1986

A study of stress perceived by resident assistants at the University of Northern Iowa

David A. Shaw
University of Northern Iowa

A study of stress perceived by resident assistants at the University of Northern Iowa

Abstract

All of us are exposed to some form of stress throughout our daily lives. This stress could be experienced in a variety of ways, whether it be from our jobs, interpersonal relationships, insecurities, or other factors that affect us. The resident assistant (RA) is exposed to the same stresses as other college students, as well as the additional stress placed on one who is balancing academic pressures along with the responsibilities of the RA position.

A STUDY OF STRESS PERCEIVED BY RESIDENT ASSISTANTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Administration

and Counseling

University of Northern Iowa

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

---

by

David A. Shaw

June 23, 1986

This Research Paper by: David A. Shaw

Entitled:

A STUDY OF STRESS PERCEIVED BY RESIDENT ASSISTANTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Thomas W. Hansmeier

June 30, 1986
Date Approved

Adviser/Director of Research Paper

June 30, 1986
Date Approved

Jack F. Kimball

Second Reader of Research Paper

6/30/86
Date Received

Robert Krajewski

Head, Department of Educational Administration and Counseling

All of us are exposed to some form of stress throughout our daily lives. This stress could be experienced in a variety of ways, whether it be from our jobs, interpersonal relationships, insecurities, or other factors that affect us.

The resident assistant (RA) is exposed to the same stresses as other college students, as well as the additional stress placed on one who is balancing academic pressures along with the responsibilities of the RA position.

THE RESIDENT ASSISTANT POSITION

The student paraprofessional staff member known as the resident assistant (RA) performs a variety of duties and multiple roles within college residence halls. Some of the duties, roles, and expectations of RAs include: (a) administrative tasks, such as distributing and collecting forms, preparing reports and records, and reporting on housekeeping and maintenance needs; (b) developing, supporting, and advising the programming activities within the hall and its subunits; (c) facilitating group formation; (d) providing a healthy and educational living environment; (e) helping to explain and enforce the regulations and policies of the institution; (f) providing helpful information; (g) acting as a liaison between the student and campus services and agencies; and (h) assisting individual students through counseling or helping interactions (Blimling & Miltenberger, 1984; Mable & DeCoster, 1980; Upcraft, 1982; Winston & Buckner, 1984).

These multiple roles and conflicting expectations make the RA position one that requires a degree of maturity, knowledge, skills, and dedication to the job which is exceptional for undergraduate students. To make things even more complicated, differing opinions about the ideal or actual roles of the RA are held by residents, supervisors, faculty members, administrators, parents, and fellow RA$ (Schuh, Kuh, Gable, Friedman, Stipanovich, & Wegryn, 1982).

Obviously the substantial responsibilities and conflicting expectations associated with the RA position can, and in most cases do, lead to perceived stress.

STRESS

Definition

Stress has been defined by Selye (1974) as the "nonspecific response of the body to any demand made on it" (p. 14).

Responses to Stress

Stress factors, or stressors, experienced by an individual result in stress responses from the body: increased heart rate, blood pressure and muscle tension; increased production of glucose and serum cholesterol; and decreased protein stores, digestive processes, and T-lymphocytes. These physiological responses to stress are a result of hormonal secretions of the pituitary, thyroid, parathoid, and adrenal glands, as well as the hypothalamus and other parts of the brain (Greenberg, 1981). This reaction by

the body is a way of preparing itself for sudden, intense expenditures of energy at the expense of long-term maintenance functions (Barrow, 1981).

The triggering of these glandular responses is the result of the experiences that an individual perceives as being stressful. Thus, different individuals will be sensitive to different types of situations (Lazarus, 1966).

Stress Stages

Once the individual experiences stress, the body goes through three distinct stages: alarm reaction, resistance, and exhaustion. These stages are the body's way of trying once again to establish an equilibrium. If the stress is persistent and chronic, adaptation energy is exhausted, and the body becomes more susceptible to illness and disease.

One should also be aware of two different stress patterns that exist. First is the prolonged, chronic elevation of the level of stress. The most disturbing consequence of this pattern is its relation with degenerative disease. The second pattern is situational stress, in which the internal disruption is transient and tied to specific kinds of environmental events. The most problematic aspect of this pattern is that one's performance in the situation is disrupted (Barrow, 1981).

In dealing with the resident assistant population, one must focus attention upon the situational types of stress patterns that the RA is experiencing, in order to deal with immediate

problems that may occur. Later, it would be beneficial to emphasize the prolonged effects that could result from long-term stress.

Stress Factors

Most individuals differ in the kinds of situations that produce stress, the physiological manifestations of stress, and the nature and degree of effectiveness of their coping mechanisms. The RA group will encounter similar factors that will influence the level of perceived stress.

Most stress factors, or stressors, can be grouped into one of four major categories (Greenberg, 1981). Stress can be caused by biological stressors (toxins, heat, cold, etc.), psychological stressors (threat to self-esteem, depression, etc.), sociological stressors (unemployment, death of a loved one, etc.), and philosophical stressors (use of time, purpose of life, etc.).

Due to the responsibilities of the position, the RA confronts many situations that have an effect upon the level of stress that one perceives. For example, the RA may be involved in situations where social support is expected but is not received; interaction occurs with large groups of residents; he/she must respond to concerns initiated by students; and he/she must confront individuals or groups who violate the rights of others. Furthermore, the RA may have to adapt his/her lifestyle due to

role expectations and may experience personal conflict which results from competing value systems (Dickson, 1981).

Other factors that have been found to contribute to the level of stress experienced by the RA are the type of hall (coeducational or single sex), number of students per living unit, campus size, sex of the RA, RA experience, and the geographical location of the institution. The level and amount of training, behavioral patterns, health habits, and coping skills are still other factors which have an effect on the amount of stress experienced by the RA (Bertschy, 1980; Dickson, Ponikyar, Bertschy & Tomlinson, 1981; Nowack, Gibbons & Hanson, 1985; Nowack & Hanson, 1983; Pardine, Dytell, Napoli, Friedman & Spencer, 1982).

Stress Measurement

Stress measurement instruments are helpful in detecting stressful situations and levels of stress experienced by the RA. The results from such instruments can be used by professional housing staff members to develop training programs designed to diminish the negative effects that stress has upon the personal well-being and paraprofessional performance of the RA.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to measure the levels of stress perceived by the RAs who are employed by the Department of Residence at the University of Northern Iowa. The scores were used to compare the stress experienced by the RAs in the different

types of halls within the residence hall system. The results of the study were made available to professional staff members of the Department of Residence in order to focus upon areas perceived as being stressful to the RAS.

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The Subjects

The subjects for this study consisted of 90 paraprofessional resident assistants employed by the Department of Residence. The RAs worked within a residence hall system consisting of nine halls which house approximately 4,800 students. Each hall is administered by a full-time professional staff hall coordinator and is staffed with 8 to 14 RAS. The student to RA ratio is about 50 to 1. Exactly 38 (42%) of the subjects were male and 52 (58%) were female. The RAS worked within halls that are all male, all female, or coeducational.

The Instrument

The Resident Assistant Stress Inventory (RASI) is a self-report instrument designed to measure RA anxiety. Technically, stress refers to the external event, and anxiety is the internal response (Dickson, Ritter, McCary & Kuncl, 1977). However, stress and anxiety are used interchangeably in the study.

The RASI addresses the issue of stress type and stress tolerance by presenting 50 hypothetical situations that the RA responds to on a numerical scale ranging from least stressful (1)

to most stressful (5). Each situation falls into one of the six different stress factor areas being measured. The six stress factors are (Dickson, 1981):

1. Factor I (Emotional Resiliency) refers to situations where support is expected but does not occur.

2. Factor II (Facilitative Leadership) refers to interactions with large groups of residents.

3. Factor III (Counseling Skills) refers to helping responses to concerns initiated by students.

4. Factor IV (Environmental Adjustment) refers to adaptations in one's lifestyle due to role expectations.

5. Factor V (Confrontive Skills) refers to encounters with individuals or small groups of residents who violate the rights of others.

6. Factor VI (Values Development) refers to personal conflict resulting from competing value systems.

The results from the RASI instrument can help RAS and professional housing staff members to focus on stress-producing situations within the residence hall and on the stress tolerance of each RA. The results can also help professional housing staff members to develop training programs designed to control the levels of perceived stress.

Administration of the Instrument

In the spring of 1986, the RAS were asked to participate in research studying the level and type of perceived stress of the RA population on campus. All of the RAS completed the RASI and score sheets, resulting in a final sample size of 90.

The RASI was administered to each RA by the hall coordinator. The RAS were instructed not to talk during the administration of the instrument, because it could distract others. It was also important that each RA concentrate on his/her effort, because some of the situations may not have been experienced. This would require the RA to project the level of stress that would be felt under those circumstances.

The average time required for the completion of the RASI is from 20 to 40 minutes (Dickson, 1981). It was suggested that the hall coordinator take this into consideration when scheduling a time to administer the instrument. There is no time limit, so the RAS were urged to take as much time as necessary and to answer each item as honestly as possible.

Scoring the Instrument

The inventories were self-scored by each RA, using the RASI score sheet. The score sheet is divided into six different stress factors that are measured. Under each stress factor is a list of those items on the inventory that relate to that particular factor.

The RA was then instructed to go through the inventory and transfer the score for each item into its appropriate column on the score sheet. The scores for individual items were added together for a total, then divided by the number of items for that factor to arrive at a mean score for each factor.

These mean factor scores were then added together to get an average score for the different types of halls within the system, and an overall score for the entire residence hall system. Each score was rounded to the nearest .01.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

The study results, summarized in Table 1, show that there are differences in the levels of perceived stress experienced by RAs who work in different types of residence halls and in residence halls of the same type.

1. The RAS within the all-female residence halls perceived a higher level of stress on all six stress factors than did those RAs in the coeducational or all-male halls.

2. There was a significant difference at the .01 level between the level of stress experienced by RAS within all-female halls compared with RAs within other types of halls for the Emotional Resiliency and Counseling Skills stress factors. The level of stress for the Facilitative Leadership stress factor was significant at the .05 level.

3. In the all-male halls, the highest level of perceived stress was caused by Values Development factors, due to a higher score by RAs in Shull Hall.

4. The Facilitative Leadership factors ($\bar{x}$ = 3.02) were perceived as being most stressful for RAs within the entire residence hall system, followed by Values Development factors ($\bar{x}$ = 2.94), Emotional Resiliency factors ($\bar{x}$ = 2.90), Confrontive Skills factors ($\bar{x}$ = 2.85), Environmental Adjustment factors ($\bar{x}$ = 2.82), and Counseling Skills factors ($\bar{x}$ = 2.70).

5. There was a dramatic difference between Dancer and Bender RAs' stress scores on all six factors in spite of the fact that the two twin towers are both coeducational and of similar construction.

6. Among the four coeducational halls, Bender Hall RAs perceived the least stress for all six stress factors, and Dancer Hall RAs (with one exception, Environmental Adjustment) perceived the most stress. Bartlett Hall RAs consistently perceived less stress than did Noehren Hall RAs.

TABLE 1

PERCEIVED STRESS SCORES

Stress Factors	I Emotional Resiliency	II Facilitative Leadership	III Counseling Skills	IV Environmental Adjustment	V Confrontive Skills	VI Values Development
			All-Male Halls			
Rider	2.73	2.54	2.46	2.70	2.52	2.61
Shull	2.72	2.86	2.60	2.69	2.73	3.06
$\bar{x}$	2.73	2.70	2.53	2.69	2.63	2.84
			All-Female Halls			
Lawther	3.32	3.79	3.01	3.23	3.27	3.29
Hagemann	3.50	3.02	3.16	2.96	2.96	3.15
Campbell	3.07	3.13	2.92	2.77	2.91	3.23
$\bar{x}$	3.25**	3.28*	3.01**	2.94	3.02	3.22
			Coeducational Halls			
Dancer	3.23	3.26	2.80	2.92	3.26	3.29
Bender	1.82	2.45	2.04	2.06	2.20	2.12
Bartlett	2.74	3.04	2.51	2.75	2.64	2.56
Noehren	3.01	3.06	2.77	3.33	3.18	3.13
$\bar{x}$	2.72	2.95	2.54	2.81	2.86	2.81
			The Entire Campus System			
	2.90	3.02	2.70	2.82	2.85	2.94

Note: *Significant at the .05 level.
Note: **Significant at the .01 level.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results from this study show that there is a difference in perceived stress levels of RAs within and between the different types of residence halls in the campus housing system as measured by the RASI.

These results only show the differences that exist between the levels of perceived stress of RAs , without providing evidence as to what environmental factors may affect the levels of stress experienced. Hopefully, experienced housing officers can utilize their experience to validate any conclusions as to the environmental factors that could have contributed to the levels of stress experienced by the RAs.

Additional research might help to identify environmental factors that have an effect on levels of experienced stress. The RASI could be used, along with other instruments, to measure the relationship, if any, that exists between perceived stress and such factors as burnout, cognitive hardiness, health habits, illness, job performance, psychological distress, social support systems, and time management within the RA population.

This profile assessment of RA stress levels could help professional housing staff members focus on the types of treatment and training that should be provided to minimize stress.

Previous studies have shown that appropriate training has a positive effect on perceived stress. Bertschy (1980) found that

training designed to teach RAs techniques that would help in dealing with stress can reduce the perceived levels of stress, while increasing levels of measured job effectiveness among the trained group.

It has also been found that the timing of the training has an effect on the level of reported stress. A study by Winston and Buckner (1984) showed that peer helper training received while working as an RA is of marginal value, but such training received before beginning work does seem to lessen reported stress.

Continued efforts need to be made by professional housing staff members to measure the levels of perceived stress and to concentrate on the development of training programs designed to diminish the negative effects that stress has upon the RA. Such efforts would help the RA to become better prepared to deal with and to prevent stress, while further enhancing the RA experience for all.

References

Barrow, J. C. (1981). Educational programming in stress management. Journal of College Student Personnel, 22, 17-22.

Bertschy, W. J. (1980). The effects of training upon reducing stress perceived by resident assistants. NASPA Forum, 5, 5-6.

Blimling, G. S., & Miltenberger, L. J. (1984). The resident assistant: Working with college students in residence halls. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Dickson, G. L. (1981). Resident Assistant Stress Inventory manual an in-service educational guide (Rev. ed.). Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press.

Dickson, G. L., Ponikyar, C., Bertschy, W., & Tomlinson, R. (1981). RASI update: Research for RA in-service education. Journal of College and University Student Housing, 11, 8-12.

Dickson, G. L., Ritter, C., McCary, R., & Kuncl, W. (1977). The resident assistant stress inventory - a focus on individual RA in-service education. The Journal of College and University Student Housing, 7, 22-25.

Greenberg, J. S. (1981). A study of stressors in the college student population. Health Education, 12, 8-12.

Lazarus, R. S. (1966). Psychological stress and coping processes. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Mable, P., & DeCoster, D. A. (1980). The role of students as staff members and leaders within a residence community. In

D. A. DeCoster & P. Mable (Eds.), Personal education and community development in college residence halls (pp. 206-217). Washington, D.C.: American College Personnel Association.

Nowack, K. M., Gibbons, J. M., & Hanson, A. L. (1985). Factors affecting burnout and job performance of resident assistants. Journal of College Student Personnel, 26, 137-142.

Nowack, K. M., & Hanson, A. L. (1983). The relationship between stress, job performance, and burnout in college student resident assistants. Journal of College Student Personnel, 24, 545-550.

Schuh, J. H., Kuh, G. D., Gable, A., Friedman, K., Stipanovich, M., & Wegryn, L. (1982). The RA role revisited: Differences in perceptions of RA responsibilities. College Student Affairs Journal, 4, 13-22.

Selye, H. (1974). Stress without distress. New York: J. B. Lippincott.

Upcraft, M. L. (1982). Residence hall assistants in college: A guide to selection, training, and supervision. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Winston, R. B. Jr., & Buckner, J. D. (1984). The effects of peer-helper training and timing of training on reported stress of resident assistants. Journal of College Student Personnel, 25, 430-436.