

Brita Johnson, Sarah Jacobson, Corbin Ruiz

SOAN 373 – Final Draft

May 23rd 2010

Chris Chiappari

### **St. Olaf “Not-So-Nice”: Interpersonal Conflict on Campus**

#### **Abstract:**

Conflict, that thing that makes stories exciting, inspires art, and elicits strong emotion, fits a certain niche on college campuses. Students face a host of academic, social, and personal challenges that they may have never faced before—let alone all at once. The choices one makes to deal with such conflicts can provide a snapshot of one's attitudes and values as well of those of the larger community. Through our investigation, we hope to gain insight into the sorts of conflicts St. Olaf students face, their strategies in navigating through them, whether or not there are common patterns of conflict mediation, and what this says about the campus as a whole.

#### **Setting/Community:**

In the Rice and Dakota counties of southeastern Minnesota, the Norwegian Lutheran settler population founded a school to perpetuate their traditions, training teachers and preachers, in 1874. This academy would eventually become St. Olaf College, an undergraduate liberal arts institution still grounded in its Norwegian heritage and affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (Atkins, 2007).

St. Olaf, and the small town of Northfield (founded in 1855), grew up together throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, producing wheat, corn, Malt-O-Meal cereal,

scholars, and banks to withstand the strike of Jesse James. Both St. Olaf and Northfield have a reputation of suiting the stereotype of “Minnesota Nice”, a regional phenomenon promoted by Garrison Keillor and others of friendliness, understatement, and avoiding confrontation. Such cultural characteristics are generally acknowledged both within and beyond the midwestern states (Atkins, 2007). In addition to “Minnesota Nice”, behavior patterns attributed to the region and to St. Olaf include a stoic, Scandinavian demeanor and passive-aggressive conflict management approach. To test the depths of these stereotypes, we set out to discern what St. Olaf students think of conflict: how they define it, how they react to it, and how they ultimately deal with it.

Considering the background and image of St. Olaf, and of Minnesota and the Midwest in general, it is important to note that St. Olaf students are not a strictly homogeneous sample. The student body represents all 50 states and 30 foreign countries, and the racial/ethnic demographics differ somewhat from those of the town of Northfield: as of fall 2009, the St. Olaf student body is 85% white, with the next highest population being 5% Asian and 4% Unknown; while in Northfield, whites account for 89.4% of the population, followed by 5.7% Hispanic and 2.4% Asian. 63% of the class of 2009 studied abroad (St. Olaf Fast Facts, 2009) With all of these influences from beyond Minnesota and Scandinavian Protestantism, perhaps the stereotypes of conflict management at St. Olaf are just stereotypes after all.

## **Methodology:**

The subjects for this research were all full-time students between the ages of 18 and 23 at St. Olaf College. Researchers selected subjects based on a convenience sample of our friends, classmates, and acquaintances. We interviewed 12 male and 10 female students, all of who were upperclassmen, and most of who were seniors. We chose to interview upperclassmen to be able to ask about their experiences of conflict at St. Olaf throughout the last several years. Subjects were told that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could choose to refrain from answering any question if they were uncomfortable answering, and that they could choose to end the interview at any time. Subjects were also assured that their identities would be kept anonymous.

We conducted informal, one-on-one interviews that were designed to foster conversation about interpersonal conflict at St. Olaf. We, the interviewers, were careful to refrain from defining conflict, so as to allow the subjects to speak about conflict as they understood it, and to contribute to our own working definition of “conflict”. We also made sure to encourage in-depth discussion of interpersonal conflict and related topics, beyond the scope of the interview questions if appropriate. We did this in order to attempt to get a sense of how students talk about and encounter conflict. The setting for these interviews ranged by interviewer and subject, however they were intentionally in a place where the subject felt comfortable, and where we could ensure the subject's anonymity and confidentiality.

The interview questions themselves were not altered after beginning the interviews, however we added a few questions after certain topics reappeared in the first interviews, such as "Have you ever had a conflict about money?" and "Do you talk to a third party about conflict situations you experience?" After examining prior research pertaining to students and conflict, we also decided to use the term "interpersonal conflict" in the interview to exclude the topic of intrapersonal conflict, which is interesting but of an entirely different focus beyond the scope of our investigation.

After taking shorthand notes and gathering a few quotes for each interview, we initially analyzed the results of the interviews by taking note of any responses or topics that were particularly striking to us as researchers and then comparing them to prior research. We also applied a number of sociological tools and theories to better understand the significance of our findings, including social capital, Foucault's discourse, and social constructionism, discussed later.

The strengths of this methodology include its open-ended interview questions and encouragement of subjects to speak freely about conflict. Without the restrictions of yes-or-no questions or set definitions of terms, we were able to learn about our interviewees' views and experiences of conflict that might not have emerged otherwise. Another strength of our methodology was that we allowed the subject to define interpersonal conflict, thus we were able to hear about and discuss a wide variety of types of conflicts. Additionally, because the sample was a convenience sample, most subjects were friends or acquaintances of the interviewers, and may have felt more comfortable discussing certain issues with someone they knew that might have made them uncomfortable with someone they didn't. By conducting most of the interviews on

campus, researchers were able to meet with subjects with a minimum of logistical considerations. Scheduling interviews was typically a simple process, and not as involved as it might have been trying to coordinate with non-students or individuals living off-campus.

A primary weakness of our research technique was the limited generalizability of our findings. As our sample was not randomly selected, we cannot extrapolate our findings to apply to the larger population of St. Olaf students. We have constructed a picture of what conflict means to certain students on campus, but cannot claim that it is representative of the student body as a whole. The fact that most subjects were friends of the interviewers could also be a weakness, as some people may have been more comfortable disclosing certain stories or opinions of conflict with the anonymity that is ensured when being interviewed by a stranger. This sampling technique also limited the researchers to conflicts within their own social circles, missing out on the views of those who do not share friends, interests, or experiences with the researchers themselves. The timeline of the project, limited by the school's semester schedule, also led to some difficulties in achieving both depth and breadth of research. Lastly, the limited research experience and unfamiliarity with each other's differing conversational, note taking, and writing styles gave the researchers a fairly sizeable learning curve to conquer.

### **Problem:**

Our research topic has developed and changed over the course of the research and data collection process. Our first topic, looking at how friendship groups on campus

change over time, appealed to us more as a casual inquiry rather than as a formal, in-depth investigation. Hoping to spice up our project, and to find something both grounded in previous research and with the potential to yield new and interesting results, we decided to pursue the topic of interpersonal conflict. We wanted to investigate how St. Olaf students encounter, experience, talk about, and deal with conflict.

In going away to school and adjusting to college life, students face a host of academic, social, and personal challenges that they may have never faced before, let alone all at once. The choices one makes to deal with such conflicts can provide a snapshot of one's attitudes and values as well of those of the larger community. Through our investigation, we hoped to gain insight into the sort of conflicts students at St. Olaf face, their strategies in navigating through them, whether or not there are common patterns of conflict mediation, and what this says about the campus as a whole.

We started our research without a set definition of conflict, in order to see how the students we interviewed define it themselves, and how their definition relates to how they deal with and approach conflict in their relationships. We reframed the problem of conflict in relationships as the research progressed by adding and altering our interview questions to obtain more detailed information and to make sure we covered all sorts of possible types of conflict.

In preparation for our interviews, and in order to establish a better understanding of our topic we called upon the body of academic research surrounding interpersonal

conflict, among college students as well as people of different ages in different communities.

One of the first things we did as a research team was narrow our term “conflict” to “interpersonal conflict”. An article by Barki & Hartwick (2004), *Conceptualizing the Construct of Interpersonal Conflict*, also provided us with the first academic definition of interpersonal conflict that described properties associated with conflict situations such as disagreement, and negative emotion. Without prompting, the term disagreement was named by our interviewees repeatedly as a component necessary for a conflict to exist.

After further research, we noted is the new conflicts college students face at a time when they encounter a host of new challenges without their previously established social or familial support networks. College students find increasing independence while in a high contact, high stress environment. Additionally, students may face conflicts outside of college, with regards to their identity, friends at home, and family. Many cases of divorce happen right after a child has gone off to college, an event that can not only cause intrapersonal conflict in students but interpersonal as well. In Jessica Bulduc’s study on the effects of parental divorce on college students, many students said their parents’ divorce resulted in difficulty in their own intimate relationships (2007).

Beyond the operationalization of the term “interpersonal conflict”, the existing literature also provided us with different possible ways to categorize conflict, and different ways in which individuals deal with conflict. Although interpersonal conflict

refers to conflicts in any personal relationship, many studies relate to more specific relationships, such as romantic relationships, relationships with co-workers, and roommate relationships. An interesting article by Adams & Laursen examined the differences in adolescent conflict with parents and friends, testing whether the “dynamics of conflicts with friends differ from those with parents and that the differences are not an artifact of the topics that provoke disagreement in each relationship” (2001, 97).

Vashchenko, Lambidoni, & Brody also addressed the difference in interpersonal conflict between parents and friends, finding that “external coping styles (e.g., blaming others, acting out)” were more common in conflicts with parents, while “conciliatory coping strategies” (e.g., taking active steps to solve the problem), were found more often in relationships with peers (2007, 245). Originally, we planned to interview students primarily about interpersonal conflicts in relationships with peers, however eventually we decided to include interpersonal conflict in relationships that involve a dimension of power difference, such as with someone in a position of authority. Although an authority figure on campus is not the same relationship as that with a parent, it does provide an interesting question to see how relationships with those in authority differ from those with friends.

A second difference in type of conflict is how many people the conflict affects. A study by Hongling, Cairns, & Cairns looked at social aggression, which they defined as “actions whereby interpersonal damage is achieved by non-confrontational and largely concealed methods that employ the social community” (2002, 342). This is relevant to our research insofar as interpersonal conflict affects groups, and how group dynamics

come into play in conflict. For example, a number of interviewees mentioned that if a relationship had ended because of a conflict, that conflict often affected other relationships as well. Additionally, one subject commented on how the extent of the effect of a conflict determines her approach to it. For example, if there is a conflict with a professor or coach that affects the whole class or team, she was more likely to address the conflict directly.

One study that explored the way conflict differs depending on relationship is that of Londahl, Tverskoy, & D'Zurilla (2005), who examined interpersonal conflict among college students in five different close relationships: best friend, second best friend, romantic partner, and mother or father. This study also provided us with different categories used for problem solving within interpersonal conflicts: positive and negative problem orientation, rational problem solving, impulsivity/carelessness, and avoidance. We saw examples of many of these styles of problem solving within our results, as interviewees described rationally weighing out different options and even using a third party to validate their rationalization. Similarly, avoidance was a common response to conflicts that might be more consistent with the "Minnesota Nice" phenomenon.

Examining past research also provided us with a greater insight into the different ways individuals cope with conflict and gave us clear categories of possible reactions to interpersonal conflict. Although the study *Conflict Resolution Between Friends During Middle Childhood* (Joshi, 2008) deals with children younger than college age, a number of the possible reactions to interpersonal conflict are applicable to our study and were mentioned by our subjects. Some of these categories were: discussion, submission, compromise, standoff, third-party intervention, aggression, assertion, withdrawal,

nonaction, time elapsed, and reasoning. Similarly, and with a more comparable age group, Robert Emerson (2008, 483) examines the college students' responses to roommate troubles, which included: managerial reactions (non-confrontational or indirect), complaint-making reactions (try to get the other party to change directly), and distancing and punitive reactions (open confrontation and hostility). Among the subjects who described a conflict with a roommate, we saw all three of these types of reactions. Finally, in investigating the relationship of alcohol, physical violence, and conflict, a study by Battista and Kocovski, *Exploring the Effect of Alcohol on Post-Event Processing Specific to a Social Event*, suggests a link between alcohol consumption and "social anxiety" characteristics, factors which may influence a student's reaction to a conflict situation, and the interactions of an individual and their unique social climate (2010).

The body of research surrounding our topic also informs our analysis techniques, as it gives us a greater understanding of the theories that influence our research. Theories such as social capital – the idea that incentives and relationships matter – describe social interactions as an exchange of resources: "Interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric" (Smith 2009, 1). For college students dealing with conflict, this theory comes into play as students choose which relationships to cultivate, which to step away from, and which to mend in the case of a conflict. Francis Fukuyama elaborates, "the norms that constitute social capital can range from a norm of reciprocity between two friends, all the way up to complex and elaborately articulated doctrines like Christianity or Confucianism... the norm of reciprocity exists *in potentia* in my dealings with all people,

but is actualized only in my dealings with *my friends*" (1999, 1). Social capital theories can influence the social dealings of college students, in addition to the regional and community traditions and attitudes that characterize conflict and mediation.

Another theoretical tool that we can use to analyze our results is Foucault's concept of discourse. According to sociological theory discourse is a formalized way of thinking that is socially constructed and can be manifested through language. This is relevant to our research, as the discourse surrounding conflict affects the way students approach, talk about, and deal with interpersonal conflict. If students are operating in a system where discussion of or directly approaching conflict is discouraged the way they talk about conflict will be affected. We were very interested in understanding how students talk about interpersonal conflict. Consistent with Foucault's ideas, we found that generally students don't seem to talk about interpersonal conflict, at least with the other party. Perhaps this is because there is a general sense that people should maintain the peace and avoid confrontation – consistent with Minnesota nice. Often, the discourse that takes place around interpersonal conflict happens with a third party.

One sociological theory of knowledge is that of social construction. Social construction considers how social phenomena develop in social contexts. It is any concept and/or practice that are the creation or object of a particular group. When an object is dubbed socially constructed, it is referring to focusing on its dependence on reliant variables of our social selves. The fundamental assumptions on which social constructivism is typically seen to be based on are reality, knowledge, and learning (Social Construction).

One of social constructionism's main foci is to reveal the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the creation of their apparent social reality. Social constructionism also involves looking at the ways in which social phenomena are created, institutionalized, and made into tradition by human beings. A socially constructed reality is one that is viewed as an ongoing, dynamic process that is replicated by people acting on their understanding and their knowledge of it.

This theory is useful to our research because it helps explain why students react differently to certain situations. If a student reacts drastically in a conflict and learns from their actions and the reactions of others, when that student is later put in a similar situation he/she will either react the same as before, because he/she has not learned anything, or he/she will approach the conflict in a different manner, trying to make things run smoothly. For example, one subject had a roommate conflict her freshman year, and after leaving a meeting with her roommate and JC, the subject stormed out of the dorm yelling "This is bull shit!" and punching a door. The following year, when she had another roommate conflict, the subject remained calm when her roommate was yelling at her calling her a "bitch" and saying that she "has no friends" and so on. Students usually learn from their first conflict whether it turned out bad or good and when they encounter another conflict they will apply their knowledge of how to handle certain situations and apply it.

### **Findings:**

In response to our attempt to get a sense of initial perceptions of conflict almost all interviewees immediately assumed interpersonal conflict. There were a couple

interviewees that also included intrapersonal conflict. However, there was one anomaly in an interviewee who said that the first thing he thought of in regards to conflict on campus related to “things like Sudan, genocide, war violence” and how students are unaware of such conflicts. When prompted to speak more on interpersonal conflict he continued in that trajectory, but it is interesting to note that we cannot assume students first impressions of conflict relate to interpersonal conflict.

### **The “Minnesota Nice” Phenomenon**

In keeping with the accepted parameters of Minnesota Nice, as outlined by Atkins (2007) and conventional wisdom on campus, the majority of students interviewed were initially hesitant to describe conflict, with most giving immediate answers to whether they have conflict in their lives of, “no, not really” or “hmm”. After a pause, most would then begin to describe experiences, either personal or secondhand. Most seemed to be passive aggressive, but if the conflict got to a certain point, they all said that they face the situation head on and take care of it right away before it got worse.

When asked if there are people on campus one deliberately ignores, one interviewee said that sometimes, “choosing not to say hi makes me feel like I’m the ignoror”,—fitting with the passive/aggressive model of Midwestern temperament described in Atkins (2007). This is also well captured in one subject’s response to the same question, she replied, “I can think of one, she really dislikes me, which is probably legit, but she fakes it, which is just ridiculous, it’s like ‘you hate me!'” Another student claims, “there are people I would pass by without stopping… I just have nothing to say

to them. We could have been better friends, but it just never happened, and we stayed at the same level”.

The study by Londahl, Tverskoy, and D’Zurilla mentions the type of relationship as it impacts and is impacted by conflict. Simply avoiding others is a characteristic of a more casual relationship, as opposed to a best friend, romantic partner or family member (2005). Interviewees echoed this, as they report being “sometimes just not willing to tell or confront them about the problem, especially if you don’t know them well”.

At the same time, some students feel that St. Olaf has “a highly concentrated population of go-getters” who are very forward with themselves and address conflicts immediately. This range of responses to conflict reflects the variety of experiences students bring to St. Olaf from their different geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds as cited in St. Olaf Fast Facts (2009).

Although almost all students mentioned the “Minnesota Nice” phenomenon, all were able to identify and talk about some conflict in their own lives. Many of these were significant and striking. It appears that perhaps students on St. Olaf campus are operating in a mindset that would fit better into the category of “Not-so-nice”.

## **Physical Violence in Conflicts**

A common theme in the descriptions of conflicts involving physical violence was alcohol. In a collegiate setting, where students may not have their previous support networks or outlets for stress, alcohol can be a catalyst for conflict—Battista cites

alcohol as a common factor in “social anxiety” and processing conflicts (2010, 1). Interviewees corroborated this, explaining that drunk people are less inhibited, more likely to lash out, and less likely to communicate effectively. While Vashchenko, Lambidoni, & Brody find that “external coping styles” or physical responses to conflict occur in familial relationships, the students we interviewed cite using both external and conciliatory coping strategies in conflicts with friends (2007, 245).

Almost all conflicts that escalated to the point of violence mentioned alcohol as the main reason, as one interviewee said, “People get pissed when they’re drunk and they can’t control themselves”. She went on to say “Without alcohol guys are a little too chicken to start with each other”. Another common conception among interviewees was that things get blown out of proportion when alcohol is involved and can lead to violence. The only description of violence that did not include alcohol was an incident where the violence was accidental. The student’s roommate tried to lock her out of their room when they got in an argument, and the interviewee went to put her foot on the door to keep from getting locked out and she ended up kicking the door right in her roommate’s face. Although she apologized right away and said it was an accident the roommate threw her cell phone at the interviewee.

One interviewee recounted an incident that occurred off campus, when an inebriated male patron started harassing a female bartender. The interviewee froze, watching as his friend helped restrain the drunk man and throw him out of the bar, and wishing he had been more assertive himself. This illustrates a common trend running throughout many interviews of people describing themselves as bystanders or allies in

physical altercations, but never initiators. Only one interviewee described using violence as a way to address a conflict, but then immediately reproached himself saying, “I almost broke someone’s jaw one night, put a hole in the closet, someone stopped me. It was a stupid way of addressing that conflict, but definitely direct!”.

The concept of Minnesota Nice also plays a role in addressing physical conflicts. In another interview, a student explained that her ex-boyfriend would grab her wrist to get her attention. While not violent, this physically aggressive move made her uncomfortable and angry, but she did not directly address it with her boyfriend until they eventually broke up.

### **Changes in Friendships Over Time**

Students interviewed accounted for changes in friendships over time by: growing closer or farther apart, having differing interests and values, and social circles shifting gradually through networks of mutual friends. Similar to the findings of Joshi (2008), interviewees described a variety of conflict-addressing strategies they used when dealing with friends, although these methods were not always effective in preserving a relationship. When asked how many of their friends from freshman year were still close friends, many interviewees initially responded all of them, and then on second thoughts would describe how many of their friends had actually drifted apart over the last 4 years (all interviewees but one are seniors). One interviewee described how “conflict in life choices/values and with differing opinions turn into conflicts that aren’t resolved” which leads to changes and ultimately losses of friendships over the 4 years. However she

made sure to point out that although “people go their different ways, I don’t know if it’s a bad thing, some of it’s fairly healthy”.

One female interviewee, a senior, observed that “as friends get to know each other better over time, they can learn from each other and can acknowledge issues in a better way”. Another, also a senior, described a conflict with a roommate junior year: “...he spilled fucking Mountain Dew on my iBook, and I stayed mad for two hours... he was so frightened, because it was kind of the first time he had seen me angry, so he bought me a pizza bagel and left it at the door as a peace offering”. As the previous female student noted, such conflicts, which might sideline new friends in the course of their relationship, can be amusing anecdotes for those who have known each other longer and can work through conflicts effectively. Another interviewee explained that his group of friends was “characterized by a lack of conflict”—the people he hangs out with most are the people with whom he does not regularly argue or disagree.

## **Gender Differences**

While there was a wide range of responses from both male and female students, in general, male interviewees would use general labels or stereotypes for groups of people involved in conflicts (“music majors”, “football players”, “hippies”, “sluts”) while females would cite specific individuals or personal acquaintances (“my freshman year roommate”, “my ex boyfriend”, “this guy in one of my classes”). These differences in discourse are consistent with Foucault’s concept of discourse as a social construction: different approaches to talking about conflict, according to gender, reflect societal

values and standards. Students were also roughly divided along gender lines with regards to seeking third party input or mediation in conflicts, which is discussed later.

## **Roommate Conflicts**

Roommate relationships were a common example of conflict throughout the interviews. These instances often involved first-year roommate conflicts, and usually resulted in one roommate moving into a different room or building. Our findings were consistent with those of Emerson (2008), who described the various channels through which students address roommate conflicts, including indirect, direct, and hostile interactions.

There were a number of instances of direct roommate conflict: one student remembers the internal struggle surrounding her decision to move to a different dorm freshman year—she says her roommate was “a great friend, but we just didn’t work as roommates... she understood the situation, and kind of faced it at the time... we’re still friends today”. Another first-year roommate conflict started with an African American student calling a Caucasian student a "cracker" and the Caucasian student replied with calling the African American student a "nigger". In another interview, a student had to talk to her AC because her facebook status said, "fuck you roommate" with a picture of herself giving the middle finger. She ended up getting kicked out of that dorm for harassment.

Other students said that their conflicts with roommates were less dramatic and less direct: “it was more fuming than anything, it never seemed like a big enough deal to

bring it up... let me try to remember what it was... I sort of sensed that she was more touchy about it than I was, and the conflict would just escalate if it was addressed". In another case, an interviewee had his brother visit one weekend, with the roommate's knowledge and approval, while the roommate had his girlfriend over the same weekend, without any prior conversation with the interviewee. Neither roommate brought up their houseguest handling procedures again. Another person interviewed said that he isn't friends with his roommate because his roommate was against drinking and R-rated movies, which represents a difference in values.

Although there seemed to be very few examples of hostile reactions to roommate conflict, one is of the example mentioned in the physical violence section describing the accidental kicking of a door into a roommate's face.

### **Third Party Involvement**

There were inconsistent answers regarding how often subjects talked to a third party about interpersonal conflict. Some said if the conflict was more significant they were more likely to talk to a third party, while others said if the conflict was significant they were more likely to keep it to themselves. Subjects also related their approach to the importance of the relationship within which there was conflict. Some responded that if the relationship was more important they were more likely to confront the person, others said if the topic was less significant they were more likely to confront the person.

A study by Hongling, Cairns, & Cairns (2002) addresses the size and scope of a conflict in relation to its resolution strategies, finding that third party mediation is more common for conflicts involving many individuals. This is well represented in the example of one interviewee who said she was more likely to address a conflict directly if it affected more people than just her, for example a whole class or sports team.

Of those who did seek third party input or mediation in conflicts, the most commonly sought resources included Residence Life staff, the Counseling Center, and other friends. Students reported situations in which both students and staff initiated involvement with Residence Life. In one interview, the student said that she did not want Residence Life involved because she felt it just “added fuel to the fire”, and another time she was forced into a meeting with her JC and her roommate when she was not ready to meet and talk about the situation, so that didn’t really help her much. While cases of both males and females seeking third party counseling were reported, female students were generally more likely to seek outside input.

### **Conflicts With Authority**

Conflicts with authority also arise for students, including disagreements with professors and bosses, and encounters with Public Safety and administration.

Regarding conflict with professors, students generally felt that the power and authority involved in the relationship with their professor affected the conflict, students sometimes felt as if their opinions weren’t heard or given weight, or that even if they are, professors “always get the final say”. Similarly one interviewee also mentioned that

oftentimes “any action taken by a student is entirely fruitless”. One student explained that during her junior year, she took several weeks off from class when her father died. Some professors were more willing to be flexible, while others “couldn’t get past the importance of finishing work”, which was upsetting. Regarding conflict with classmates, interviewees commented on the significance of the environment created by the professor regarding conflict or in this case differing opinions, “Depends on the way the class is set up – either different opinions are welcome or there’s one opinion of the class and you stay in that line”.

Another student remembered approaching a professor near the end of the semester to discuss expectations that seemed “out of the norm”—she explained it was a small class, and she is the type of person to be assertive in conflicts affecting more people than just herself. When the conflict was not resolved by meeting with the professor, she appealed to the head of the department – to no avail (according to the interviewee). Two interviewees said their arguments had to do with changing a grade, and going against a student’s petition for French distinction. Another interviewee said he hasn’t disagreed with a professor, but he has with his coach about running practice so late during finals. The coach threatened him saying that he had to “clean up his attitude or clean out his locker”. It appears power and authority play a large role in addressing conflict between professors and students.

Academic departments sometimes had an effect on students’ approach to conflicts with professors, as a number of interviewees who were natural science majors would comment how the sciences were simply not designed to have conflict with

professors or other students: "in science, someone's right and wrong. It's not really possible to disagree with a prof, either you understand it or you don't".

When discussing conflict with public safety officers, there seemed to be a sense that although power and authority affect this relationship, public safety is "not really regarded by students as a legitimate form of authority". One student said she briefly considered running from public safety, but said she "wouldn't consider running from a police officer 'cause then I could actually get in real trouble". One subject commented how he is very conscious of responding directly to the attitude the public safety officers project or "on how they approach their position of power, if they're lording it over you, I'm not gonna react well".

One instance of a more positive effect after discussing a conflict with a form of authority involved a student's boss. A student Resident Assistant described a conflict with his boss over being scheduled to come back to campus early over a break to work. He spoke to his boss "respectfully, not like in a mad way" before the break, and had his work schedule changed.

### **Summary and Conclusions:**

Through our investigation, we gained insight into how St. Olaf students encounter, experience, talk about, and deal with interpersonal conflict. Although much of our findings seemed to support the presence of a "Minnesota Nice" mentality on campus, conflict exists and is felt by all students on campus – whether they deal with it directly or not – perhaps a more fitting name for the phenomena on St. Olaf campus

would be “Minnesota Nice-to-your-face”. We were also able to get an in-depth view of how students at St. Olaf encounter conflict in different relationships such as with roommates, different types of authority, and friendships. Different relationships seemed to foster or discourage conflict, but the likelihood of conflict seemed to depend more differing values or opinions than the relationships themselves. Finally, we also learned about strategies in navigating through conflicts. Almost all students said they would rather talk to someone else about a conflict than to the person involved, which also seems to support the prevalence of “Minnesota Nice-to-your-face” on campus.

It was surprising to see how common roommate relationships were as an example of conflict throughout the interviews. This seemed to be the most common form of interpersonal conflict on campus. Perhaps this is because students are in close contact with their roommates, and shared living spaces create great potential for conflict. As stated by one interviewee, “Conflict comes from being really close and not having space”. Some of the roommate conflicts that did happen were during freshman year, which might be expected as students are placed with unknown roommates and many first-years are living with someone else in a close, confined space for the first time. Other roommate relationships that had conflict were between two friends who wanted to live together, but were not necessarily compatible. It may seem as a good idea to live with a friend, because if there is a conflict it will be easy to address and work out, but that is not always the case. Apparently some friends are just not meant to live together and it would be better for their friendship to not live together.

One might think that majority of people who are in a conflict talk to a third party, because “Minnesota Nice” restricts directly addressing conflicts, however a number of interviewees seemed to have thought deliberately about whether or not to talk to the person involved in the conflict and do so on a case-by-case basis that suggests students are not subject to “Minnesota Nice” so much as influenced by it somewhat. Additionally many interviewees seemed to have decided to talk to a third party purely as a way to be assured that they are being rational in their feelings or that they are justified in their feelings and approach.

This research could be useful for the people involved at St. Olaf’s Residence Life office, because it provides us with a better understanding of how conflicts between roommates are addressed. It also provides us with feedback about how situations were handled when Pamela McDowell or Residence Life were involved. For example, one of our interviewees was in a pretty serious conflict with a roommate who was at times very verbally abusive and after meeting with Pamela about the issue, nothing was ever done to separate the two roommates and the interviewee ended up moving home three weeks early. This research could also be valuable to the counseling center to further understand/ gain better knowledge of how students deal with conflict on the St. Olaf campus and what kinds of conflict they are facing.

This research could also be good for St. Olaf Public Safety officers to use and look into because a handful of our conflicts involving Public Safety have to deal with the attitude/tone that comes from some of the officers. However it also highlighted the lack of authority public safety officers seem to have on campus – related largely to a lack of

respect. Perhaps through a better understanding on both the students and administration side a better way to approach potential disciplinary situations through public safety can be reached. The administration of St. Olaf College could find this research useful because it provides the school with a realistic view of the conflict students face and could be used to help foster an environment that encourages addressing conflicts in a positive and healthy way. The administration could also incorporate ways to address conflict in a positive way into student orientations or use it as a topic for an event put on by the wellness center.

Further research of interpersonal conflict on “the hill” could involve a content analysis of materials available to students regarding conflict. For example, the handout students receive “Getting along with your roommate” in dorm rooms at the beginning for the year. Additionally, it would be interesting to find out more about the perceptions of conflict on campus from people other than students. For example, interviews with the counseling center, Pamela McDowell, or some of the Deans might provide further insight into the types of conflict that occur on campus and how they are dealt with by administration.

Conflict comes in many different forms, from disagreements with peers and authority to conflict with schedules, to violence. Conflict definitely takes a certain role on college campuses, and has a unique part of students’ lives on St. Olaf campus. The choices students make to deal with conflicts can give a small perception of that student’s attitudes and values as well of those of the larger community. It appears that on St. Olaf Campus students do encounter conflict and that a number of them give

deliberate thought to how they approach and deal with it in their lives. It also appears students' experiences with conflict show us a great deal about the impact of the common social norm of "Minnesota Nice" on campus. Perhaps, as stated in the title, it would be more fitting to describe the way students deal with interpersonal conflict as a form of Minnesota "Not-So-Nice".

## **References:**

1. Adams, R., & Laursen, B. (2001). The Organization and Dynamics of Adolescent Conflict with Parents and Friends. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 63(1), 97-110. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.
2. Atkins, Annette (2007). Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out. Minnesota Historical Society Press, St. Paul.
3. Barki, H., & Hartwick, J. (2004). Conceptualizing the Construct of Interpersonal Conflict. *International Journal of Conflict Management* (2004-2005), 15(3), 216-244. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.
4. Battista, S., & Kocovski, N. (2010). Exploring the Effect of Alcohol on Post-Event Processing Specific to a Social Event. *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy*, 39(1), 1-10.
5. Emerson, Robert M. "Responding to Roommate Troubles: Reconsidering Informal Dyadic Control". *Law & Society Review*, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 483-512, Sept. 2008
6. Fukuyama, Francis (1999). Social Capital and Civil Society. Presented at the IMF Conference on Second Generation Reforms, October 1, 1999.
7. Hongling, X., Cairns, R., & Cairns, B. (2002). The development of social aggression and physical aggression: A narrative analysis of interpersonal conflicts. *Aggressive Behavior*, 28(5), 341-355. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.
8. Kim, Beaumie. "Social Constructivism - Emerging Perspectives on Learning, Teaching and Technology". *Projects Server Introduction*. 2001. Web. 22 May 2010. <[http://projects.coe.uga.edu/epltt/index.php?title=Social\\_Constructivism](http://projects.coe.uga.edu/epltt/index.php?title=Social_Constructivism)>
9. Joshi, A. (2008). Conflict Resolution Between Friends During Middle Childhood. *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 169(2), 133-148. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.
10. Londahl, E., Tverskoy, A., & D'Zurilla, T. (2005). The Relations of Internalizing Symptoms to Conflict and Interpersonal Problem Solving in Close Relationships. *Cognitive Therapy & Research*, 29(4), 445-462.
11. Simon, V., Kobielski, S., & Martin, S. (2008). Conflict Beliefs, Goals, and Behavior in Romantic Relationships During Late Adolescence. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 37(3), 324-335. doi:10.1007/s10964-007-9264-5.

12. Smith, M. K. (2000-2009). 'Social capital', *the encyclopedia of informal education*, [[www.infed.org/biblio/social\\_capital.htm](http://www.infed.org/biblio/social_capital.htm)].
13. St. Olaf College Fast Facts, (2009) St. Olaf Profile, [<http://www.stolaf.edu/about/StOlafProfile.pdf#zoom=100>].
14. Vashchenko, M., Lambidoni, E., & Brody, L. (2007). Late Adolescents' Coping Styles in Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Conflicts using the Narrative Disclosure Task. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 35(4), 245-255.
15. Weitzman, P. (2001). Brief Report: Young Adult Women Resolving Interpersonal Conflicts. *Journal of Adult Development*, 8(1), 61. Retrieved from Academic Search Premier database.