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Title: A Break In the Chain: A Look at Communication Between Resident Advisors the Resident Life Employees Above Them.

Course: Anth411 Section 1G and 1U (Methods of Cultural Anthropology) Fall 2007 -- Nancy A Abelmann

About the Author: I am currently a senior in LAS studying Anthropology and Psychology. I became interested in the topic of my research after first working with University Housing as an Office Assistant for a Resident Director (RD) during my sophomore year. I became a Resident Advisor (RA) my sophomore year, as well, and continued in the position through my junior year. I now am again working as an Office Assistant.

The further I got involved in this department, the more frustration I saw amongst the RAs, and at times the RDs, in regards to policy making and a lack of easy communication with the higher administration. Given my background observations and experiences, I decided to address the issues through this research project.

Keywords: Residential Life, Administration, Resident Advisors, Communication

Abstract: Through past experiences and observations of resident advisors (RAs), resident directors (RDs), and the administrative staff of the Residential Life Department, I have noticed a break in the communication between RAs and Housing Administration. The organization of Residential Life is very similar to that of many large departments: employees are hierarchically organized and policy is set in a hierarchical fashion as well. Policies that affect residents are made by administrators (starting with a director) and implemented by the resident advisors. This is where communication appears to be absent. While information is quick to travel from the "top-down," there is very little opportunity for the resident advisors to give feedback as to how the reality of the situation is playing out on the hall floors. This break in communication appears to be a stressor and source of frustration for many RAs who are working with the residents on a daily basis and see nothing of the administration.

The intent of this proposed research is to determine the existence, cause, and possible solutions for this "disconnect." The cause of this "disconnect" is something very worthy of investigation. Without determining the cause, any solution will likely be restricted in its influence. I hypothesize that it may be a break in age, education, values and goals, and/or daily experiences between the administrators and resident advisors. To investigate this issue, I plan to utilize interviewing and visual representation task methods. It would be beneficial to many people for this apparent stress to be investigated and alleviated in this prominent department on campus.

Initial Exercises:

Reading Response

Initial Exercises:

Observation

Initial Exercises: *This exercise was completed before the formation of my actual research project detailed below. It has very little to do with my research questions and data, however it does demonstrate one aspect of a resident advisor's job.*

Analysis of a Text

I have worked for University Housing for the past three years in various jobs and positions and have seen a lot of the inner workings and administration behind what goes on in a residence hall on this campus. For that reason, I've decided to analyze one of the foremost documents put out by this campus unit, Residential Life (University Housing) Guiding Documents. These documents, which are actually short paragraphs, lists, and key points, are to be lived by for a Residential Life employee. They span across all jobs, from the director to the resident advisors to the office assistants, basically anyone that would come into any contact with residents, parents, the press, etc. To me it is an interesting document because on the most obvious level, the statements made are very clear, straightforward, and reasonable. They even seem simple. However, through my experience working, nothing in that department is as clear-cut as this text. Regardless of that (as it is only my opinion), I would like to look at these documents for what they really say to the reader who has not had experience with this unit otherwise.

The document is divided into several different categories, including their "Vision Statement," "Mission Statement," "Inclusiveness Statement," "Housing Mission," "Housing Principles for ... Work," and "Housing Strategic Priorities 2006-2008." At the beginning of the document, before all of these sections "The Department of Residential Life uses the following guiding documents to intentionally guide its planning, decision making, and daily operations," is stated in bold. This sentence is saying several things to the reader. Although it is written for Res. Life employees, it is public information for anyone to read. From an employee standpoint, this sentence can be read as instruction. In other words, it tells the employee that he must keep the following in mind as he is representing this campus unit at all times. On the other hand, this sentence tells the reader that Res. Life employees do actually use the following guidelines, ideologies, and practices in their work, whether that turns out to be the case or not. Furthermore, the use of the word "intentionally" places more emphasis on the idea that using this document is something done actively and always.

Another interesting thing about this document is that it attempts to be as all encompassing as possible. Residential Life is a campus unit that involves many

members of the campus community. Freshmen, with very few exceptions, live in the residence halls and become a part of this unit. Therefore, Res. Life has to be as welcoming, inclusive, and all-encompassing as possible. When it comes down to it, they are basically a business, and they do need to make everyone happy, whether that's possible or not. These attempts can be seen in several sections of this document.

First of all, the "Vision Statement" says, "Learning, growing, mattering for every person, on every floor, in every community." This very clearly is reaching out to everyone and trying very hard not to exclude. This makes sense because in such a large campus unit, some people are bound to feel that they do not belong, or that they are not being treated equally. These points are reemphasized in the "Inclusiveness Statement" which lists many identities and states that all employees will "respect and honor individuals, inclusive of, but not limited to, their..." Using this language, Residential Life is protecting itself in the situation that it has forgotten, or not listed, an identity. Some examples of identities are age, ability, race, gender, religion, size, etc. While this language protects Res. Life employees, it comforts residents, giving the feeling that they are indeed included.

This document holds many more examples following the two that I've already listed, but what I find more interesting is it's dual role as a guide for employees, and a comfort and tool for residents. Residential Life has many people to consider, their employees, residents, parents, and other branches and units at this university. With such a large breadth of people and things, it must keep its objectives and rules very clear and open to interpretation. For that reason many of the aspects of this statement can be read several different ways from several different perspectives. All aspects of this document, though, surround the idea of "inclusiveness" and respect for all. It is simply written to account for all aspects of residential living. Much more could be pulled out of this document, and I think it would become even richer with actual employee and residential opinions on what this document means to them.

This document can be viewed at [University Housing Guiding Docs](#).

Initial Exercises: *This interview, too, was done conducted before my research questions and plan had been determined. It, therefore, does not address any of the issues described below; nevertheless, it gives insight to one resident's experience with Housing and Residential Life.*

A Practice Interview

In order to follow my interest in University Housing and Residential Life, I interviewed a current employee and past resident of Allen Hall (one of the 17 halls on campus). As a current employee and past resident myself, I knew him previously which removed a lot of the apprehensions I have had when interviewing people I hadn't known in the past. This made the entire interview

more relaxed, and it was easier in general because both the interviewee and myself understand each other's methods and behaviors in communication. That led to better understanding of not only words, but also gestures throughout the interview.

During the interview, I found myself much more aware of my facial expressions, verbal responses, and writing patterns than I am in usual conversation, as well as how I had been in previous interviewing scenarios. I attribute this to the readings; I was constantly thinking about Weiss's warnings about mistakes in interviews. The mistake of not fully listening to the interviewee and only focusing on the answers that you, as the interviewer, want to hear was something that particularly concerned me. After the interview, and going back over my notes, though, I do not feel that I made that mistake.

Nevertheless, I did make a couple mistakes in how I addressed some of the questions I wanted to ask. I realized that I had started the interview with the general question, "How did you come to be a student at the U of I?" I then continued along with some basic history of the interviewee, and then started to gear my questions towards how he had come to be an employee of University Housing. After looking over my notes, I feel that I should have explained my interest in that asset of his life before I started asking the questions. In our readings, it was stated a few times that it is good to make a clear statement on exactly in what you are interested. However, I have a few concerns regarding that: if you tell the interviewee exactly what you are looking for, does that not influence their responses in a way that may make them bias towards one direction or another? Also, they may leave out information that can be helpful if they do not think that the interviewer wants to know that aspect. I suppose those are both concerns, which are voiced in many of the readings assigned in this class, but I am still not clear on how to address the situation.

My interview for this assignment only lasted about 30 minutes. I would say the short time period is accounted for by that fact that the interviewee and I knew each other previously. We also kept the interview shorter on purpose due to constraints on the interviewee's schedule. As I said, it started with the general question provided for the class. The interviewee, D, said that the choice had really been between Northwestern University and U of I. It "had been an easy choice," though, because he was not accepted to Northwestern University. After this first question, and some more about his studying here and his level of happiness with the school in an academic sense, we moved into the housing questions. I noticed, though, that in all of the academic questions, there was a very large assumption between both of us, that going on to a university was a given. Both in my question structures and D's answers, it was apparent that neither of us had thought of the option of not continuing education after high school. That is something that I should be aware of in future interviews when dealing with other topics and questions.

I was interested, more specifically, on what D's take on the Inclusiveness Statement from Residential Life (the document that I analyzed in the previous assignment) was, as first a resident, and then an employee. He told me that throughout his experience with Res. Life, he felt that the resident advisors, and thereby their superiors, had carried out the statement very well. He then went on to say, however, that that experience seems to be limited to inside Allen Hall. He had had friends in other halls who did not have the same experiences or level of satisfaction and belonging. Through this part of the interview, I feel I made a few mistakes on the manner by which I asked questions. There were some assumptions I made in my questions, and perhaps even biases behind the question of whether people in other halls had had the same experience (as I had my own experiences and ideas on the matter). This is something that I really need to keep in check when continuing on this topic.

Given our pre-existing relationship, there was a higher level of comfort than can be expected in any other interview situation. I feel that the time duration on this interview would be virtually impossible in any other case because of the need to develop a comfortable relationship with the interviewee. Furthermore, I am not sure if I did this, but there is definitely the possibility that I pulled in previous knowledge of the interviewee's opinions and past conversations to the way that I interpreted his answers. That would have also influenced the direction I moved in with my questions and which questions I chose to ask. All in all, I found myself very aware of the various mistakes that can be made in the interview process. Nevertheless, I feel that because of and despite our pre-existing relationship the interview went fairly well. I got another perspective on the document in which I am interested, as well as learned some important things about from where that perspective is coming.

Question: Questions (Revised Nov. 12th)

I am curious to see how the apparent disconnect between RAs and Housing administration has formed, how it exists, and if it is seen by everyone in the Housing Department. Thus far, my data collections have shown that the RAs feel a disconnect in communication with administration and that has been a source of frustration for them. I am still conflicted as to where the RD should be placed. The role of the RD is to serve as a liaison between higher administration and RAs; sometimes he is part of the administration, and sometimes he is part of the RA staff. I think that I would like to talk to more RDs about this and see what they think. Furthermore, I would like to be able to speak with more high administration, i.e. the director, assistant director, etc. I think that it could be very interesting to see what those people, so far removed physically from the residence halls, would say about this feeling amongst some RAs.

To sum up, here are my current questions:

1. How has this disconnect formed?

- a. Is it inherent in a department of this size?
- b. Does it have a historical presence?
2. Where do the RDs place themselves along the hierarchy of employees?
 - a. Can they be part of both groups?
3. How do the “highest” administrative positions feel about the possible disconnect in communication?
4. Is it simply a break in communication or does it also involve a disconnect of generations, values, and ideas?
 - a. Do those run along with communication?
5. Can anything be done about this disconnect? How can the RAs’ frustration on the matter be relieved?

Questions (Updated 10/23/07)

Following both my interview and findings in the University Archives, I do have a few new questions. Of course, I have to wonder if the perspective of my interviewee is representative of other RAs both in her hall, and across campus. On a more possible scale for this project, I would like to get the perspectives of other RAs on that staff. I would also like to get the other perspective, that of someone in the administration. My hunch is that they would see a disconnect as well, but it would not be as frustrating a situation for them, as they are the ones with more power over the circumstances. The worst possibility is that some members of the administration would not be aware of this disconnect or frustration, but I do not think that that would be the case.

I also wonder if this is indeed a historical organizational divide, perhaps inescapable for such a large department (although I do not believe that), or if it is something new that has formed in response to current employees’ personal styles, perspectives, and opinions. The archival documents help to answer part of this question, but I feel that the only method capable of giving a complete answer would be more interviews, and a lot of them.

New Question:

After discussing things with my comment group in class last week, I realized what I really want to get at through this project is the disconnect between RAs and the Housing administration. These two groups very rarely converse together, and are actually discouraged from directly addressing one another without using the resident director as a middle man. Administration makes rules, changes rules, administers policies. These things are then told to the resident director who is left to tell them to his resident advisors. The resident advisors, although they are the ones with constant and direct contact with the residents, are not consulted in policy making or rules. They are not even asked

of their opinions on what might work or not. At the same time, if resident advisors have questions, they are not expected to ask the administration directly, but told to ask their resident director, who will then get the answers if possible. Why is there such a wall between RAs and the administration?

I have been working a hypothesis over in my head since we had the text analysis assignment. However, I am not quite sure I know how to get at the topic in which I am interested. I would venture to say that the Inclusiveness Statement of the Residential Life (University Housing) department means somewhat the same thing to everyone on a very basic level, though on other levels it means something different to Housing staff and administration than it does to the residents of the halls. Furthermore, I am interested in seeing how the statement is actually carried out in the residence halls through every day interactions between residents, resident advisors, and resident directors. I might like to also look at more distant administrative positions that do not often come into contact with the residents, for whom this system and statement have been created.

Questions I have:

How do residents feel about the Inclusiveness Statement? How do they see it acted out, if at all? Does that vary across residence halls, and resident advisors? How do resident advisors view this statement? How do they think they support the statement? Do resident directors do a lot to make sure this statement is upheld? If so, what do they do; what don't they do? Do administrators see the actions taken place in support of this statement? Do they do anything with the residents, or indirectly, to support the statement in an active manner? Furthermore, is there a disconnect between staff and residents in the ideas and actual experiences within the halls?

Plan: Plan (Revised Nov. 12th)

Many of my current questions cannot be answered within the remaining time of this semester, but they are the questions that I still have at the end of this preliminary research.

In order to answer these questions, it would be helpful to conduct interviews of more RAs across campus and Housing employees in administrative positions. I also would want to have more of these employees complete the relationship charts, or visual representations of one's role in the department amongst many other roles. This helps to give an idea as to where each employee places themselves. To answer the question of the historical appearance of this disconnect, I can not only look more into the archival data, but also utilize the

older members of staff who have been around for a long time and can attest to the way things were about a decade or more back.

It would be more plausible to pick one residence hall and do the research for only that hall. However, there are large differences between many of the halls, and one does not necessarily represent the rest. Also, only using one hall with limited staff members who so many people know has the potential to make confidentiality difficult to keep. Depending on time and interest, this project would probably best be done across campus, in my opinion.

Plans (Updated 10/23/07)

In order to continue answering the questions that I have had throughout this project, I would like to go through more of the archival documents on Housing. I want to see if I can find something in them that directly relates to the one residence hall on which I would like to focus. Along with that, I think that more interviews would be helpful. I'm not exactly sure what is a feasible number for the remainder of this class, but it would be nice to get in at least one more. Another problem with interviews is that I would ideally be interviewing a member of the administration. However, that gets tricky with confidentiality, which may limit me in this particular project.

I am still trying to figure out how a video would enhance this project. That is something that will hopefully progress throughout the next couple of weeks before that assignment. It could be interesting to get a video observation of staff interaction with the resident director, their liaison to administration. It might also be interesting to get some comments on video from residents themselves and their experience, or lack there of, with housing administration. I'm not sure if that would add to, or take away from, my focus.

New Plan:

In order to answer this question, I will look at one residence hall on campus. It is one that has historically been considered within the Housing Department to "go against the grain" of the rest of the halls. In the past, they have been known to protest administration decisions in several different cases and points in time. I will interview an RA on the staff, the RD (resident director) of the staff, and if possible, the AC (area coordinator) who is the "lowest level" of the administration.

I was originally trying to stay away from this topic because I have some personal biases on the topic, and my goal is not to play devil's advocate. As a past RA, I am very curious to know why there has to be such a divide. I never had the chance to ask while I was an RA, and was discouraged from asking, so I would like to take the chance now. I will conduct the interviews very cautiously

to try to control some of my biases and keep them from affecting any answers.

In order to try to find answers to some of these questions, I would like to interview residents, resident advisors, and resident directors from a few different halls. I would be interested in interviewing staff who have more of an administrative role, but that involves interviewing someone who is the only person of that job title, making confidentiality near impossible. In which case, I would have to use the other consent form. In either case, I do have a lot of questions, and, in order to represent a proper sample, (as Becker discusses) this project could potentially take a long time.

Becker also discusses the problem of attempting to discuss, or look at, too much information. Given that, I may need to narrow my questions down to one main point. I also could see a potential problem in the differences between residents from whom I receive information. Each person in the residence halls has a different experience, influenced by themselves, their roommate(s), their resident advisor, hall community, etc. As a past resident advisor, I can confidently say that there is no one leading aspect that determines whether or not a person will have a good experience in the halls. With this much variation in experience and influences, I think it would be hard to come to any conclusions about the answers of the questions I will ask.

Data: I decided to interview a resident advisor (RA), RA Natalie, to initially address some of the questions I have. I thought about interviewing someone in Housing administration, but I wanted to hear the perspective of an RA first in order to see if my hypothesis (coming from an RA's point of view) on the relationship between RAs and the administration had any weight to it. Overall, I feel that the interview was successful in that it offered a good perspective and some key things that I would like to investigate further. At the same time, though, I realized that there were a number of things I would like to change in the technical part of the interview: how I begin the interview and the way I ask questions sometimes.

A Project Interview

I left the interview with a strong impression that Natalie felt a divide between Housing administration and herself. She communicated this feeling both through direct statements as well as language and body movements. When referring to her staff and the administration Natalie repeatedly used "we" and "they." After doing this for the first half of the interview I asked her about this choice of words:

Me: "It sounds like, in your mind, you separate yourself because you keep saying 'they.' And, do you see yourself as being part of the same department on campus, or do you see some segregation?"

Natalie: "I see it as segregated. I mean, I feel like there's the hall, and then there's Housing floating, putting red tape around the hall."

Me: “How does that effect your outlook on the job? How do you feel when you say, ‘I am a Housing employee.’?”

Natalie: “I never say that... I just feel like I don’t represent Housing.”

That part of the interview kind of serves as a summary for the rest of it. I feel it is important to add, however, that Natalie continued on here to say that she still felt she was doing her job and a good job. It is simply the felt division between administration, who makes the rules and policies, and the RAs, who implement them without any say and who often disagree, that leads her to make that statement.

One of my reservations going into this project was that I would end up leading my interviewees with my own biases and experiences. I felt that I avoided this for the most part during the interview, but I saw it here in the above section’s first question. I think that it would have been sufficient for me to leave the question at, “do you see yourself as being part of the same department?” I said the word segregation, and that was exactly what Natalie used to answer. On the other hand, given previous statements, this could be a situation like that which Bourdieu addresses: something may be there “which never would have been spoken, but which was already there...”

I said earlier that Natalie also stated a feeling of separateness through body language. Throughout the interview, when referring to admin, Natalie would hold her hand up at face level, or higher, and gesture. Sometimes she would also point away from her. I took these to mean that she was talking about a group of people who were higher above in a hierarchy than where she was considered to be.

Other things during the interview that cannot be captured by transcript were the intonations in my voice. This is the biggest thing that I would like to change. If I didn’t lead very much with vocabulary, I felt that the structure of my sentences or fluctuation throughout them could have led just as thoroughly. In listening to the audio recording, I could hear myself accenting certain words that showed my feelings of the relationship between RAs and administration; i.e. stressing the word “they” or “them” referring to administration.

Overall, this interview confirmed my belief that there was a disconnect and that it is a source of frustration among the RAs, at least for Natalie. It also gives me some concrete starting points to use in continuation of this project. In addition to the existence of a division, Natalie also talked to me about a lack of trust for the administration as well as feelings of disappointment and disrespect. Furthermore, listening to the audio recording of this interview gives me a much better idea of what I need to be thinking about when asking questions. I need to be more aware of my tone of voice. I also need to be careful when asking questions; sometimes I add on more detailed information to a question that is

not necessary in this stage of interviewing.

Data: When I did an online search of the University Archives, I found a few different links that related to my topic in some way: Residence Hall Staff Materials, Residence Life Subject Files, Undergraduate Residence Hall Issuances, and Residence Halls Handbooks. After going over the summaries of all, I decided that Residence Hall Staff Materials would be the most beneficial to my research.

The Archive

The records that the Archives had went back as far as 1961. This difference of about 40 years can be both good and bad for my project. In a way, they can show a historical presence of a disconnect between administration and resident advisors. On the other hand, the turnover of employment in University Housing is extremely high. Not only are the student RAs coming and going at a high rate, but also the resident directors and area coordinators are only expected to remain in their positions for at most 3 years, after which they either move up the hierarchy or on to a different school. That being said, I think that the difference in time, and if this disconnect proves to exist through the archival documents, speaks to whether or not the current problem is historically organizational, or a newly formed issue.

What I found in the Archives was not exactly what I had expected. Upon looking through everything, it turned out that they only had documents ranging from 1961-1970. Furthermore, there were only a few documents, each of which had a different topic and use, so there were none that I could track from year to year. I found that residence hall staff in 1969 was comprised of about half the employees of that today, which could be expected due to overall growth of the University. I also learned that although staff members had different titles (i.e. RAs were called counselors) until around 1970, the organizational structure was very similar.

Most of the documents were handbooks for residence hall staffs, both men and women residence halls, but some were charts and graphs representing the organization of Housing and how it related to other departments on campus. I found the handbooks for staff to be the most helpful in my research. They held many definitions of the role of a Counselor/RA, objectives, and responsibilities. Some of the direct and indirect definitions are as follows:

-University of Illinois Men's Residence Halls Staff Handbook (1966)
Responsibilities; "3. Be a liaison between administrative staff and the students."

Responsibilities; "5. Be a fellow resident on your floor."

They are reminded that they are "representing both the Dean of Students Office And the Housing Division."

"Advisors Role": "...the biggest obstacle the counselor has to overcome is the feeling held by a few student government leaders that the Counselor is part of

the
'administration' and thus should not meddle or interfere with the students in running their government... The best way to overcome this erroneous outlook..."

Other handbooks made similar statements, but in the interest of space, I will focus on this. I found it interesting because the Counselor (RA) is being asked to, at once, be a "fellow resident" (and thereby exhibit no trace of his relationship with administration) as well as a representative of and a liaison to Housing Administration. Another interesting dichotomy is within the last quote above. Housing has just told the Counselor that he is a representative of them and a communicator between them and students, yet they call the view of a Counselor as part of "administration" (placed in quotes in original document) erroneous. I feel that is a pretty strong word to use for something that cannot be entirely true given previous statements made by the administration itself.

I think that the documents I have found will help me in that they provide evidence of the organizational structure of housing in the past. It is fairly similar to that of today. Furthermore, the statements made in the handbooks by administration, especially that last quote, lead me to believe that there was probably a separation between the two. Also, the fact that the word administration was put in quotes by the administration, makes me think that it was a power separation and disconnect that had become quite apparent. I would like to do further research on these historical documents, but for now, it has given me a good start.

Data: Beyond the method of interview and verbal information from participants, I wanted to find a way to provide a visual representation of their thoughts. After reading about both the mapping and kinship and social exchange techniques, I thought that I could combine them in a way. Following these ideas, I asked several resident advisors and some higher administration (although not the "highest") to draw their idea of where their role in University Housing fits in with other employees of the department and how they are related. I gave each participant a blank sheet of paper and a pen with limited instructions and not much of a prompt.

Data Continued

My goal was to see what would come to mind visually, without any ideas from me. Because I was so vague in the instructions, some had questions for me throughout the process:

"Do you want this like a chart?"

"Do you want me to write words?"

"Do I have to include every employee?"

I answered all of their questions with something along the lines of, "You can make it however you feel best represents your vision of Housing employees and your role within and relationship with them." Only when a participant was still hesitant did I offer some suggestions. I suppose that I could have avoided these

questions by giving more thorough instructions, but I really wanted to avoid restricting the initial visual representation that they held in their heads. The end result proved to be interesting and differed in style from participant to participant.

I asked 4 resident advisors, a resident director, and an area coordinator to do this task for me. It has proven hard to get a hold of some of these people, so I am still waiting on a couple of them. Of those that I have already, one person decided to draw a sketch, and the others drew graphs/flowcharts of sorts. I have not received the administration members' representations yet. The resident advisors' that I have so far all support my hypothesis that there is a disconnect between resident advisors and Housing administration, and furthermore, that this disconnect is a source of frustration among resident advisors. This idea showed through across the different styles of charting.

The sketch carried a few themes within a relatively simple appearing drawing. This participant drew a small boy trying to feed a fish. A larger, professional-looking man, tying the child's hands back with some kind of ribbon, stopped him from doing so. The man has a look of smugness on his face while the child is depicted with a very confused expression. Also, the child's arms are not simply held back, but twisted around his body. Upon explaining the drawing to me, the participant informed me that the child symbolized the RAs, and the man, the administration. The act of feeding the fish was meant to stand for the RAs' job, and they were being tied up with the red tape coming from the administration. Clearly, this participant felt frustrated with the certain state of things between RAs and Housing administration. This drawing, however, does not really show a disconnect per se. Rather, it shows more strongly a sort of hierarchical power relationship.

Of the other charts I received, one was rather simplistic at first glance. It appears to be a flow chart just showing the different jobs in housing and where they have traditionally stood. After discussing with the participant, though, I understood that each connecting line's length stood for the strength of the relationship. Also, the size of the circle that each category was placed in served to tell how that participant viewed their amount of power. For instance, "University Housing Administration" was put at the very tip with large letters. There was also a small description underneath the title marking this category as an "authority" and comprised of "muckety-mucks." This category was also very distant in line from the RA position, with the RD and AC placed in between. The participant explained that these were the people she had to go through to get to the top.

Another chart was very detailed with more verbal descriptions to go along with organization. Through choice of language and placement, it was clear in this one, too, that the RA felt distanced and frustrated with the situation. The most distinctive part about this one, though, is the humor that the participant used

throughout the task. There were often small chuckles, and he told me several times that he was happy with the confidentiality. With all of the RA participants, there seemed to be a shared feeling that they should not be saying what they were saying about housing, and would not want their RD, or anyone else to see it. This was not shown through guilt, though, more of a protection for their job and status in the system. More than a worrisome reaction, they all joked about what they were saying. This suggests the idea that despite the apparent disconnect between the RAs and administration, the administration still holds a lot of power over the RAs, what they do and what they say.

I feel that these visual representations from RAs and some administrative figures will support my hypothesis well, and add something to the rest of the work. They certainly provide a clear picture of opinions and are more interesting to decode than an interview transcript. They are advantageous in that they give a more or less clear-cut view into the participant's opinion. Nevertheless, they do not provide the same kind of explanation or opportunity for more information that an interview does. As I stated, each of these has supported my hypothesis thus far. It will be interesting to see the administrative figures' ideas from the same prompt.

I hope to add to this entry once I have the representations from the members of administration whom I have asked to participate. They told me that we could do it before Fall Break, so hopefully soon.

Data: In regard to a video plan for my research project, I feel a little conflicted. Although it would be telling to have a visual representation of the way RAs, RDs, and higher administration interact, I think that it would present several risks for those involved. It would take away confidential identities of any RAs documented, in which case, their jobs could become unpleasant or compromised. If there is, as I suspect, some kind of acknowledged division of communication between the two groups, RAs expressing their frustration without the protection of confidentiality may further those lines of disconnect.

Video/Plan

From my personal experiences, and as I have stated, the RAs are encouraged not to go directly to administration with a problem they may have. In accordance with that policy, inter-department problems are often very hushed, almost secretive. At least, that is how they have appeared to many of my past co-workers. These conditions make it hard for any relationship characteristics of the type I am studying to take place in a visual situation on film because simply speaking of the matter removes the policy of silent division. In other words, RAs who voice their frustration could be blamed of resisting the Housing Department of which they are a part. This hypothesis is coming from a few experiences I had last year (I will explain if IRB permits). Nevertheless, there are characteristics of this relationship dynamic that can be seen through participants individually. For example, the body language during an individual interview can speak loudly of the frustration felt in the current situation.

Nevertheless, this too could be risky for the participant. Due to these risks, I would not feel comfortable adding a video component to my project. Yet, there is an ideal situation that I feel would be very interesting on video, if it were to happen.

Many times, we discussed the possibility of inviting an administrative employee of Housing to discuss certain policies, ideas we had, or programs we were doing. This was hard to do, considered unconventional, and actually happened only once. However, I feel that this situation could speak to many of the issues I am interested in here. I would first invite a member of the administrator, several RAs, and their RD to have a discussion of some sort. It would get most to the point if they were to discuss a current policy or something that gets passed from the administration to the RAs. This could work in reverse, too, so that they could discuss a program that the RAs are doing, which indirectly affects the administrators' jobs. Either way, it would be most helpful for the research if they were to discuss something that affected both parties. In having this kind of control over the situation, I would be actively participating in the film, but when it came time to record, I would not want to be an interviewer or moderator during the discussion. I feel that it would be much better to have the participants control the conversation themselves. This way, the situation is semi-structured, and would have somewhat of an observational style, not really fitting into any of the other styles offered by Barbash and Taylor.

With this set-up, I think that the interactions between the participants would provide a visual description of the relationship characteristics. There is the chance that the camera will have an affect on the participants and their behavior during the discussion. Still, I think that past methods of communication and levels of comfort with each other will be apparent. I imagine that this video could run as long as the discussion. I would refrain from editing for fear of misrepresenting, or leaving out parts that may lead to other conclusions to my hypothesis.

Another idea I've had about a video project for this research would be simply to film both administration and RAs doing their jobs. This would also fall under the observational style. Doing something along these lines would show the small amount of contact that the two actually have with each other. Even more, it might lend itself to answering the question of why. It could be very telling of the aspects of both roles that restrict the kind of communication that I am arguing could be helpful. This would serve as a sort of visual time allocation. Perhaps with this size and style of a department, it is unrealistic to have open communication between the administration and RAs. Filming the two doing their jobs (paper work, meetings, programs, etc.) may shed some light on the issue.

Discuss: The organization of large departments often takes after a bureaucracy, with a

hierarchy of employees, with a director at the top and a larger work force, or population, at the bottom. Indeed, this model applies to the University Housing Department on the University of Illinois campus. I am investigating the working relationships between the employees of this department. There has been substantial evidence for a sense of frustration amongst those people who make up the work-force population at the bottom of this hierarchy, the Resident Advisors (RAs).

With the RAs at the bottom, it then goes (from bottom to top) the resident directors, program coordinators, area coordinators, assistant directors of residential life community standards and life safety, social justice and diversity education, and hall supervision and staffing. From here, the line moves up into the senior assistant director, the associate director, and, finally, the director. In actuality, this system continues on to faculty in other departments who connect University Housing to the rest of campus, but in order to stay within University Housing Residential Life, I am going to stop with the director. There is a distinction between RAs and the rest of these employees: a paraprofessional title, or professional title. This is understandable given that RAs are still students and have not yet earned a professional degree or status.

That said, my observation has been that communication between the RAs and most employees above resident director level is very limited, if existent, and that this causes frustration for the RAs. I hypothesize that this is due to a break in education, age, values and goals, and daily experiences. I am questioning whether this is inherent in a department of this size and purpose, or if it is something that can be changed. I venture to make the argument that this break in communication can be changed after examination of all employees' awareness of the problem and willingness to fix it.

In order to determine the existence of this break in communication between Resident Advisors and those people making the policies by which they live, I conducted an interview with a current 2nd-year RA, researched the University Archives on University Housing, referenced a former Ethnography of the University project, and asked 3 RAs, a resident director, and an area coordinator to create their own visual representations of employee relations. These methods have led to some interesting responses, all of which support my hypothesis thus far. Nevertheless, I am still left with the question of how the administration feels, or where the resident director falls in the organization.

I went into my first interview a little apprehensively because of my own biased opinions on the matter. As a past RA, I was often frustrated with the administrative staff of the Housing Department. Coming into this project, I wondered if it was an isolated situation for my coworkers and myself or if this was universal across resident advisors on campus. I was afraid, though, that my feelings would lead my respondent into answers that simply mimicked, much as we saw with Bourdieu in his interview transcripts from "Jonquil Street."

With this in mind, I started the interview very conscious of what I was asking and how. The respondent's answers and opinions, as she related them, were very much in accordance with my own, leading me to believe that I had influenced the interview too much. Yet, after going back over the recording, I realized that, although I had revealed my thoughts a couple of times, this did not happen until after the respondent's view had been stated. Furthermore, the hints of my opinions were not overly obvious.

The RA that I interviewed, Natalie, made several statements that communicated frustration with the current relationship she had with the administrative positions. She did not include the resident director (RD) in this group of people, though. In fact, Natalie exhibited value for Frank, the RD, in the following statement:

"When you're resident comes to you with a problem, and, in theory, you've been trained to deal with it, you know...but...um...I feel like I can go to [Frank] and ask him his opinion for it. And, you know, he can help me out with it better than I can deal it myself sometimes."

However, after a longer conversation about Natalie's trust of her RD and punishment cases she reveals that there are things that she would not discuss with the RD:

Me: "Also when you write an incident report, it does go to the RD, but it also goes up. I mean, to housing administration..."

Natalie: "Right; it would go up. Like, Frank's boss would see it."

Me: "And what are the implications of that? How does that affect what you do?"

Natalie: "Well, sometimes you feel like it's more effective, or you don't think it's important for someone to be punished on that kind of level, you know? For some people, you know, by somebody with authority to document things, and you know? Sometimes you feel like it's more important, or more effective to deal with it on a personal level. You're the only person with authority that has a personal relationship with that person."

This single statement provides a brief look at what Natalie thinks of the administration. She inadvertently states her feelings of being closer with the residents, and sometimes better able to deal with a problem than reporting it to her supervisors. In the end of the interview, after Natalie had established her opinion of 2 separate camps (RAs and Administration) I asked Natalie if she placed Frank with the RA staff, or the administration. She replied simply by nodding and saying "Both." I then referenced earlier parts of our conversation by stating, "Yet you trust him, you would trust the administration?" To this, Natalie again provided a simple statement, "No." After a pause she said, "Maybe I would if I knew them better."

That being said, this interview clearly shows one RAs point of view, in

agreement with my hypothesis. From here, I did some research in the University Archives where I found RA job descriptions from the 1960s that placed RAs in a confused role of part student and part supervisor of the residents. They were to report to their own supervisors often, serving as a liaison. There were also some tips in an RA handbook guiding RAs in the avoidance of appearing connected to the “administration” (placed in quotes in the document). This suggests some negative feelings around the term and group of people it represented. The archival data I found leads me to believe that the current hierarchy has always been in place in University Housing, and that administration has always been a group to avoid.

Perhaps the most telling of my data so far are the visual representations received from several staff members. This was interesting because I was able to see not only the views of RAs, but also that of an RD, and of an Area Coordinator (AC). It is here, that the RAs really exhibited frustration. One RA drew an older man holding a young child back from feeding a fish, apparently with red tape. This was to represent how the administrative staff and their policies make the RA’s job more difficult. Another RA made a chart with more verbal detail explaining his frustration and exactly for what he felt each administrative position was responsible, and what they were lacking. Finally, another RA drew a graph with “University Housing” large and floating over all other positions, “RAs,” “RD,” and even “his supervisor.” Also, “University Housing” held the tagline, “as in administration, policies, and muckety-mucks.” I believe the sense of frustration, and sometimes anger for this looming administration is made clear through these three illustrations.

It is even more interesting when the RD’s and AC’s representations are viewed. Both of these reveal much less opinion and emotion. They are both very graphical representations of the standard hierarchy one might view on the University Housing website. The AC’s, however, is maybe a little more telling because rather than just listing titles, he draws more on the mutual support between all employees. This may represent ignorance to the frustration and lack of support that the RAs are feeling. I would like to talk to this group of people more about their views on RAs’ opinions.

All in all, I feel I have demonstrated that these RAs are feeling something other than support for their jobs, and that this is causing stress and frustration. I would like to look into this aspect more and determine whether this feeling is universally represented in residence halls across campus, rather than just one. More importantly, though, I would like to talk with more resident directors and higher administration. I am wondering if they even recognize this problem on the “lowest” level of the hierarchy. If they do, I am wondering what are their opinions on the matter, or if they have plans to relieve the stress and frustration of these RAs. With further research in these areas, it can be determined whether both camps of employees see this break in communication. It can also become clearer whether this divide is caused by any

of the factors mentioned in the beginning, education, age, values and goals, and daily experiences. With this information, perhaps greater strides can be made towards fixing this problem.

**Research
Proposal:**

**A Break in the Chain: A Look at Communication Between Resident
Advisors and the Residential Life Employees Above Them**

Abstract

Through past experiences and observations of resident advisors (RAs), resident directors (RDs), and the administrative staff of the Residential Life Department, I have noticed a break in the communication between RAs and Housing Administration. The organization of Residential Life is very similar to that of many large departments: there is a hierarchy of employees and policy setting. These policies for the residents are made by administrators (starting with a director) and to be implemented by the resident advisors. This is where communication appears to be absent. Information is quick to travel from the “top-down;” however, there is very little opportunity for the resident advisors to give feedback as to how the reality of the situation is playing out on the hall floors. This break in communication has appeared to be a stressor and source of frustration for many RAs who are working with the residents on a daily basis and see nothing of the administration. The intent of this proposed research is to determine the existence, cause, and possible solutions for this “disconnect.” The cause of this “disconnect” is something very worthy of investigation. Without determining the cause, any solution could be restricted in its influence. I hypothesize that it may be a break in age, education, values and goals, and/or daily experiences between the administrators and resident advisors. In such a prominent department on campus, it is of benefit to many people for this apparent stress to be investigated and alleviated.

Statement of Research Problem

Being a student employee can be difficult at times, and being a student employee who is responsible for upwards of 60 other students certainly has its challenges. A resident advisor’s job consists of many weekly responsibilities and being generally available for support, advice, and crisis intervention, all while remaining a good student. The job can be stressful, and when there is an extra component of (seemingly) lack of support from supervisors it is likely to become more stressful. Pilot data of visual representations of work roles and relationships in Housing done by RAs suggest that there is a lot of frustration, and hints of anger among the RA staff. The same task done by an RD and area coordinator (one step above the RD) only provided organizational charts of Residential Life’s hierarchy without any personal affect.

The break in communication, or “disconnect,” being suggested here arises in the context of making and implementing practices and policies. Residential Life administration formulates policies, and the RAs are expected to uphold them, as in any other organization. Nevertheless, preliminary interview with an

RA, revealed frustration with this as the RAs are in constant contact with the floor community, yet they are not asked for input regarding policies made to govern these communities. The administration, however, is rarely in contact with any residents or present in the residence halls. With this and other pilot data, I am proposing that not only is there a lack of communication between administration and resident advisors, but that it is a significant source of stress and frustration in what is already a stressful situation.

Furthermore, Residential Life is one of the largest departments on campus. According to University of Illinois's (www.uillinois.edu) information for prospective students, the 22 residence halls in Urbana-Champaign serve 8,550 undergraduates every year. Another 6,450 undergraduates live in Private Certified housing units, which uphold many of the same guidelines and policies. It is University policy that all incoming freshman live in the residence halls for their first year on campus (Housing's "Info for Prospective Students"). Thus, it can be assumed that most students on the U of I campus have had some experience with University Housing, and specifically Residential Life. There are also approximately 200 student employees hired to work as resident advisors (~175), program advisors (3), and multicultural advocates (22). Affecting so many students' lives, a problem in this department should hold priority. If there is an upset in the team of people providing services for residents (and parents), the University is not providing the best that it can.

Statement of Proposed Research

To investigate this disconnect, I would like to work with resident advisors as I had done in my preliminary research. However, I would like to incorporate more research with the administrative positions, and the resident directors. The resident director (RD) is seen as a liaison between RAs and the administration. They are put in an interesting position between these two groups, and I am interested to hear their opinions are on the matter. The viewpoint of the RD is valuable as it may provide insight on the source of RAs' frustration. The RD participates in both administrative tasks as well as more direct work with the residents, a position which gives them perspectives of both groups. The perspectives of administration, RDs, and RAs are what I am interested in because as Lynch points out in "The Image of the Environment," a person's experiences and situations can influence them to have a different opinion of a current situation; more experience, higher education, age, and values can all lead to different perspectives on a policy.

As there are 22 residence halls on campus, I propose to limit my sample to only 2 halls. Twenty-two is too great of a number to work this closely with, and I have concerns that 1 hall would not be representative enough, nor would confidentiality be ensured. With my interest in RDs, it is necessary to incorporate more than 1 hall in order to get the opinions of more than one person (each hall has only 1 RD).

Methodologies

In attempt to gain insight to these perspectives, determine whether the disconnect is perceived by all parties, and the cause, I plan to utilize multiple methods. The order is somewhat arbitrary, however, it may be best to follow the order as listed for the first 2 methods. An interview may have an impact on the visual representation, and I want the representations to be as un-influenced by this project as possible. The following are the methods I am proposing to use:

1. Through my pilot research, I used a visual representation technique that proved to be very insightful. The mapping method struck me as an interesting way to discover the values of participants after reading of Nelson's use of this in her research with South Korean women. Then, thinking that Crane and Angrosino's method of kinship charting was more relevant to this research, I thought to combine the two. I plan to continue to conduct this task with participants of this proposed project.

My goal here is to gain insight to how each of these employees sees themselves within the Department of Housing. A problem with this research, if done only through interviews, is that there may be a basic misunderstanding or misrepresentation of where a person places him/herself within this hierarchy. As already established, people bring their own experiences in determining position, and it is important to understand from where a person is coming. I do not want to influence participants in any way, or lead them to believe I want a reproduced chart of Residential Life's Organization Chart (found on the Housing website). Therefore, I plan to give very little instruction or interference in the process. I will ask the following question, and leave the rest to participants: "On this sheet of paper, can you create a picture that represents your view of your role within Housing, and how that relates to other employees and positions in the department?"

To follow-up on this task, the participant and I will discuss their representation, decoding any of the symbolism or language used.

2. After the first method, I plan to go back and conduct individual interviews with participants. It would be very interesting to be able to talk with the Director of Residential Life, two Assistant Directors, and two Area Coordinators. This way, I would be able to ask each position of their experience with policy making and working with other employees of Residential Life, especially the RAs. Following these interviews, I propose to interview several RAs, as well. After hearing from both of these groups, I would then interview both RDs from the 2 halls. In this order, I can enter the interview with background knowledge from the different groups that RDs are meant to represent. This style of interviewing is somewhat similar to that which is seen in Bourdieu's interviews with residents of Jonquil Street in an integrated French neighborhood. He demonstrated the value of juxtaposing two different

viewpoints: demonstrating the reality of the situation to all involved.

3. I may also be interested in partaking in some group observations. David Morgan discusses this method in opposition to that of focus groups, determining that it does not provide the same depth of information. Nevertheless, given that it would be impossible in this study to conduct anonymous focus groups, a group observation may be very telling. If this method is used, I intend to observe a portion of an administrator's "average" workday, that of a RD, and that of a RA. This could provide information as to whether or not it is simply a difference in daily tasks and priorities that lead to differences in opinions on hall life. This method is capable of making available "a day in the life" information to fellow workers, as well, and may give other employees a better understanding of the mentality behind a certain policy. One thing I will want to watch for in this method, as in others, is the "truth" of what is being said and displayed. I may influence participants simply by being present. Also, Balshem made it very clear in her work with focus groups and town meetings that people act very differently in the public and private spheres. Participants may feel more comfortable relating their true feelings in an interview, but acting a different way in the public sphere of every-day work.

Ethics

Confidentiality in this project is extremely important. If negative feelings continue to be the case, as demonstrated in pilot research, it may be detrimental to employees' daily experiences with work. I will inform participants that their involvement in this research is completely voluntary and that, at any point in the research, they are free to decline or withdraw from participation with no consequence. Participants will also know that they can ask to remove sections of their interviews from the dissemination of data, and that they can skip questions if they wish during the interview process. All of these things will have no negative consequence to the participant.

Pseudonyms will be used for all participants in the dissemination of this research, and data will be kept in a secure location. The risks of participation are no greater than that of daily interactions, as long as confidentiality is ensured. The benefits, however, have the potential to be great. If a cause to this "disconnect" is found, then steps can be taken to alleviate the stress and frustration, seen in the pilot research, of the RAs.

As a caveat, I feel it is necessary to make known my connection and bias with this research. I was an RA during my sophomore and junior years, worked as an office assistant to a resident director before that, and currently am working again as an office assistant. Furthermore, I have done all of this work in the same residence hall. With this background, I have formulated my own opinions based off of experiences with the Residential Life administration. I will make every effort to not let this have any impact during interview sessions or other methods. All participants will be aware of my history within Residential Life;

however, my personal beliefs will not be disclosed.

Significance of Research

It can be seen through preliminary research posted on my data page for the Anthropology 411 Moodle that, from the perspective of an RA, there are some problems with the way Housing Administration communicates with those who serve as a liaison for the residents. Regardless if this disconnect between employee positions in Housing is noticed or felt by staff other than that of the RAs, it remains problematic. Continuation of this research could hopefully push University Housing to address this issue. A problem such as this has a wide breadth of affect: unhappy resident advisors are less likely to carry out their job requirements, thereby not providing the best resources for the thousands of residents in the halls. A solution to this problem can only be attempted after further research on the cause, and that solution has the potential to improve Residential Life's employee satisfaction, and should therefore be of interest to the department.

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EUI Links: I searched IDEALS looking for any article having to do with "University Housing," "Residence Life," or "Residence Halls." The results were full of papers that have been written on Orchard Downs and others written about race relations on campus. I eventually found the article that I am looking at here,

and it is the only one that had something to do with resident advisor's perspectives on their job and experiences in general. The title of this article is "Do Resident Advisors' Perceptions of Their Jobs Vary From One Residence Hall to Another?" by Ashley Gonzalez-Brennan. I thought that it would be a good starting point.

It is interesting, because once I started reading the article I realized that I know the author and a lot of the people involved in the research. I was even present at one of her observations. The fact that I was that involved with some of the things she was looking at, and that we share a lot of the same views might make my research even more bias than I was afraid of originally. Nevertheless, there were some interesting and useful points made in the paper.

The bulk of the article is about perceptions of RAs on their jobs. A lot of it ended up having to do with race and gender, and as it came from a psychological perspective, much of the discussion brings in psychological theories. These things will not apply to my research directly, but perhaps indirectly. I am looking at the relationship between administration and resident advisors, and I suppose that race or gender may certainly be a factor between RAs and their liaison with administration, the resident director.

What this article did have that I consider to be very useful are observations of two different staffs. Although the author was looking at different things, the field notes include interactions between the staff in general, including the resident director. This, among other things, then led to her conclusion of their overall satisfaction with their job. These types of relationship interactions can serve as an aspect of my research as well; they can lead to how comfortable / happy with their situation a staff member is and how much support they feel they have from staff. Both of these things may effect a staff's interaction, or lack there of, with administration "higher up" in University Housing.

Here is the article: ["Do Resident Advisors' Perceptions of Their Jobs Vary From One Residence Hall to Another?"](#)

Reflect: My EUI experience has been very positive. I have found this online format to be especially helpful in the organization of my research. Having never before conducted such a research project, it was reassuring to have a space to reference and compile all of my research and data. It helped me to better formulate my questions, hypothesis, and end result.

Compliance with IRB was not very difficult in regards to my project. None of the research I conducted had great risk, nor was confidentiality unwanted. In contrast, confidentiality was necessary for all students, preferential for most professional staff.

I plan to publicly archive my research and data. Having complied with IRB, I

see no harm in making this data available. It can serve as a benefit to the Residential Life department, and perhaps give them a basis to begin further investigation of their own. In addition, this problem may exist on other college campuses, and therefore pertain to other Housing departments as well as our own.

Recommendations: Based on the findings of this preliminary research, it would be beneficial for the Housing Department, Residential Life to further investigate employees' feelings on the matter of communication within the department. In my opinion, the data shows that increased communication across employees and job positions could reduce some frustration and stress for the RAs. Therefore, if Residential Life could accomplish this goal, they may have a healthier working relationship with their staff. Furthermore, this may also increase feelings of importance, worth, and increased respect for the RAs from their supervisors. This could then, in turn, improve working environments and satisfaction levels for both staff and residents.