Responses from this theme made up 18.8% of all responses categorized into themes. Table 3 below displays the themes and their prevalence out of the thirty-eight responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th># Out of 38</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean and Rude</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect and Fond of</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mean and rude.** Tied for the largest group of responses was mean and rude. Over half of the RAs thought that residents believed the following of RAs: stern, ruin, rude, blame, negative, have issues with, scary, joke, douche bag, very strict, mean, dick, bad, no fun, and don’t like.

When analyzing the responses which fell into this category, two sub themes became apparent. RAs thought that residents either believed RAs were outright mean or they believed residents had differing views. The number of responses related to outright mean and differing views were split evenly. Fifty percent of them mentioned that resident perceptions were based on experience, time, or the person and fifty percent thought that residents believed RAs were just mean or rude. Eight of the eleven in the differing views sub-section were paired with a response from the respect and fond of theme.
Carol felt that residents’ perceptions of RAs could differ. She thought that experiences were the main factor when she stated:

I think it depends on the situation and the person based on previous experience, because if a resident has had a good experience with their RA and tends to not get in trouble or not get caught, then they are going to look at their RA as more of a friend or someone who is just there. But if they are more of a person who gets caught or is not necessarily always following the rules, they are going to look to the RAs to blame them for the reason why they are getting in trouble and so therefore they are going to have a negative position. I think it both depends on the person and situation.

Similarly, Joe felt that residents’ opinions of RAs would change once they got to know the RA. He commented, “Once they get to know us and realize everything that is going on, the residents tend to think, ‘Oh, they aren’t just after us.’”

Sophia felt that Ball State was unique in the way that RAs approached residents. She thought that residents may have different feelings at different universities. She remarked:

At some other universities it might be that way, like more policy based, but I think at Ball State it is not as scary. RAs aren’t as scary because we focus so much on intentional interactions and I don’t feel like I have ever had that impact on someone where they are afraid to come talk to me. It is more of an intentional interaction and more on a personal level with residents.

Bruce had a different viewpoint then most of the RAs. He still thought there were differing views among residents, but he thought that most residents had good views of RAs, as opposed to less. He said:

I think for the most part, residents acknowledge that it is the RA’s job to be that figure. You get some residents who know that, but are still not happy about it. . . . Residents know that RAs have to be the authoritative figure because that is their job.
These RAs believed that there are residents who do not like the RAs, but they also believed that depending on the situation, some were fond of RAs. The other half of the RAs in the mean and rude category felt that residents had a purely negative view of RAs.

Bella spoke of a recent event that had happened in her residence hall which helped her define how she thought residents viewed RA. She said:

Something recently that I have just found out throughout our building is that residents think we are spies and wait outside their doors and want to document them. . . . Residents perceive us as looking to get them in trouble.

These RAs felt that the general perception of residents towards RAs was for the sole purpose of ruining a resident’s fun. Chris commented that he felt residents think RAs are “a nark or someone just trying to bust them and ruin their good time.”

**Police.** The other leading group of responses was police. Descriptors from this category included trouble, out to get, policy, hall cop, look for trouble, nark, police, snitch spies, and enforce. This group was similar to the first in that the responses were negative, but this theme stood out because it specifically dealt with handling policy and getting residents in trouble.

Grace felt that residents had a fear of RAs due to the perception that RAs are police. She said, “For some it is a scary situation and they panic and see you as the police. They don’t cooperate well or they cooperate very well because they are scared.” Rose was under the impression that residents thought RAs try to get residents in trouble. She commented:

I think that a lot of people just think that we are honestly out to get them, and I have had so many residents say to me, “You RAs are just out to get us and all you want to do is just get us into trouble.”

Dorothy similarly felt that residents believe RAs go out of their way to find trouble. She remarked:

Most residents would say that we are trying to sniff out trouble and trying to get people in trouble. And if they get in trouble for something they always kind of put it back on you, the RA, or other
residents. They always try to defend themselves and they don’t understand that we are just doing our job and that we have to take care of what we see and hear.

Dorothy makes the point that these RAs feel that residents had a misconception of what RAs do. Thirteen of the twenty-two RAs from this theme stated in their responses that even though they felt that residents saw them as the police, this was not the way they behaved.

**Respect and fond of.** The next largest theme was that of respect and fond of. RAs who had responses in this category felt as though residents did in fact, have a positive perspective of RAs. Terms and phrases used by the RAs include understand, friend, warm up, respect, not scared, appreciate, good, recognize, and like. It should be noted that all responses were coupled with a negative response. This was due to RAs believing that residents liked RAs, but only some of them or only after getting to know the RAs. No RA thought that all residents had positive feelings toward Resident Assistants.

These RAs did feel that at least some residents respected or were fond of RAs. Becky felt that RAs were mostly liked from the campus as a whole. She stated, “For the most part on Ball State’s campus that we are respected and that we have a lot of respect from our faculty and peers for what we do.” Melanie related to this and felt that RAs were liked by residents who were involved, but not the “typical freshmen.” She remarked, “I believe there is one [perception] by people who work in housing and students who are involved and realize how hard we do work.” Lydia worked in the Honors Residence Hall Community and felt that her community was different than the rest. She commented, “In the honors dorm. . . The residents don’t take us as seriously as an authority figure as they do a friend or substitute parent.” These three assumed that only certain residents had good opinions of them.

Bruce and Joann believed that the residents knew the RAs responsibilities and had no harsh feelings towards them. Joann said, “Most of the time I think it is, ‘we understand. We know you are just trying to do your job.’”
Power. Another category for RA responses was power, which was used by nine Resident Assistants. The nine mentioned that they believed residents viewed the RAs from a perspective of power and authority. Phrases used in this theme included the following: above, boss, bossy, big, powerful, power hungry, and peers as authority. This theme was used with all other themes except for parent. This demonstrates that while believing residents saw them as mean or the police, they also thought residents perceived the RAs had inflated egos due to their position. The usages of power were always from the aspect of RAs being condescending to residents.

Gloria was the only RA to have a response only in this category. She felt that residents mainly viewed RAs as a person above them. She stated:

I think generally residents see RAs as above them quite a bit. . . . I think that they think of RAs as someone they can’t really connect with but can connect with at the same time; someone who is on their level but is a little bit higher.”

Gloria pointed out that she thought residents felt they could not connect with RAs, because of a separation of authority levels. Jeff had a resident who felt similarly and said, “They didn’t like authoritative figures and having peers being them.” Dorothy also mentioned the power distance and thought residents perceived RAs as people who thought the floor belonged to them. These RAs believed that residents perceived a distance between them and the RAs, which would hurt an RA’s ability to connect with the residents.

Parent. The parent theme was the smallest grouping with only four RAs having a response within it. These four RAs believed that residents thought of them as a substitute parent for college, or a “floor mom or dad.” The responses related to parent indicate the RA’s belief that residents want the RAs to take care of them and treat them like a parent would. On the other hand some residents may see parents as rude authority figures, which would be casted onto RAs if they saw the RAs as a substitute parent.
Grace compared being seen as a parent with being seen as the police. She remarked, “There are those that haven’t had to interact with you in that situation [documenting] so they don’t really see you as that. They see you as a floor mom or dad. The softer and the harder side I guess.” These RAs felt that residents thought of them as someone who would take care of them, but also told them what to do, like a parent would. Becky saw this and said, “They think I shouldn’t be telling them what to do because they are adults.”

How You Want Authority Expressed- Residents

The last question asked to residents was “If your RA had to express their authority to you, and you were in the wrong, how would you like your RA to do that?” The question was phrased so that residents could assume that they had behaved inappropriately in order to eliminate responses related to feeling unjustly approached. Responses were analyzed and categorized. Five themes arose. They were respectful and kind, one-on-one, do their job, calm, and help fix problem. Table 4 exhibits the themes and their number of responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How You Want Authority Expressed- Residents</th>
<th># Out of 29</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respectful and Kind</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-on-One</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do Their Job</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calm</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help Fix Problem</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respectful and kind. The largest theme was respectful and kind, which exhibits the prevailing desire of residents to be treated positively when reprimanded. Approximately two-thirds used a phrase or term from this group, which included personable, not threatening, friendly, understanding, not in your face or rude, not controlling or powerful, on the same level, not super mean, not yelling, kindly, kind, not be pushy, forgiving, not condescending, treat me like a peer, treat me like an adult, nice, and
pleasant. The prevalence of this theme displays how residents respond to being in trouble. Residents care greatly about how the RAs treat them when they have broken a policy.

Amber wanted her RA to be nice with her if she had broken a policy, because she couldn’t stand people who were rude. She commented, “I just can’t deal with authoritative figures who are so over the top about things and just in your face and just rude.” Eli expressed why he felt the way he did when he said:

I think the main thing is that they’re pleasant about it. I mean, it stinks that, you know, if I’m breaking the rules that they have to handle it, but at the same token [sic] I think that as long as they’re respectful and they’re just addressing the issue at hand, then that’s the main thing.

Another aspect of this was theme was forgiveness. Residents wanted their RA to let them know that their mistake or bad behavior was forgivable. Haley spoke of an incident where a RA’s handling of broken policy made her feel very uncomfortable. She stated that the RA "was really rude about it and kind of made me feel really uncomfortable. So, just making sure that she’s respectful to me and [sic] let me know that it’s still ok that I did something wrong.”

One-on-one. The next largest theme was one-on-one. These residents wanted their RA to deal with the situation just with them. Terms and phrases used include one-on-one, alone, personally, up front, me, me first, face-to-face, private, straightforward, and take me aside. This theme was used with all other themes except for calm and was sometimes the only theme a resident responded with. Being the only grouping a resident used represents the importance of this theme. Some residents did not care how they were treated (represented by the respectful and kind theme), but solely cared that it was in private. These residents cared more about not being embarrassed or used as a public example then they did being treated nicely.

June was one of the residents who only cared about the RA handling an authoritative situation by doing it one-on-one with her. She said:
I would want her to talk to me personally about it and not call me out in front of people and just take me aside and deal with it instead of doing it kind of in a public place or in front of other people.

June points out that she doesn’t want her RA to bring up the situation in front of other people. George also felt this way and said, “That way everyone doesn’t have to find out you know. It’s just between us.” Whether for embarrassment or shame, these residents valued a private conversation about policy violation.

**Do their job.** A total of eight residents had a response that fell within the do their job theme. These residents understood that they were at fault and wanted the RAs to do what protocol called for. Phrases for this category were doing her job, do his job, professional, professionally, correctly, supposed to, follow procedures, and call me out. Out of the eight residents whose response fell into this theme, only one did not have a response from the respectful and kind category. The strong correlation between the two displays the desire of residents that RAs do their job, but still be kind to them while doing it.

Liam felt as though residents sometimes did deserve to get in trouble and the RA should follow their procedures to handle it. He said of residents:

> I feel like sometimes you just need to be called out on it and it doesn’t matter where you are, but [sic] if you know you’ve been doing this wrong . . . or it’s just not right and it gets to the point where you keep doing it, just call him out on it.

The residents who had similar responses to Liam did not particularly care about how they were treated, but just wanted the RA to handle it correctly. Eli said, “If I’m in the wrong and I broke a policy . . . these are the rules I’m going to follow. This happens if I don’t. If they’re following those rules, then cool, I agree with it.” One resident originally even stated that he did not care how RAs behaved towards him while documenting a situation. James remarked, “I guess nice or bad, it doesn’t really matter to me. I guess I prefer nice then.”
Calm. One of the smaller themes was calm. These residents particularly cared that the RA remain calm and not lose his or her temper when handling policy violations. The four all used “calm” in their answer. Three of the four residents only had a response which fell into the calm theme, pointing out the strong desire the four residents had that their RA not be rude at them for breaking a policy.

Nick felt that if an RA was not calm in this situation, it would cause him to not be calm. He commented:

I would say approach in kind of a calm manner and then I’ll stay calm too. If you come in screaming in at me, chances are I’m going to come screaming back at you. I really like to be treated the way I think I should be in certain situations.

Eve responded similarly by sharing “very calmly. Not yelling at me saying like ‘oh you did the wrong thing. I hate you,’ but just staying calm.” The four residents preferred that the RA remain level headed and not overreact to their situation.

Help fix problem. The final theme for how residents wanted RAs to express authority when they were in the wrong was help fix problem. All four used the phrase “fix it” in their response. These residents all mentioned that they wanted the RA to tell them what they could do to not have the issue again. Marcus summed up these beliefs when he said, “Let’s talk it out and make sure we both understand what needs to change in the future, so it doesn’t happen again and so that I learn my lesson.” Marcus and the other residents wanted the RAs to inform them on how to correct the problem they had, so that they could avoid getting in trouble again.

Perception Effect on RA Job Performance

The last question asked to RAs was “Does that perception affect how you act in your job. If yes, how?” Out of the thirty-eight RAs, twenty-nine responded with “yes.” For those who did respond “yes,” three themes were found. These were desire to change perception, situational, and avoid hatred.

Eleven responded with “no,” and two themes immersed. These were importance of job and don’t care.
The two responses (yes and no) equate to more than the total number of RAs because two RAs had different responses for each year they had worked as an RA. Table 5 displays the themes for yes and no responses, along with the percent of responses out of total yes or no responses for each. Some RAs responded in multiple themes, so percentages do not add to 100 percent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5: Perception Effect on RA Job Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes- Desire to Change Perception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes- Situational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes- Avoid Hatred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No- Importance of Job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No- Don’t Care</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yes-desire to change perception. The largest category of RA responses was desire to change perception. The fourteen RAs in this theme said that the perceptions they believed residents had of them caused them to try to change the residents’ perceptions. Phrases in this theme included break walls, prove them wrong, break perceptions, change stereotypes, change perceptions, overcompensate, earn respect, and show them.

Leah felt that she needed to show her residents that she wasn’t what she believed they saw her as. She said, “I think it encourages me to show more of my non-authoritarian side just to show them that the RA isn’t only the police officer, so to speak, but we are there for other things too.” Dorothy felt like she had to break stereotypes and resident perceptions which were based on previous experiences. In comparison to what her residents thought she would be like, she stated:

Well that’s not what I am here for. So I always try to defeat the stereotype, I guess through my actions. I think the only way it affects me, like [sic] I don’t consciously think about it, but if it does in any way, it is to defeat the stereotypes and not be the big mean, bad RA.
Richard felt that in order to change the stereotypes, he had to make sure that his behavior didn’t follow what a “stereotypical” RA would do. He mentioned:

In order to break that stereotype you have to do more than just yell at them. You have to actually help them if they have questions. Show them where they need to go if they come to you and show that the RA is more than just an authoritative figure.

These RAs were affected by how they believed the residents saw them, which resulted in them trying to remove the assumed perceptions residents had.

Yes-situational. Another group of RAs believed that the perceptions they thought residents had affected them sometimes and other times didn’t. These RAs used phrases such as depends, depending, and yes and no. Clare felt that her residents had a different perception than residents on other floors, so she had to change her behavior depending on the floor. On other floors she decided to assert her authority more, since they weren’t her residents. This shows that RAs who are not as comfortable with certain residents may be more susceptible to perception effects.

Beth changed her behavior around the residents based upon how they were reacting. She felt that the perceptions would change the way she acted based on what she thought the residents thought of her. She said, “I try to stay more serious depending on they are reacting to me. If they take it more as a joke I get more and more serious just depending on the situation and how they are treating me.”

Becky said that she became nervous because of perceptions, but it ultimately did not affect how she performed her job. The perception caused her to hesitate, but did not affect her ability to do her required responsibility. She stated:

Yes and no. I think I have to do my job so no sort of perception like that is going to make me not do that. But it does make me hesitant and makes me nervous for maybe how people will perceive me but at the end of the day I am here to do my job so no matter how people perceive me I am going to do it.
The Effect of Perception on Resident Assistant Job Performance

Yes- avoid hatred. The last grouping of RAs who said that the general perception of RAs affected how they act in their job was avoid hatred. These seven RAs acted in a manner to not be hated by residents. They did not like the stereotype they believed residents had, so they acted in a manner to be liked by residents.

Karen had this experience early in her RA career, but it changed as she stayed in the position. She commented, “Definitely, the first semester as an RA I was nervous to document someone or like be authoritative towards someone because I didn’t want them to hate me.” Donna also wanted people to like her. She said, “I have always wanted people to like me so it makes me strive harder for that personal one-on-one relationship. Be like, [sic] I am not a monster but I am a person you can talk to about anything.”

Bella had a similar experience to Karen and really wanted to be liked her first year as an RA. She remarked:

I think that within my first year it definitely did. I cared about what my residents thought of me and how I was going to act. You know if I wanted to be an authoritative figure that’s what I was going to be at the time but if I wanted to be that friend I would be like, “Oh hey!” You know acting cool. Bella mentions switching her behavior to that of a friend around residents, because she didn’t want to be seen as mean. This exhibits these seven RAs’ desire to be liked, which causes them to change how they act in their job.

No- importance of job. Slightly more than half of the RAs who felt that perceptions did not affect them stated that it was because of the importance of their job. All seven used the term “job” in their response. These RAs would not let anything get in the way of them carrying out their responsibilities. Whereas other RAs cared about being liked, these RAs were able to look past that to complete their requirements.
Lacy was very confident that the perceptions would not affect her, because her RA position was very important to her. She said:

No because regardless I have come here to do a job. I am not going to let what they think determine how I am going to do my job because there is a lot of money on the line and I need my job. So I come forth very upfront about what I do so it is up to them if they abide by the rules.

Jeff had the same thoughts and would not bend to what residents wanted. He stated, "I just let them know that is their opinion and they may have a problem with that but I am not going to cater to that and I am still going to do my job." Perceptions did not matter to these RA as much as their job did, so they were able to act as if they had no perceptions.

No- don’t care. The other RAs who said "no" to the last question responded that they just didn’t care what residents thought of them. Phrases used by these five RAs include don’t care, consistent, dick when necessary, and can’t let it affect me. Two of these RAs specifically noted that they did let perceptions affect them their first year of employment, but they learned to not be affected by their second year.

Carol felt that she needed to be consistent with everyone and perceptions did not create barriers between her and her residents. She did not want perceptions to allow her to behave one way with certain residents, and another way with other residents. This implied that she believed certain residents had perceptions that would tempt her to change her behavior, while others did not. She stated:

I would say no. I think you should be consistent with everyone. I treat everyone the same. Even if I have written them up before or I haven’t, I will still approach them, still talk to them, and be friendly and take interest in their life. No matter what it is. It isn’t a barrier and [it] isn’t something that separates them or puts them into a category of being an individual who is irresponsible.

Like Carol, Bella realized she could not let the perceptions affect her. For Bella; however, this realization happened after her first year as an RA. She commented, "I have learned throughout my position that I
can't let it affect me. You can't really let their perceptions affect you because it will either affect your life or your position in negative ways."

Discussion and Implication for Practice

This research has revealed some important aspects of how Resident Assistants (RAs) and residents perceive one another, and the relationships the two have. The first question asked to both RAs and residents had a strong similarity in responses. The largest theme of responses for both groups was that of caring and compassionate. They also had a similar number of responses for role model and leader, social, responsible, and policy enforcer (which was the smallest grouping for both). RAs were found to have put more of an emphasis on hardworking and time management than residents, which are aspects related more to working and experiences as an RA. Residents mentioned RAs being helpful and informative more than RAs, which possibly shows how residents see certain benefits of RA and resident interactions that the RAs are not as aware of. RAs being helpful and informative may contribute to residents having a better perception of RAs, as Baumrind (1968) mentioned when describing authoritative versus authoritarian parents. Authoritative parents explained their motives, which was a part of parenting that gave a child an internal locus of control. Policy enforcement was mentioned by both groups, but not very often, which shows how both groups do not view policy enforcer as the primary role of an RA.

When it came to how authority is expressed, RAs and residents had similar thoughts, but did not respond as uniformly as they did on the first question. The largest theme for both RAs (respectful and friendly) and residents (caring and fair) had shared phrases and synonyms, with a few differences. Both groups knew that authority was shown through behavior changes and both saw RAs stay relaxed unless an issue was present. Residents and RAs saw authority being expressed by being informed and they each saw RAs take care of policies when needed. RAs saw themselves expressing authority through building respect, boundaries, being an example and straight forward, and the changes in strictness.
Residents did not see this in RAs, but saw a few things the RAs did not mention. The residents viewed their RAs as an authority through mandatory meetings and duty rounds and their presence on the floors. A few residents were also aware that their RAs were RAs first, which implied that rules were rules regardless of relationships.

Residents were aware of the methods that RAs used to express authority and even saw authority expressed through ways the RAs did not particularly think of. When residents described how they wanted their RA to handle policy misconduct, they strongly desired RAs to be respectful and kind while doing so privately with the resident. Many RAs stated that they behaved respectfully and friendly with residents while being authoritative, but none mentioned giving residents privacy so to not embarrass them. The RAs from the laid back theme noted that they remained calm with residents, which was another desire of residents. RAs who stated that they were informative would most likely be the ones to please those residents who wanted to know how to fix the problem that had happened. A decent number of residents did not particularly care how they were treated, but just wanted the RAs to do their job correctly. While this was not specifically mentioned by RAs, certain RAs did make comments referring to carrying out their RA duties and no RAs said they ever avoided what their responsibilities called for.

While not every RA mentioned that he or she handled authority like the residents wanted, only one desire of the residents was not mentioned by at least one RA. The privacy when handling policy misconduct is one aspect that RAs need to make sure they are carrying out, especially since it was such a big theme for residents. The responses residents gave concerning how they would like their RAs to express authority could be very beneficial to RAs. RAs that are aware of what residents will respond to best can handle conduct issues and still maintain great relationships with residents. The few residents who mentioned that an RA handled a situation poorly had bad feelings towards those events.
RAs had strongly negative reactions when describing how they felt residents perceived them. While almost thirty-five percent felt that residents had positive feelings for RAs, not a single one of them felt that this was the only reaction. When comparing this to the first question asked of residents which asked them to give three adjectives which describe and RA, it should be noted that only ten percent of residents mentioned RAs as policy enforcer. This shows a significant divergence in how residents perceive RAs and how RAs think they are perceived. Sixty-five percent of the interviewed RAs did not think that residents thought of them in a friendly way, in comparison to ninety percent of residents using positive descriptors for RAs. The considerable amount of perceived negative feelings could have an impact on an RA's quality of performance. Masson and Deluga (2000) stated that positive affect (positive emotions) is a predictor in RA effectiveness. The negative perception RAs had could cause them to have a negative affect or less of a positive affect, which would result in less effectiveness as an RA.

How they gain the perceptions they think residents have of them was not entirely discovered, but a few RAs gave insight into how it happens. RAs mentioned that they had heard residents comment negatively about RAs, while some RAs spoke of the perceptions they had when first coming to college. Others heard from residents who had bad previous experiences with RAs.

Dwight said that if he were to document a resident, then it would have a negative effect. This implies that RAs who handle policy violations may be more likely to be confronted with residents who have negative perceptions (or who form negative perceptions) of RAs. RAs who are faced with policy violations more often may be faced with more residents who do have negative perceptions of RAs, thereby shaping how they think residents perceive them. These RAs showed how past experiences could shape the RAs belief in how residents feel about them.

This difference in perception and reality would not matter if RAs did not behave differently based upon their perceptions, but this was not the case. Over seventy-five percent of RAs said that, in some
The Effect of Perception on Resident Assistant Job Performance

way, the perceptions they believed residents had of them affected how they acted in their position as an RA. This could have a great impact on RAs if they were able to see the reality behind resident perceptions. The RAs who were affected by this false perception in a negative way could react to situations differently, if they did not think that residents were viewing them how they had previously behaved. This information matches what Moy and Hales (1973) found. Their research suggested that how leaders act and how they perceived their actions can cause misunderstanding and miscommunication within people of a group. When RAs perceived that they were being seen as mean, rude, policing, etc., it may have been causing misunderstanding, which in some cases impacts job performance.

In the seventy-five percent who were affected, a quarter of them said that the perceptions caused them to act in a way so as to not be hated. This can have negative impacts on an RA and may cause them to not follow procedures. Knowing that they are not hated could possibly change how they behave. The largest group who were affected said that they tried to change those perceptions. Since those perceptions did not actually exist as much as they thought, these RAs were overworking to be seen as a good authority figure when they already were being as one. The RAs who said that their perceptions’ affect was situational could benefit from this knowledge as well. They would not have to hesitate or worry about which residents had a negative perception of them as much.

False perceptions may not have such a negative impact, however. RAs may be overworking to change perceptions, but their behaviors could have other positive impacts. For instance, an RA who thinks residents view her or him as mean or rude may try to break these perceptions and show that the RA is caring and fair. Even if only ten percent of the residents view her or him that way, the RA will still be behaving in a way that can cause those residents who appreciate the RA to appreciate her or him more. This may cause residents to reach out to the RA more, get help from the RA more often, and possibly
have a greater college experience. The RA may be trying to change perceptions that aren't pervasive, but by doing so he or she can improve on already positive perceptions.

These results do not show that every resident will like RAs and will act peacefully with them in misconduct situations. They will still have to be authoritative and some residents will not like them. It does show that certainly not every resident feels this way and RAs do not need to go into situations feeling as though the resident will be disrespectful. RAs will have to take each situation case by case, but know that their pre-conceived ideas may be off.

The hope for this study is that RAs can be made aware of how to better interact with residents. Training can be given during formal training events for RAs. This information can be presented to Resident Assistants, but may be more valuable to RAs if they were to share their own perceptions and previous experiences with one another. RAs have many different feelings towards residents, and even more experiences. There may be more information that can be learned through sharing of experiences in light of this study's data. If RAs can practically apply this research, some unneeded anxiety of resident perception can be avoided. Since it was apparent that RAs in their first year struggled with letting perceptions affect them more, training for those new RAs can be especially valuable. RAs may also have more success with their residents if they are made aware of how residents really want to be treated, and what they do not appreciate.

Limitations

Twenty-nine residents were interviewed in the process. This number is small in comparison to the total number of residents at Ball State University. The number of Resident Assistants (RAs) interviewed was close to one-third of all BSU RAs. The reactions recorded from residents may not reflect the feelings of all residents at the university. Additionally, the type of residents interviewed may not have accurately reflected the different personalities of residents that RAs have. Certain individuals who were asked to interview with the investigators declined to interview. It may have been that individuals who declined
did so because they had negative feelings towards their RA and did not want to share those feelings with a University employee. This would have an impact on the data collected regarding how residents feel about their RAs. Also, even though interviews were done in private spaces, residents may have felt discomfort in responding to questions. Co-Investigator Taylor Thurlow was a current RA at the time of interviews, which could have made RAs feel discomfort as well.

Future Research

This research can be adapted with more specific research on the populations studied in this study. Research evaluating perceptions of residents based on policy violation history and residence hall communities would shed light on the specifics of what RAs can expect different residents to perceive. Future studies should endeavor to gain a larger population of residents, so as to have a more accurate representation of different populaces amongst residents. In addition, research done on how RAs handle policy violations could add to this study's results regarding how residents want their RAs to act.

Conclusion

While being limited, this study does give valuable information regarding resident and RA perceptions. Residents and RAs have similar feelings as to what an RA is and should be, as well as how authority as an RA is expressed. RAs are not often correct in their assumptions of how residents feel about them. The incorrect perceptions cause overwork, but could also help with residents who already respect the RA. Housing and Residence Life at Ball State University can use this to help their RAs better perform in their positions and thereby better serve the residents (who are students) of the university. It is not a decisive declarative as to perceptions of residents and RAs, but it can certainly get the conversation started regarding perceptions.
The Effect of Perception on Resident Assistant Job Performance

References


