

How Invisible Are You:
An Exploration Between the Divides of Visible and
Invisible Social Groups

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Social Group Formation at St. Olaf

Abstract

Our project is about social group formation and interaction on campus. We are curious how groups form and once they form, why are certain groups on campus more visible than other groups. Are there divisions between groups, or are groups amorphous? Are groups visible through out campus or only in particular locations, like Buntrock Commons or Stav Hall?

We gathered our data through focus groups, interviews, BORSC reports, student ethnographic research method 373 past projects, observations, and various books. We created three groups of people we wanted to talk to: football players, Student Support Service members, and individuals who played neither football nor were in SSS. The first two groups we deemed visible. We deemed them visible because from our own personal experiences we've noticed our friends talk about the exclusivity of TRiO/MACO/SSS students and football students. We were curious why students believed they were exclusive and noticed those groups over other groups. The third group of participants was outside observers or the "invisible" group, although all claimed to believe people had subjected them to particular social groups.

Some of our main findings in the project were:

- Concerns over exclusivity:
 - Both SSS students and football students felt as if their groups were "open" but other people felt either intimidated or assumed the group was "exclusive" and could not join.
- Physical attributions

- There are various visible indicators such as sports tee-shirts, physical appearances (body-type, skin color, etc) that help students to distinguish visible groups
- Outside observers are passive:
 - Students in SSS feel as if there is a lack of collaboration and sharing knowledge with greater St. Olaf population
 - Students in football feel as if the greater St. Olaf population ostracizes them and projects negative stereotypes onto the football team
 - Students in the “invisible” group feel as if others stereotype their group and/or put them as an individual into categories
- Students do not identify them selves with just one organization
 - Student identities are comprised of many different interests, activities, and beliefs.
 - Students feel as if negative stereotypes of their particular group are projected on to them and they are thoughts of as one particular identity
- Importance of the cafeteria
 - Students have multiple interests; their identity is a patch-quilt of activities, and beliefs yet if one sees them in the cafeteria with one social group, this indicates to the St. Olaf population that their one social group is all they have.

- Because of busy schedules, eating meals with friends is one of the most important socialization times of the day.
 - Students describe meal times similar to “family time.”
 - Time’s influence on students
 - Student’s schedules can have a major impact on who they interact, or don’t interact with.
 - Students do not have a lot of time to interact with many social groups because of schedules, homework, and various activities
 - Most students don’t think they have “enough” time
- How students meet
 - Blending of social groups
 - Happenstance
 - Shared beliefs and activities
 - First-year dorms
 - When they first come to campus
 - The church
 - Classes/Majors
 - “Double date” in the caf: when one group has members in another group and they sit in the cafeteria to eat, many students become friends with other groups this way
 - Study abroad
 - House parties: when social lubrication is present many students forget St. Olaf norms and talk to one another

How Invisible Are You:

An Exploration between the Divides of Visible and Invisible Social Groups

How do groups on campus form? Do group dynamics on campus counteract the “global citizen” image St. Olaf promotes? What can separate social groups on campus tell us about the student body? Is change possible, or is it even an issue? If this is an issue, why is it an issue?

In this project, we wish to see the point of view of students from two visible social groups: Student Support Services (SSS)/TRiO students, football players, and a group of individuals from an “invisible” social group. The invisible social group is not a group of students who do not participate on campus; rather, it is less visible which social group(s) they are in. In these particular social groups it is obvious to outsiders why the two groups have formed: for the SSS students it appears as if they have a shared background, whereas the football student’s social group seems to be formed because of the shared interest of football. Further, it seems socially acceptable for the football students to sit with one another during social activities like eating in the cafeteria, whereas with the SSS students, students question why the SSS students seem exclusive.

In order to make this project successful, the role of the participant would be as an interviewee and a collaborator. Firstly, we would conduct observations in social settings such as the cafeteria, which is one of the most apparent settings in which to observe divisions among social groups. Secondly, we would conduct interviews with SSS students, football players, and a random selection of students from an invisible group to hear their perspectives on the matter and to identify their views. We would analyze the differences between what we observed and what our participants stated.

Setting/Community

In many ways, St. Olaf College is like a bubble within a bubble. It is a small, national ranked liberal arts college located in Northfield, Minnesota 35 miles south of Minneapolis/St. Paul. The college is located on top of a hill on the furthest western area of the town to 17,000. According to the school's 2009 profile, "300-acre campus is home to 17 academic and administrative buildings, 29 student residences and 10 athletic facilities. St. Olaf is a 4-year residential college, 96 percent of St. Olaf students reside in one of the 11 residence halls and 18 academic and special interest group houses. Adjacent to campus are 325 acres of restored wetlands, woodlands, and native tall grass prairie owned and maintained by St. Olaf. There is a utility-grade wind turbine that supplies one-third of the college's daily electrical needs." Yet, as ethnographers, we realized students do not recognize the campus according to a map; they see and experience the campus according to their own social understanding.

For our research we decided to interview three groups at St. Olaf College. These included the St. Olaf College Football players, Student Support Service students (SSS), and the less visible groups on campus. We chose the SSS and Football players to represent the visible groups on campus. And we picked a group of random students who were not necessarily associated with any visible group. The Student Support Service is a student retention program that is sponsored by the St. Olaf College along with the support from the U.S. Department of Education, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, and the Hearst Endowment. The program is intended to ensure academic success for St. Olaf students who meet federal eligibility guidelines such as low income and first generation.

The program also makes sure students are committed to enhancing their academic experience at the college level.

Student Support Services is one of three TRiO programs which are funded under the Higher Education Act of 1965 whose objective is to help students overcome classes, social, and cultural barriers to complete their college education. The program provides services up to one hundred and sixty eligible St. Olaf students each year. The program services range from advising and employment referral to sponsoring leadership activities such as tutoring to graduate school preparation, incentives for academic achievement and financial aid advising. One of the main services that the Student Support Services program provides is the Summer Bridge Program, which allows qualified students a jump-start on the academic year.

The St. Olaf College football team as of 2009-2010 consists of ninety-nine players. These students come from all over the United States. Each year, the incoming new incoming football players come earlier on campus compared to the rest of their fellow first year students for practice. During this time the new students are able to interact with their upperclassmen as well as other first year students and make friends. This additional time enables the new players to make friends before the school year begins by being part of a social group. This is similar to the Student Support Service bridge program as well.

In both of these programs the students tend to have the same schedule during the period they are here on campus. From practice time, class time, and meal time. The students form their first social group of friends at this time as crucial time as Nathan states, "The most significant relationships are formed either before college or very early

in one's college career, most often in some shared affiliation, whether voluntary or not, such as freshman dorm assignment, special freshman summer program, ROTC, ethnic club, or sorority and fraternity rush" (58). By the start of the beginning of the school year these groups have already formed their social group which does not make them feel the need to seek another group while others are trying to find out which social group they want to be in.

For the invisible group we decided to pick students who were neither involved in football nor were participants of the Student Support Service program. In our research there were five students two male and three female for the focus group. All of these students lived in different dorms and come from different class year. However, none of them came to campus earlier their first year. Many of these students tended to identify themselves being part of multiple social groups rather than one in particular.

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Fig. 1: Comments from the BORSC posters.

Methodology

We decided to pick two social groups on campus that were visible and one invisible group to compare the social dynamics on campus. We contacted the football players, students support service, and random groups of students in a class to take part in a focus group meeting and one-on-one interview questions about social groups. We figured that obtaining subjects in this way would make students feel inclined to discuss about their views on social groups on campus. Furthermore, we needed specific groups that the general student body would have been able to identify.

We conducted our research by initially researching symbolic interactionism, diversity in college and gathering data the school has already provided. Yet, through our research we realized students do not act or behave solely symbolically. Moreover, their behaviors are more like Geertz's theory of thick description. Student behaviors have meaning, but they do not act out solely to express meaning. Board of Regents Student Committee (BORSC) report "The Facets of Diversity: A Study of Diversity at St. Olaf." The February report provided a plethora of information about diversity issues on campus. The student committee who wrote the reports gathered their data from student polls and student comments made on posters. We used the data from the report about diversity on campus because it provided both statistics from the student body as well as quotes from its members. The information from St. Olaf reports and past Ethnographic Research Method projects was more useful than some of the information we found in various books and articles.

We formed three focus groups: students from the Student Support Service, students from various social groups or the "invisible group", and football students. We invited some of the students to interview with us a few days after the focus group. This process was useful because we were able to rearrange questions and create new questions during the interviews. We could get a taste of what was important to people in the group and then gather data from a more individual and micro perspective. Further, we hypothesized Stav Hall would be a beneficial place to observe. Before we conducted any of the focus groups, we observed the first hour of dinner from the second floor. By observing where people tend to sit and whom they tend to sit next to at the cafeteria

before interviewing our participants, we were able discern whether there were visible trends in the cafeteria.

After most of the focus groups and interviews, we observed Stav Hall once again. From the information we gathered from our participants, we learned how important of a space Stav Hall is for many visible and non-visible social groups. On our second observation we sat on the main floor during one of the busier dinner hours. Further, we were able to see if our observations overlapped with any of the observations from our participants. If there were gaps between observations, for instance, if we observed groups in the cafeteria separated by gender, would our participants mention a similar trend? The focus groups and interviews were necessary in our analysis of why people tend to sit at certain places in the cafeteria and with whom they chose to sit next to.

Problem

As ethnographers, we cannot be completely objective. Our humanness and personal experiences drive us to be interested in particular subjects. For us, and our background, we are interested in diversity. Whether it's because one of us is a refugee from Tibet, or the other comes from a town of rich multiculturalism and ethnic equality. "Part of the diversity ideal is the hope that all students will develop friends and have important conversations with those of backgrounds and ethnicities different from their own" (Nathan year:58).

Our own experiences with diversity issues and awareness drove us to question issues of diversity in the student body on campus. As we began our research, our questions and the problem evolved. Initially we asked why certain groups, like the

multicultural students, seemed to be insular. Then, with the help of Professor Chiappari, we asked how and why do groups form, is there interaction between groups, and why are certain groups “visible” in social settings while others seem invisible?

While we began the process of brainstorming what we wanted to ask other St. Olaf students about their questions about diversity. During this time, for one week, the BORSC committee hung posters in the hallway between Buntrock and the Library. The committee members wrote statements on the posters, “What does diversity mean to you?” and “How can the school increase diversity at St. Olaf?” and placed markers next to the posters for students to write their responses on the posters. One of the response on the poster said “I think we should start KILLING each other now. People are so messed up here. Come and kill all browns” (BORSC Report: February 2010). The responses triggered a campus-wide reaction and some of the comments offended students and faculty.

The various responses on the posters and the reactions from the community provoked questions. On the posters, many of the comments assumed diversity meant only racial and multicultural diversity. For example, one of the quotes stated, “Diversity is code for anti-white racism. We don’t want it here you Marxist tool!” and another stated, “You only got into St. Olaf cuz of affirmative action u dumb fuck” [*sic*]. We began to wonder, why are the statements focusing on visual indicators of differences?

We initially wanted to research why it seemed like the multicultural students only hung out with other multicultural students. However, we, like the comments on the posters, realized we were assuming diversity is “visible.” Rather than question if there were insular groups, we started to question what makes groups on campus form, do

people stay in one particular social group, how do groups know if they are “invisible” or “visible,” and what are their experiences if they are in a visible group?

We framed the problem on the concept of “visibility” because of our own experience. Through out our time at St. Olaf we have been a part of many conversations dedicated to where particular groups sit in Stav Hall i.e. “The Caf.” More often than not, one wonders why it seems as if the multicultural students sit in the same area in The Caf and why they only seem to sit together.

In our research we considered how much of the problem is our perception as ethnographers and how much of it feels like a reality for the students. How the students experienced the reality of being in a visible or invisible group framed how we decided to organize the questions for the focus groups. We wanted to see if students thought visible groups existed, who they were, and if they were in a visible group how they were aware of their own visibility.

Findings

Over the course of ten interviews and three focus groups, we began to ask ourselves, “how much of our perceptions are based on reality?” Anthony Giddens questions what social reality is based on: the individual or social forces. Are groups visible because of the individuals in the group or because of what the group represents?

Before we began interviews, we were curious why there were such apparent divides between social groups. We questioned what it meant to be apart of particular social groups: does their membership reflect their identity and what does membership

mean? Our findings were surprising: the membership of a group does have importance for those in the group, yet, for outsiders they create different meaning.

How do groups on campus form?

Majority of St. Olaf groups on campus form by sharing similar interests, major, classes, and living in the same dorm. For example, many Students Support Service students come to St. Olaf College in August to take a Biology and writing summer course. They met some of their fellow first year colleagues and had an experience of taking college courses. During their stay, they live in the same dorm and share the same schedule. Once the school year begins this group of students were comfortable and had special relationship with one another.

The same goes for the football players who shared the same practice schedule during their time on campus who come earlier than the rest of the student body. They all lived in one dormitory and shared similar schedules. For the incoming students, their first year dorm and classes helped form their social groups on campus as they began to have similar routines, classes, and learn their interest.

Do students have enough time?

Anthony Giddens begs the question: is it the individual or the social force that shapes our reality? Students in all focus groups and interviews stated that they felt as if they did not have enough time. The idea of time and what is *enough* varies. One student said in the invisible focus group that he had to “forgo hanging out with my friends and doing the activities I like just to get my work done.” At St. Olaf, it appears that in order to

be well rounded Ole, one must participate in various activities. There is a social force either to become extremely busy or to pretend to be extremely busy. One female in the Student Support Service focus group commented that she does not “have time to do everything I want, I have to go to group meetings, you don’t have time to participate in all the activities you want.”

Student perceptions of “having time” affect how they perceive their time spent socializing and creating bonds. Despite involvement in various activities, many students “hang out” with the students they meet from activities. The social force of time shapes student realities in positive ways: by creating schedules with various activities, students meet other students who may share similar beliefs. “People make up society and are constrained by it” (Calhoun, 2002, p. 223).

What are student definitions of friends?

“Many students are building on contacts developed before they entered college, contacts that have strong demographic and social components. If many student networks begin with hometown contacts, what is the likelihood that they will cross class, ethnic, race, or even religious lines when the United States is demographically divided along precisely these lines?” (Nathan, 2006, p. 59-60)

Students distinguish between friends. Social behavior has layers, as Geertz would describe as “thick description.” For instance, one student in the football focus group disdained how players in a particular sport wore their hats and thus could not be friends

with them. The little gesture one person did with their hat was an indication to this particular student that he could not be friends with this person.

Students distinguished between various “types” of friends. One student from the invisible group explained in an interview how he knew who was a good friend and who was a school friend, with a close friend when he can “begin to know their habitual traits and their habits and what they like and dislike, then I say I know them pretty well. An SSS student defined a friend as “someone who you can comfortably talk to about just anything someone who you can easily spend time with you don’t have to worry about whether this person is gonna be comfortable with spending time with you.” The student also said how sharing the same interest and having similar backgrounds made him comfortable because he didn’t feel like he had to consistently explain himself to his friends.

Further, the Football players explained how they mainly hung out with fellow teammates: many of them had similar classes, shared religious beliefs, were active together in volunteer activities, or had similar life style beliefs. For them, they were not just friends because they played a sport together, but they felt comfortable enough with one another “to sit in a room and not feel awkward” as one of the football players explained. For many of the students, being comfortable with and sharing a common interest was a huge part of who they considered a “friend”. Within the first few period of the school year we began to see how friends tend to form.

What did students notice when they first came to school?

Group formation happens in various ways. Students from Student Support Services and Football explained how they mainly stayed friends with the students they

initially met when they came to campus three weeks before the start of school. One Football student said coming to school three weeks earlier and meeting, working, and “hanging out” with the Football students was “beneficial” for forming friends. He elaborated with, “that’s one of the good things about when you come as a freshman a lot of people are kind of worried just like when you study how people form friends, for us we’re already close contact with those people so friends right there.” A Student Support Service student said coming to school three weeks earlier and meeting, working, and “hanging out” with the Football students was “beneficial” for forming friends. Another SSS student said “I did notice like the there weren’t that many minority or multi-cultural students”. However, many of the students talked about the friendly welcoming they received their first week but said that “the atmosphere was energies everyone is just meeting people no body is shy and now days that doesn’t happen that usually”.

What groups do students think are the most visible on campus?



Fig. 2: A group of track runners sitting shirtless in the cafeteria. They were indistinct when they were wearing shirts, but then became more visible.

Students named visible groups that had the most distinguishing physical attributes: football players, music students, SSS students, multi-cultural students, Live Action Role Players (LARPers), and hippies. These students are visibly distinct either because of what they decide to wear or because of how they look. Our participants mentioned the cafeteria when ever talking about visible groups. They mentioned that particular groups sat in particular areas of the cafeteria. But, upon our observations, it did not seem as if all groups sat in the same spot every day.

During a focus group with our invisible participants, one male said, “I know there are 45 [football players] but only five stick out in my mind.” A female responded saying, “there’s only one table, in my mind, of football players.” Students notice visible groups on campus, but more so, they notice the outgoing members of the visible groups. Participants in the SSS focus group talked about the “LARPer King” without mentioning the other members. Students notice visible and outgoing individuals and project the particular individual behaviors on the whole group.

What are student’s experiences being in a visible group?

“My perception of the football team is that they like drinking and not school,” said a participant from the invisible focus group.

“Outgoing, there’s so many outgoing guys. A lot of people don’t want to discover that because it’s very intimidating,” said a football player.

One football player said:

I’m not sure if this sounds a little cheesy but like one thing our coach says is that this is a team full of leaders. There’s a lot of leaders in this...it’s interesting

with our team sometimes...there's a lot of strong personalities but there's a lot of driven people too. People that have definite goals and so, when you're all working towards, not necessarily the same goal, but a goal, it's easy to hit that friendship.

These three quotes show what it can be like for individuals who are in visible social groups. The football students explained in great detail how students ostracized them: students will deliberately walk around them or avoid them in the cafeteria. Most of the players have few male friends outside the team and more female friends. Further, their experiences as a visible group and as a group were vastly different: as a group they volunteered in the community, and one player estimated as many as 60 out of the 85 players practice their faith together. Yet, they described their experiences as a visible group on campus as mainly negative. One of the football players explained, "I think were more dispersed on weekends, like this weekend I went to the art house that was interesting I didn't know anyone there. I talked to a couple of them, didn't seem like they cared that I was a footballer. I think people loosen up on weekends."

What are student experiences being in an "invisible group?"

Students felt as if at one time or another someone had put them in a particular category. All the students described having a broad range of friends and one student said, "I think I have different groups of friends and I have to pick which friends I'm hanging out with." Yet, despite having a range of friends, all students in the invisible focus group said they had only one to three people they consider their closest friends. One of the students from the "invisible" group said that often times she felt as if other students

stereotype her group or label them as an individual into categories. Thus, despite whether they belong to a group or only have a few friends, because of their visual presence or actions, students who aren't as visible as football players or SSS students are still put into categories.

Space on campus is important for group formation. Particular areas on campus seem as if they belong to particular social groups. All our participants felt as if they could not enter a particular area because they were not in that social group. For instance, the lower floor weight room is “for” male athletes, or certain groups sit in the same area in the “caf” everyday. As a result, people in less visible groups feel as if they cannot enter these spaces and thus do not interact as much with students who are in these particular spaces.

Does group membership reflect identity?

“[Our coach] says to take what he teaches us and build it into our every day lives, be a great father and husband. I think family goes two ways for us to be close and for us to be better guys.”

“Sometimes I’m reflected in the group but not always. The group is so large that we have all different values. We’re not all homogenous. We have something that brings us together.”

The football players they stated that their membership in the team reflected their identity. One of the player said, “Most people are proud to be part of [the group].” Since many of the players live together and have similar interests, they feel that they are part that group. Another player mentioned that he was involved in other things that are also

part of his identity. In the Student Support Service the responses varied among the students, some stated it reflected just part of their identity. One male said, “part of my identity of course I mean my identity you can figure out by looking at all the groups I am in and that will comply my whole because every group that I am in has an interest I am interested in.” While others stated that their relationship in Student Support Service reflected their identity because that’s where most of their friends are part of too. After the interviews and focus groups we learned that students did not tend to view their membership in one particular reflects their identity. Rather it was multiple social groups that formed this identity.

What about false perceptions?

The football players stated how there are many false perceptions about their team by the larger St. Olaf community. For example, one of the false perceptions that a football player said lot of people thought that everybody in there drinks---. However this was not the case said one of the players who stated “There’s actually number of people who don’t drink I actually didn’t drink till my 21 birthday.” They mentioned said “People think we are dumb, stupid.” A player said “In reality we actually have lots of really really smart people and lot who lot of people who volunteer in community, religious active people.” Since of the general student body often times are not able to see many of the positive things that the football players do there and are intimidated, they tend to have the false perceptions mainly. One of the Student Support Service students said that, “all minorities are here, not knowing what SSS means.” Many of them said that people think

that they are an exclusive group who don't want to associate with the rest of the student body.

Summary and conclusions

As ethnographers, we're subjective our research project. We actively wanted to research visible and invisible groups. What is visible to one of us may not be visible to the other. We see the social groups we want to see. We are individuals not completely constrained by the St. Olaf society, but rather, constrained by our perceptions of the St. Olaf society. All the participants had frustrations: they felt as if they were categorized wrongly, not all individuals felt like they "belonged" to a group and many felt as if there were subjected to false assumptions of the group they were lumped into. Yet, our participants used stereotypes to understand other groups.

One of the most surprising things that we learned was how lack of time and one's schedule can have on the social group that they become part of in college. For example, since the football players share the same schedule which takes a large portion of their time, they are mainly only able to interact with their teammates. The same thing applies to the rest of the student body like those who share the same dorm hall or major are more likely to come across one another. So having a common interest was another huge impact on the social group that people were part of. Due to sharing similar interest the relationships between the members were able to last longer.

One of the reasons that there seems to be a divide between different social groups is because of time. Since students are involved in various activities and have different interests, they mainly eat with friends who are in the same activities, thus when students

see divides in the cafeteria, it's because of who students are in proximity to. One of the reasons students think the Student Support Service group is an exclusive group is due to their "visible" physical feature. Since many of these students are racially and ethnically different from other students, students tend to see these "visible" students more than another social group of mainly white students sit at a certain table in the cafeteria. The general student body does not notice it since there are multiple groups of less visible students sitting in various areas in the cafeteria.

For further research, we wished we could include a female or a co-ed sports team since we had just the football team consisted of male students only. We think by having another sports group consisted of female would have the same perception as the football players by the larger student body on campus. Further, a follow-up for next year after Residence Life implements the new housing plan for first year could be very interesting. Since the next year incoming freshmen students will not have the opportunity to select their dorms like past students we wonder if this will shift the social group formation. For example, one of the football players mentioned that their coach would request the residential life office to put the football player in the same room since they will be able to foster better relationship with one another.

A potential use from this research that we came up was rethinking about how to do the week one program for the incoming students differently to allow students to interact with each other. Since for the majority of the students it is the first time they will be meeting with the rest of the students. Further, during Week One where upper class students perform skits about not judging various people, they should perform more skits about not judging visible social groups on campus like the Student Support Service and

football players. Week One should educate the incoming students about what Student Support Service does, and if there was an option for students other than the SSS students to take the bio class before school starts and thus students would be able to interact with other students.

The Football team has an ice-cream social every year and they volunteer in the community. However, for the most part, the greater St. Olaf population does not know this. If the football team could host a volunteer fair, this could help foster a better image of the team. Further, students would see the football students as more than athletes and perhaps see the football students as they see themselves: not just as visible entities but as volunteers and members of the community.

The focus of our paper changed as we talked with our professor over the period of the research. In the beginning both of us had not thought about the concern of “visible” and “invisible” social groups on campus. One of things that helped to look further into our research was from the BORSC report from the messages which were left on the posters in library hallway that asked the great St. Olaf community about “What diversity means to you?” By conducting this research we learned how the importance of working along side with the people who we were researching about helps us to gain better understanding and make the report more accurate. We also learned about the importance of making sure that the people who we were researching on were in no way or form negatively affected through the focus and individual interviews with the assist of the IRB report. Some of the things that went right for this research were the interviews with the different social groups.

We had various challenges in our research. In order to construct a fruitful interview, we had to highly edit our interview questions with our professor to make them clear. Our interviews could have deeply offended the participants if we did not have chosen our words wisely. Secondly, because of scheduling conflicts, some of our participants could not do an interview so we did not have an equal number of representations from each group to respond to the questions.

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