Seeing God Clearly: Meaning-Making and Attributions to God Made by Resident Assistants

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Abstract

Resident Assistants (RAs) at a Christian college in the Midwest were interviewed in order to explore the nature, reasoning, and complexity of attributions to God from their RA-related experiences. Resulting themes found that RAs made attributions to God for experiences of identifiable goodness, which included positive developmental experiences and experiences of deep unity and spirituality. Though RAs often saw themselves as God's intermediary agents, they also claimed they were limited in their ability to affect deep change. The relationship between their agency and God's was complex, but RAs sought solace in God's ultimate control in the midst of their efforts. Implications for practice include facilitating opportunities for RAs to reflect on their experiences to impact spiritual development. Moreover, professionals can teach conceptual and theological tools to help RAs think about how God works in the world and to develop RAs as leaders to better influence wholesome and growing experiences.

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Introduction

In his article, "The Development of the Leader and the Spirit," Stonecipher (2012) showed the importance of reflection for leadership. Student development professionals seek to foster student learning through asking questions that encourage students to reflect on their experiences. Christian college educators not only acknowledge students can and do make spiritual meaning, but they also affirm God works in various experiences (S. Reese, 2012; Searle, 1994). Furthermore, educators desire for students to discover how God is working and to perceive their learning experiences through a spiritual framework.

Student development professionals would benefit from research that explores the nature, complexity, and nuance of when and why resident assistants (RAs) attribute experiences to God for at least three reasons. First, this research increases awareness of the experiences salient to RAs with respect to God's working. Such awareness influences professional practice and the development of students' spirituality and meaning-making.

Second, this study illuminates why experiences of God's agency are especially meaningful for RAs. Based on their research, Spilka, Shaver, and Kirkpatrick (1985) developed a theory of religious attributions explaining the motivations and circumstances by which people make religious attributions. In essence, this research helps examine how RAs understand and make sense of the experiences they attribute to God.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, this study reveals the perceived effects of attributions on the spiritual and leadership development of RAs. Since RAs are student leaders on campus, their own formation and development is modeled to the greater student body (Cumings, 1997). To summarize, this research helps professionals better understand how RAs see God's work in their residential areas, and such understanding greatly influences student development practice and understanding as well as student learning and spiritual growth.

Literature Review

To explore how a group of RAs at an evangelical Christian college describe how God works, two areas of research are beneficial to review: (1) emerging adult religiousness and spirituality and (2) conceptions of God's agency and attributions made to him. Smith (2009) stated that emerging adulthood, broadly speaking, refers to adults 18–29 years of age. It should be noted that while there is literature on spirituality and meaning-making in higher education, there is a dearth of research on those topics with specific reference to RAs and student leadership (Lehr, n.d.). For example, Gehrke (2008)

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claimed her empirical study was one of the first and only which sought to show the relationships between spirituality and leadership among college students. This study qualitatively explored spirituality and meaning-making in the context of RAs who are student leaders on campus.

Emerging Adult Religiousness and Spirituality

God and religiousness. Emerging adults (EA) can be broadly characterized by transition and declining religious distinctiveness. In comparison to adults, Smith (2009) found that EA in contemporary America were less likely to pray, attend religious services weekly, and affiliate with their faiths. Though a plurality of religious portraits among EA were found, the prevalence of selective adherence and an individualist mindset revealed that EA, in general, are apathetic and indifferent to faith and do not locate their identities and actions within particular religious frameworks (Smith, 2009). Smith (2009) also found the religious outlook of many EA corresponded to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), a theological grid that affirms five points: (1) there is a watchful God who (2) wants people to be good and who (3) does not need to be involved except when there is a problem; (4) the primary goal of life is to be happy; and (5) good people go to heaven when they die.

Evangelical sub-culture. Among evangelical college students, research shows evangelical students believe God is involved in their lives. For example, studies by Lowery (2000), Cumings (1997), Brelsford and Mahoney (2009), and Kimball, Boyatzis, Cook, Leonard, and Flanagan (2013) demonstrated that evangelical Christian students in college (at both Christian and non-Christian institutions) emphasized a personal, friendly, dynamic and vibrant relationship with God. This God can be sought for help and is often seen as caring and desiring their moral best. Finally, God is provident in everyday circumstances like grades, and he acts through vehicles such as the Bible or other people. The present study adds to the field of research by providing college students with the opportunity to talk about how they view and interpret God as an agent who acts in certain events.

Development of faith and spirituality. Emerging adults can be characterized as having a new set of thinking enabling them to see the world, themselves, and their place in the world with increased complexity and awareness. This capacity equips EA to develop "faith," which was defined by Parks (2011) as "the activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience" (p. 10). The development of "spirituality," an oft-criticized term for its breadth of meaning (Setran & Kiesling, 2013; Smith, 2009), involves essentially the same process. Faith/

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spiritual development occurs from crises, challenges or transitions that cause one to rethink their beliefs, own them, and to make meaning and purpose in the world (Astin, Astin and Lindholm, 2011; Fowler, 2000, Gehrke, 2008; Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004; Parks, 2011; Stonecipher, 2012). Reese (2012), researching from a distinctly Christian perspective, claimed that for college students to develop spiritually, they must (1) be ready to hear God's voice and leading and (2) be given opportunities to tell where God has acted in their own story.

God's Agency and Attribution to God

Understanding God's agency. According to Gray and Wegner (2010), agents are "things that act" (p. 9). One general theme is that people exhibit a tension between conceiving of God as an abstract figure versus more familiar analogues to a human agent with intention. Studies by Lalljee, Brown, and Hilton (1990), Knight, Sousa, Barrett, and Atran (2004), and Gray and Wegner (2010) showed that subjects expressed sophisticated conceptions of God's agency not identical to human causation or experience. In contrast, Grysman and Hudson's study (2014) found that participants expressed a functional concept of God for situational explanations that was limited by perceptions of a human person. Furthermore, studies by Gilbert, Brown Pinel, and Wilson (2000) and Gray and Wegner (2010) found that many people consider God to be an agent of intention whose actions and purposes can be known. Interestingly, Grysman and Hudson (2014) showed college students added intentional and agentive terms of God when retelling a story, even when such descriptions were not given in the story, indicating that it may be intuitive for people to make God as an agent more integral to their stories.

Attributions to God. When people invoke God's agency with respect to activities in the world, they are making attributions, which Spilka et al. (1985) defined this way: "People seek to explain experiences and events by attributing them to causes—that is, by 'making causal attributions'" (p. 2). Three main motivations drive people to make attributions: (1) to make meaning out of their experiences, (2) to control or predict their environment, and (3) to maintain positive self-esteem, which for some includes religiosity (Gray & Wegner, 2010; Mitchell, 1997; Grysman & Hudson, 2014; Spilka et al., 1985). Spilka et al. (1985) gave four contextual elements that interact with each other when one makes an attribution: the event, the event context, the attributor, and the attributor's context. For someone to make an attribution to God, the following pre-requisites must be present: (1) a belief in an agentive God that is available and understandable, (2) anomalous, extraordinary, or moral experiences that cause either harm or good, and (3) an attribution

to God must be more satisfactory than a naturalistic attribution (Gray & Wegner, 2010; Spilka et al., 1985). Characteristically, people make attributions to God for positive events and for seemingly inexplicable negative events (Gray & Wegner, 2010; Lalljee et al., 1990; P. Mallery, Mallery, & Gorsuch, 2000; Ritzema 1979), and some do so in order to reinforce religious beliefs (Sharp, 2013).

This study seeks to expand upon the research of Ritzema and Young (1983) by qualitatively exploring the nature and extent to which a group of RAs acknowledge or understand the interaction between God's causation and other possible natural attributions, as their study was based off a single spectrum continuum model. It also should be noted that the qualitative nature of the present research is well-timed, as Wright (1983) and Lalljee et al. (1990) noted the prevalence of attribution studies from hypothetical scenarios but a lack of attribution research from people's own actions and observations. Finally, an axiomatic theory of attribution developed by Spilka et al. (1985) and the taxonomy of attributions by P. Mallery et al. (2000) proved relevant in data analysis.

After conducting a review of the literature, questions for the present research were as follows: For a group of RAs at an evangelical Christian college, what are the in-depth RA-related experiences on their floor that they attribute to God as a causative agent whose intentions can be known? As it relates to attribution, how do a group of RAs at an evangelical Christian college describe the relationship between divine agency and other possible agencies, particularly their own agency?

Methodology

Participants

This study was conducted with former RAs at a small evangelical Christian college in the suburban Midwest. Students who were RAs the prior school year were studied because they had an entire school year of RA experiences and the benefit of time and distance on which to reflect with depth and acuity. The researcher asked seven RAs who worked on a single staff team in a residence hall to be interviewed, and six participated. This group of RAs was asked to participate because the shared participation on the staff team between them and the researcher was predicted to encourage greater participation due to the establishment of trust. There was a range of relationships among the participants and no longer any staff or supervisory relationship. Thus, sampling was both convenience and purposive sampling (L. R. Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012).

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Structured interviews were implemented. In order to allow students to make attributions to God naturally, initial questions did not explicitly name God. The reason for this omission was to prevent immediate priming of responses (Dijksterhuis, Preston, Wegner, & Aarts, 2008). The researcher also asked follow-up questions that would better or more deeply obtain information pertaining to God (see Appendix). In order to promote descriptive validity (Johnson, 1997), the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

Next, the researcher read, noted, and coded the transcribed interviews to analyze the data inductively and decipher themes (L. R. Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). As an evangelical who has worked in Christian student development, the researcher expected to find three things: (1) that RAs would "know" both (a) that God did certain things and that (b) they would "know" the purpose behind those things; (2) RAs would attribute either particularly positive experiences or difficult ones framed positively to God alone; and (3) RAs would tend toward simplicity and dualism rather than complexity in terms of instrumentality or of the relative responsibility of their actions on their floors. Thus, to resist researcher bias, the researcher engaged in participant feedback throughout the interview to promote interpretive validity (Johnson, 1997). The researcher also enacted negative case-sampling to resist bias, looking for information in data interpretation that was contrary to the expectations and viewpoints of the researcher (Johnson, 1997).

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Results

RAs Attributed Identifiable Goodness to God

One of the most pervasive themes from the stories of the RAs when they made attributions to God was the theme of identifiable goodness. God was regularly attributed for experiences that either were good or some good came out of them. There were two kinds of goodness attributed to God's doing: positive developmental learning and deep spirituality and unity, the latter of which came especially in the midst of limitation.

Positive developmental learning. Sarah's story illustrated God's intent for positive developmental learning. She was unique in that she referenced God's intent in a difficult experience without being asked to do so:

> As I've just reflected on the things I feel like God was trying to teach me last year … God gave me the floor I needed to have for what he was trying to do in my life and the lives of my girls. … Number

one a lot of humility. … [Emily] very much has the floor that I wanted to have. … There are a lot of times where I'm still very much like "God, why couldn't I have had that floor? ... And like realizing "OK no, I still have a lot of pride that I have to keep in check thinking that."

If I had had the floor I wanted, if … everything had gone right in that way that I had expected, I wouldn't have realized how prideful I was. So even though it was like really, really hard, I'm very thankful for it because it's a very big part in what God is doing in my life and who he's shaping me to be and helping me to become more like Christ.

Reflection was the means by which Sarah was able to discern God's action and intent in the dynamics on her floor. God taught her humility by giving her that particular floor of students. She at times still questioned God's intent because her experience was very difficult and did not align with her positive expectations. Yet she made meaning by concluding that God intentionally gave her that floor so that she would learn humility. She determined that such learning would not have happened otherwise. In this way, Sarah constructed a positive reappraisal of the year from her difficult experiences.

Deep unity and spirituality. Zack's story, on the other hand, clearly illustrated depth in spiritual fervor. When asked if there was another experience of God's agency, he shared that he put on a forty-hour prayer event and was initially hesitant about his expectations because he did not give his residents much notice. However, the slots for prayer were filled, and though it was late at night on a Saturday, he went on to share,

We had I don't know maybe like 30 guys or whatever and we just kind of closed it out in prayer. … You know that sometimes you get a sense that there's a real spiritual fervor—kind of sense of the Spirit. … Everyone was not just there physically, but everyone was there to pray. … And that's just the type of thing that you have no control over, you know what I mean? You can be super persuasive and get people to sign up and even get people to come to the lounge, but you have no control over that. And that was a really sweet and really enjoyable time.

Zack went on to say that God worked in the event by giving people the spiritual hunger to commune with people in prayer. In this experience, Zack's perceived control over the success of the event was mitigated partly

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because he did not have control over the inward, spiritual desire of his residents. Thus, he thought that such numbers and spiritual fervor in that particular environment were not something that came from his control but from God's.

RAs seen as God's intermediaries. Some RAs felt God was using their efforts and their agency to accomplish his purposes or to do his work as an intermediary. For example, consider Will's experience of spiritual righteousness and zeal among the students on his floor. When asked to elaborate on what he meant by the Lord using his personality, he connected his gifting and work to that of a prophet from the Bible:

> I think I learned that I'm very charismatic, and I can get a following really quickly, you know, and I think that that's something that the Lord has gifted me with and is going to hold me responsible to in my life. I really resonate with the call of Ezekiel and Ezekiel 3, like "[paraphrasing Bible] I have called you to be a mouthpiece for my people, if I give you a word and you don't tell them I will hold you accountable and the blood will be on your head, and if I give you a word and you do then you will be righteous and they will be held accountable." …I think in many ways I was able to practice that [personality gift] last year and be that [mouthpiece] and also practice to be sort of the Lord's agent in leading this floor.

Will saw within his personality qualities that were needed to be the Lord's mouthpiece, and he considered himself to be the Lord's agent when he utilized his own gifts to bring forth righteousness among the students on his floor. In this way, he clearly identified his own actions as being integral to the results of the experience.

God is the one who affects the heart. While some RAs acknowledged their efforts to be fundamentally related to the results of their experiences, they also thought their own efforts could not sufficiently constitute causation for their experiences. RAs held this view because they were convicted that they were simply not capable of affecting the depth of goodness they experienced. Though some simply expressed a general lack of confidence, other RAs identified specific weaknesses or limitations which served as further proof that God himself had to have caused the deep goodness. For example, when asked how he knew that the Lord was working in his

experience of deep unity and love among his floor, Roy shared the following:

> I think I know it was of the Lord because it was certainly not something I was capable of creating or facilitating. I know how sinful and selfish my motivations are. But what happened was not of me. I could not facilitate what was going on in terms of real friendships that were happening, in terms of really positive, encouraging, edifying things that were going on. If God was not involved, [then] it would have not looked like that.

At least partially because of Roy's perceived sinfulness, selfishness, misguided desires, and failures, he lacked confidence in his own ability to cause deep unity, and he knew God must have been involved in the experience of "real friendships." He thus attributed the experience to God.

God's ultimate control provides comfort. In short, RAs described a difficult complexity for how they understood the holistic relation between God's agency and other agencies, such as the RA or the environment. For example, Will shared that his realization of God's grace in everything and his conviction of God's work on the human heart caused him to explain human responsibility using the following analogy from his experience in an orchestra:

> [The conductor's] air was very authoritative and very straight but real sparkly joy in his eyes. … Then he was just like "Let's have fun with this. Let's play well." And then he just like starts this [hand motion], and we've never sounded better. Like I've literally never heard our orchestra sound that good. And it was like this simultaneously like "Do your best and have fun." And I think the Lord has the same expectation and presence about how he communicates a challenge to us. Our responsibility is huge, and at the same time, he's like "Be holy, as I am holy. Also it's not you. It's me. So just rest and commune with me."
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> It's your responsibility to play your part to the best of your ability. But honestly, no pressure. There's like this real, incredible tension.

From Will's perspective, there was a tension between the actions that an RA would take in his or her residential area and God's work, which was involved in everything. For Will, though he had a large responsibility, God had the ultimate responsibility, which included Will's efforts as his "part" in the "orchestra" of factors.

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The conviction that God had ultimate responsibility and caused deep goodness also meant that RAs like Will could truly "have fun" and not despair. Indeed, this conviction provided RAs with a sense of solace, comfort, and trust in God that guarded against hopelessness or guilt when expectations were not met or when desired results were not achieved. For example, when Will was asked what the phrase "all God's grace" meant, he had the following to share:

> For me, it entirely takes the pressure off. Because if it's based on my talents and my giftings, if I don't feel it––I'm done! Then it's all my responsibility that this floor is tanking, you know? And if that's the case, then [another RA's] the failure, or I'm a success. Like, are you joking me?!
> And the knowledge that it's the Lord's work, these are his guys, it's his year––[this knowledge] is what got me through. You know? And the reality that this is not ultimately mine. … It's based on joy, not based on fear … not based on a fear of messing up and [God] being mad at you.

Will was relieved of the pressure of bearing all the responsibility for difficult things happening in his residential area because of his understanding that God was the one working in the students. His conviction of God's control alleviated the fear of failure for both him and a fellow RA, but his conviction also relativized his role in the desirable results he experienced. One was only responsible for joyfully trying one's best––not for the result, which may or may not happen. Katie summed it up best when she said: "I think the ways I most clearly was able to see [God's] blessing was when I was doing my part I guess, and then he took care of the rest." Consequently, one cannot be attributed for that which they are not ultimately responsible.

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Discussion

The RAs of this study attributed experiences of identifiable goodness to God as they processed some of their most meaningful experiences as RAs in their residential areas. As Spilka et al. claimed (1985), language shapes the relevancy of an experience and thus transforms the experience itself for the individual. This study further justifies the need for student development professionals to create times and contexts for RAs and student leaders in general to engage in reflection in order to make meaning out of their experiences, to develop spirituality (Astin et al., 2011; Stonecipher, 2012), and to see where God has acted in their own story (S. Reese, 2012).

Moreover, other RAs at Christian colleges and universities who are asked similar reflective questions upon their residential experiences will likely make similar attributions to God, even if the setting may not be one of research. There are three reasons to claim generalizability (Johnson, 1997) of God-attributions among these RAs. First, student development professionals will have trust-filled relationships with RAs. Second, the practice of providing sufficient time for student leaders to reflect and verbally process is readily available for professionals. Third, RAs will likely be similar in broad theological outlook, for considerable unity was found among the RAs studied regarding their view of God: God is a good God who works for the good in their experiences, both in and beyond the RAs' efforts; God works in the heart, brings about unity and spiritual fervor, intends positive development from challenging experiences, and responds to human sincerity and weakness. This finding differs from the theological outlook of MTD (Smith, 2009) and confirms previous claims that spiritual development arises from challenges and provides transcendent meaning (Astin et al., 2011; Fowler, 2000; Gehrke, 2008; Holcomb & Nonneman, 2004; Parks, 2011; Stonecipher, 2012).

The present study asked general reflective questions to prevent subliminal priming. Christian institutions can explicitly name God with the reflection questions they ask to a greater degree than the present study in order to provide more opportunities to make attributions to God. It has been found that language availability and priming, among other factors, influence attributions to God (Dijksterhuis et al., 2008; Spilka et al., 1985). Administrators and staff can purposefully have a spiritual effect on students through this kind of work (S. H. Reese, 2001).

The researcher also found that participants realized their limitations as RAs and that this realization influenced their attributions to God. Student development professionals have an opportunity to teach the concept of God's providence and the concept of relative responsibility as a response to this finding for the sake of Christian leadership development. For example, student development professionals can teach from the Bible about God's ultimate control of situations and how he affects heart change, and they can engage in spiritual practices such as prayer to reinforce those teachings. Practitioners can then utilize the concept of God's providence to explicitly challenge prevailing expectations that RAs may consciously or subconsciously have about their role, such as: (1) the RA is capable of affecting heart change in a simple and unitary fashion, (2) the RA will have no negative experiences in his or her residential area or will resolve every problem that occurs in the residential area, and (3) the RA contains sufficient efficacy and resources within himself or herself to bring about a deep and positive result in every situation that he or she encounters.

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The teaching of God's providence should then be coupled with the corollary teaching of the concept of relative responsibility. Interestingly, when RAs were asked to share about a good experience and why it happened, they often identified *conducive* factors to the experience that God *used*; this finding expands upon Ritzema and Young's (1983) single continuum model by adding intermediary factors to God-attributions. When RAs were asked follow-up questions that *explicitly* asked for experiences where they saw God work, they usually told of experiences of which preceding factors were *not conducive* to the result; this discovery accords with previous claims that people attribute experiences to God when natural explanations seem insufficient (Gray & Wegner, 2010; Spilka et al., 1985). Student development professionals can capitalize on these findings by teaching RAs the concept of relative responsibility, which says that though God is in ultimate control of experiences, he uses people and environments to contribute to experiences. Indeed, he has ordained that environments and people within environments are factors that can (a) contribute to experiences and outcomes or (b) hinder or prevent potential experiences or outcomes. These factors are identifiable and able to be influenced to a certain extent. This critical awareness gained from the theological concept of relative responsibility could influence leadership development by bolstering conscious attempts to enact change and influence people and environments more acutely and effectively.

Conclusion

This research study was conducted in order to explore how RAs understand how God worked in their RA-related experiences in their residential areas. Resulting themes found demonstrate that RAs made attributions to God from experiences of identifiable goodness, which included positive developmental experiences and experiences of deep unity and spirituality. Additionally, though RAs often saw themselves as God's intermediary agents, God was in ultimate control, and they were limited in their ability to affect deep change. The relationship between their agency and God's was complex, but RAs sought solace in God's ultimate control and causation in the midst of their efforts. For RAs to develop spiritually, student development professionals need to give RAs regular opportunities to reflect on the experiences that matter deeply to them, for it is in those opportunities that RAs can and often do identify where they see God working. Professionals can also teach RAs conceptual and theological tools to (1) think from within a Christian framework about how God works in the world and (2) to develop as leaders who can identify environmental factors, reflect on those factors, and determine action steps to better lead toward wholesome and growing

experiences. Professionals can influence the thinking and practice of the RAs toward these ends with spiritual practices, training and curriculum. Through training and opportunities for reflection, RAs can better discern their purpose, demonstrate their faith, and practice leadership for spiritual edification and for the common good.

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Appendix

Interview Questions
Exploring attributions of cause/intent.

1. What was one overall positive result or experience that you had as an RA on your floor last year?
   - (Cause/Result) Why do you think _____ happened?

2. What is one moment that stood out to you as an RA on your floor last year?
   - (Cause) Why do you think _____ happened?
   - (Result) What do you think resulted from _____? (In other words, what do you think came of ___? What do you think were the effects of ___ happening?)

3. What was an experience that was very difficult for you as an RA on your floor?
   - (Cause) Why do you think _____ happened?
   - Result) What do you think resulted from _____? (In other words, what do you think came of ___? What do you think were the effects of ___ happening?)

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- (Purpose) Do you think there was any purpose for ____? Could you talk more about that?
- (Cause) Follow-up question if the Christian God is not invoked or is not invoked often: Do you think God in any way could be an explanation to ____? If so, how would you explain that?
- (Purpose/Intent) Follow-up question if the Christian God is not invoked or is not invoked often: Do you think God had any intent or purpose in that experience? Could you talk more about that? How do you know?
- (Confidence) Follow-up question: What is it about these experiences that incline you to know that God acted in the ways that you said he did?
- (Frequency) Follow-up question if the Christian God is invoked often: I've noticed that you have talked a lot about God's action. Why do you think God is so involved in these experiences? How would you say that you know that?

Exploring the relationship between God as actor and other possible actors.

4. Why do you think God was __(use their wording)___ of/in _____ and not (merely) you/some other cause (e.g. you, other students, cultural environment, some combination of those things)?

5. How do you understand the relationship between what God did and what you did on the floor/some of the other factors you named?

Exploring possible other experiences of attribution.

6. Is there one other kind of experience as an RA on your floor that you would say God did? What was that experience? Why do you think God did it?

If they did not talk about God beforehand.

7. I'm going to preface this final question by saying that there is no right/wrong answer to it and that it doesn't imply anything for or against all of the things you have said previously. This is simply an exploratory question: I noticed that you didn't mention God when you talked about your experience as an RA until I asked you about him. I'm curious: What do you think were the reasons why God didn't come up?

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