

“I don’t know why you say goodbye...”

Perceived Relationship Rules on St Olaf Campus

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Abstract

This paper discusses perceived social rules on St Olaf campus. We were particularly interested in researching perceived social rules pertaining to relationships on campus. We interviewed a convenience sample of students on campus through personal interviews and larger focus groups. There was a wide representation of place of origin for the interviewees - we talked to in-state students, out-of-state domestic students, and international students.

We found that there is a wide range in definitions of "acquaintances", "friends", and "Minnesota Nice"; the differences in opinion were not necessarily based on where the people were from. It is common for people to become friends through convenience (i.e. classes together, studying abroad, living near each other). There is a strong sense of a St Olaf community that is distinct from, but still a part of, the Northfield community.

Setting

St. Olaf College is a liberal arts college with approximately three thousand students. It is located in Northfield, Minnesota, just forty minutes south of Minneapolis. The college was founded in 1874 by Norwegian immigrants and is currently associated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Although the college has students from nearly every state across America and over thirty countries, a majority of students are from the Midwest and Minnesota. Like many other liberal arts colleges, classes are taught in a wide variety of disciplines. St. Olaf has an international reputation for its music program and is a leading college

in environmental science and sustainability. St. Olaf seeks to be as environmentally friendly and social-justice oriented as possible; this focus has led to it being a prominent and important player in the Northfield community. The college has been named as one of only six higher education institutions in Loren Pope's book "Colleges That Save Lives" and is the only Minnesota college mentioned in the book out of a total of forty colleges (St. Olaf Website).

Northfield is home to two small liberal arts colleges: St. Olaf and Carleton. This study has only done research about St. Olaf students. St Olaf students and Carleton students are acknowledged to be different types of people: St Olaf students are stereotyped as "pretty, fun students", and Carleton students are "the smart students". Northfield is a town of about 17,000 which revolves, in some ways, around the prominence of both St. Olaf and Carleton. St. Olaf is located on a hill on the western side of town. The St. Olaf campus setting is a small, rural, college-community-based residential college, and is often seen as a distinct and separate community from to the town of Northfield. In comparison to other colleges like Carleton, St. Olaf is not an urban campus immersed into a larger city block or neighborhood of its host city. Northfield residents are quite receptive of and friendly to St. Olaf and Carleton students and try to help them out in the every possible way.

The town of Northfield has a population of just over 17,000 people, including the students from both schools during the year. Being located on the Cannon River, as well as having the intersection of Highways 3 and 9 in town and National Interstate 35 nearby, makes Northfield a primary business center for Rice County. Minneapolis and St. Paul (the Twin Cities) are 40 miles north of the town and St. Olaf college, and is the closest large metropolitan center. St. Olaf's location in Northfield and in Minnesota is very important to our study due to the unique culture of Minnesota the Twin Cities; these specific cultures are often viewed as more accepting and

open minded than many other states in the Midwest and in the country as a whole, and the Twin Cities themselves are seen as more open-minded than the rest of Minnesota.

Methodology

We collected our information primarily through peer interviews and small focus groups. Participants were selected by each interviewer through convenience; a large number of interviewees were roommates and/or friends of the interviewer. Often, another person would overhear the interview or focus group and would ask if they could join in on the discussion. Again, these people were usually an acquaintance or friend of someone in the aforementioned group, either the interviewer or interviewee. When the interviewer had chosen who he/she wanted to interview, he/she would ask if they could discuss some topics and questions for their Ethnography class and would try to set up a time. Potential interviewees were assured that all information given would be anonymous and if they didn't feel comfortable answering a question they didn't have to.

Most interviews were conversation based and didn't follow a very strict guideline. The interviewer would start by asking a question or two and then would let the interviewee respond however they wanted to the question(s). For clarification, often the interviewer would ask small questions in between responses which would sometimes take the interview in another direction.

A very strong part of the interview process was the focus group. The focus group was particularly helpful because it allowed multiple people able to respond to one another and generate a more thorough response to questions asked. Interviewees would often realize things that they hadn't already noticed about social interactions, and everyone was able to build off each other through discussion. Oftentimes, the responses in focus groups were more three-

dimensional and covered a much broader spectrum than answers from one-on-one interviews did.

The regular interviews also had a strong point in regards to more personal stories.

Interviewees seemed more comfortable discussing longer and more detailed stories when with just the interviewer than they were in a group situation. It was easier in a one-on-one interview to get more finite and detailed responses to our questions.

Weaknesses in the interviewing process came mostly from the way the group selected the interviewees. There was not a broad enough spectrum of people selected to be interviewed for our sample to be truly representative of the population, which may create a sort of bias in the results. The people that we're friends with may be very similar because all of the interviewers are sociology/anthropology majors, and may therefore be attracted to the same types of people.

The many different locations of interviews, the mood of the interviewee (having an effect on how willing they are to give detailed responses/ how motivated they are to help), and differentiation on how questions were worded all had an effect on the results of the interviews/focus groups. Although these aspects of the interview process are often impossible to control, the group could work harder to make the setting of the interviews more constant.

All interviewees' names have been changed to pseudonyms in this paper in agreement with interviewers and interviewees.

Problem

We have noticed that there seem to be interesting and often unspoken rules on St Olaf campus. Because the three of us have all come to Minnesota from other places (Boulder, CO; Chicago, Illinois; Hong Kong), we are particularly interested in what the social rules of campus seem to be. We realized as we began conducting interviews and talking amongst ourselves that

we are truly interested in social rules as they pertain to relationships. Relationship refers to any type of connection with anyone, whether it be someone a person meets once but doesn't acknowledge, or someone a person has been best friends with for years. We are interested in how people define "acquaintance" and "friend", how people meet acquaintances and friends, how they define "Minnesota Nice", and how Minnesota Nice plays into campus interactions, if it does at all.

It has been difficult figuring out how to question people about "social rules" on campus. They are often consciously unaware of the rules that they subconsciously play into. In order to draw their opinions about social rules out, it is necessary to begin by discussing their "normal" and "abnormal" interactions and either lead them into drawing inferences about what the rules would be that guide those actions, or draw inferences on our own based on the interview and our own knowledge of the people that we interviewed. It has also been difficult to not bring our own prejudices into the interview/inferences.

It is also impossible to know what the true "social rules" are, because everyone acts and interacts differently. However, we were able to find some common threads that run through many social interactions.

The distinct open minded and tolerant culture that we have observed on campus goes hand in hand with the friendly attitude and kindness that has now been commonly referred to as Minnesota Nice. Philip Koski (2009) talks about the Minnesota Nice as "a shorthand term that describes the tendency of people in Minnesota to be polite towards others" (Koski 2009). A theory of why the Minnesota Nice exists points to a typical Minnesota winter which "encourages people to bind together in a community in order to survive the inclement weather" (Koski 2009). Whether or not this is the case there is an overwhelming perception of kindness and Good

Samaritan-like characteristics amongst Minnesota residents. This study must take into account Minnesota Nice as St. Olaf is in Minnesota and the state's cultures.

Since St. Olaf is a residential college and a distinct community within the greater Northfield community, it is important to take into account the environment that the college is suited in. Its location in Minnesota and the local culture plays a role in student life along with the cultures that the students bring to campus. The phenomenon Minnesota Nice is a representation of the culture of Minnesota and plays a significant role in social rules at St. Olaf. Due to the college being a residential college community, interaction amongst students is a 24/7 activity with a distinct majority of students living on campus or in college residence facilities. The distinct culture that a residential college brings and promotes social interaction must also be taken into account when looking at the social environment of St. Olaf. We believe that the culture and the rules therein have been affected by the setting of the college. The small town atmosphere, the other college presence, and the Minnesota culture have all played a part in influencing the rules of St. Olaf College.

One theory that was helpful to us in our analysis of social rules was symbolic interactionism. This theory sees people as active participants in shaping their world, not passive reactors. This is certainly a piece of how we thought about the social rules that we were learning from our interviewees, and it is interesting to note when people actually create their reality and when they just accept it for what it seems to be.

Findings

Every interaction that happens at St Olaf is based on how the people in the interaction view each other; are they friends, acquaintances, or what? The way that people treat someone is based on how they define that person. This belief ties back to symbolic interactionism: people define

others in their lives as "friends" or "acquaintances", and then treat them accordingly. They create their own reality of people that they can interact with, and create the rules of how to interact with them.

The definitions of what makes someone a friend and what makes someone an acquaintance were widely varied, and very interesting. One interviewee, Jasmine, has a scale of acquaintance: you can recognize someone, but not show recognition; smile/show nonverbal recognition; say hi as a sign of recognition; realize you have something in common; chat, usually about whatever you have in common; converse using names, almost always acknowledge. You can see that all levels of acquaintance have to do with acknowledgment, either how it is done, if it is done at all, and how often it is done. We believe that this is because most interactions that you have on any given day are while you're on the move; you're walking to class, going to your table in the cafeteria, walking to find a spot to study. You do not have the time or the desire to stop and chat, and so the act of acknowledging someone is a big deal in terms of social relationships on campus.

Most everyone that we interviewed defined acquaintance based on acknowledgment, and didn't feel negatively about the limited nature of acquaintances. Most acknowledge the desire to be polite (which is connected to Minnesota Nice and will be discussed below) and accepted that the extent of your conversation tends to vary based on the level of your relationship. However, one interviewee, Rex, has a very negative view of acquaintances. He feels that acquaintances are completely fake, and that you are completely fake with your acquaintances; they are people that you interact with every day, but never take the time to actually get to know. You ask "How are you?" but don't actually care or listen to what the answer is. He understands that everyone is very busy, but he dislikes the self-involved attitude of most people on campus. Because of this

attitude, he has a very high opinion of a "friend." A friend is someone who you "don't keep score with", you simply do nice things for each other because you want to, because you're friends. You don't feel like you owe each other anything, and are willing to go out of your way to do something to help the other one. Because everyone is so busy, a true friend is someone who is willing to sacrifice time or resources to hang out; you have real conversations, and come to love and respect each other for who you really are, not who your campus personality is. Other definitions of friend were in the same vein as Rex's definition, but varied slightly. Most identified the ability and desire to hang out outside of class time as a qualification for a friend. You can eat meals with a friend, hang out with them on the weekends, call if you're bored, talk to them about troubles and stressors in your life. Clarice defines a friend as someone with whom you can have a "certain level of conversation", a conversation that goes beyond small talk; when you see a friend, you go out of your way to stop and talk. The importance of conversation rather than simple small talk was also cited by Jasmine as being important in a friendship. Oliver agrees that you always interact with your friends because you have "shared deep personal things with them, stuff that you wouldn't normally tell anyone else". When interacting with people on campus it can be agreed across the board that you always acknowledge your friends because of a close personal bond, and do not always acknowledge acquaintances because of a lack of such a bond. Because small talk is so common, it is noteworthy when you get to a point beyond small talk in a relationship, which is why so many people cited it as being a defining aspect of friendship.

Another important aspect of friendship/acquaintanceship is how often you see the person. Sally claims that there is no real number of interactions needed before you can start calling them a friend, but she also says that "if you've talked with them say maybe more than five times and

they still seem to be only superficial then perhaps they aren't exactly your friend yet, despite the number of encounters". As Sally explains, there is not a magic number of times that have to interact with someone before you are friends: it's a process which includes meaningful conversations and personal connections.

It is also important to note, when examining friends and acquaintances, how most people meet their friends. Jasmine and Clarice are both good friends with people from their freshman dorms, and have found that the close proximity of dorm living helps bring people together, especially freshman year when people are trying to make new friends in a new environment. Rex has become best friends with someone because of a very difficult common class from freshman year. Selena has made many close friends through study abroad experiences. These were common themes running through the interviews: most people meet their friends through shared experiences, whether the experience be a shared bathroom in a dorm, studying for a class together, or traveling around together.

From a friend/acquaintance discussion, it is a natural next step to examine Minnesota Nice, especially because we are studying a college that is made up of mostly students from Minnesota. What is "Minnesota Nice"? Is it present on campus? How do people define it? Does it affect daily interactions? A probably historical development of Minnesota Nice begins with a community of people living together and relying on each other in some ways, but not living close to each other. It is likely that people saw their neighbors far less often than contemporary neighbors see each other. When they did, it was most likely very polite and positive conversation out of necessity; when there are so few people around, you want to be on relatively good terms with the ones who are close so they can help you if something goes wrong. The niceness was out of necessity rather than an actual choice; this is what Minnesota Nice has

grown out of. People who are Minnesota Nice are most often polite, unwilling to have conflicts with others, and very good at making meaningless conversation. One can see this attitude present on St Olaf campus. Many students know their peers, but do not know them well enough to hold meaningful conversation, and usually do not care to get to know them better. It is often said here that you can know of everyone here, yet it's impossible to truly know them and understand them.

People acknowledged Minnesota Nice as being present on campus during the interviews, but most people had rather varied opinions of what it means. Selena, an out of state student, believes that Minnesota Nice is simply passive aggressive behavior. She has had a number of negative interactions with people from Minnesota, and thinks that they do not know how to deal with conflicts of any kind, even something as simple as asking someone to move out of the way. She feels like she does not fit in with the culture here, mostly because she is outspoken and is not afraid of conflict: she talks to people when something is wrong, and is offended when people do not give her "the same courtesy". Another student, Jasmine, has lived in Minnesota for most of her life, but was born in Canada, where her parents are from. Her family, like Selena, has a rather negative view of Minnesota Nice. They don't think that it is defined by passive aggressive behavior, but do see negatives associated with it. She defined Minnesota Nice as politeness, but not niceness: "It's a cold, sterile politeness. it's not welcoming or warm." She thinks that because most people from Minnesota have been here for their whole lives and their families have lived here for generations, they do not feel the need to really branch out and make new friends. Her parents encountered this when they moved to Minnesota. Minnesota Nice is the manifestation of this lack of need for new friends, in her opinion.

Rex, an out of state student from Montana, also has a very negative view of Minnesota Nice. He believes that it gets at the very barebones of what an acquaintance is which, as stated above, is a very low level of closeness. He believes that it is actually a very deceitful way to act because it gives them impression of being very close with no truth in it. When something is hard in your life, he believes that a person who is Minnesota Nice will offer condolences, but will give you no actual help. Others have a similarly skeptical and negative view of Minnesota Nice. Sally, a native Minnesotan, wonders what Minnesota Nice actually means. In an attempt to figure it out, she describes it in terms of layers: "There seems to be a two-sided image of the Minnesota Nice, private and public. I often wonder if people are being meaningfully nice or if the politeness is just on the surface? I often find that in most cases it is superficial". This two-sided cultural form of politeness has been noticed by a number of other students, especially Jane. "I think the Minnesota Nice was really freaky when I first moved to Minnesota. As a native outsider it was really difficult to read if people really meant it or not. However after a while you tend to get molded into the culture and it becomes first nature to you, but I would say that the first I came across it I wondered if people really meant it or not". Jane believes that it is hard to tell when people are being superficial, but that you start acting in the same way the more time you spend with them. She seems to believe that people actually mean to be nice, although at first it may appear to be superficial.

Clarice, a junior born in Texas who has lived in Minnesota since she was 8, has an interesting take on Minnesota Nice. She wonders if there even is such a thing as Minnesota Nice; she believes that it is really just common decency, and not unique to Minnesota. However, she does acknowledge that, even if it is not a unique attitude, there is "Minnesota Nice", even if it's just a draw for tourists. It's the belief that you can stop and ask anyone for directions, that shop-

owners will be very polite and friendly, and that you can start conversations with anyone. When asked if there is a negative definition of Minnesota Nice, she identifies a fear of conflict. She explains that people aren't "afraid to interact with each other, but they are afraid to interact in a negative way." However, it is important to note that this is not the most important aspect of Minnesota Nice, in her opinion; it is common decency and politeness, even if just on a superficial level.

Jasper believes, unlike any of the previous students, that Minnesota Nice simply means that people are more outgoing than in other places. You can walk up to anyone anywhere and ask for directions or help with anything. He specifically says that people are more willing to help here than on the east coast (he's from Colorado), and are more courteous than people elsewhere, which is shown by people holding doors for you, and cars always letting pedestrians have the right of way.

Oliver, an international student has a very positive opinion of Minnesota Nice. It is "a projected image of how people care about others, they don't want to be ignorant. It is all about behaving nicely in public and caring for the greater society no matter what your relationship is with them." Oliver believes that Minnesota Nice plays into a larger belief in the importance of the community, and maintaining the positive attitude therein; keeping St Olaf positive and happy is more important than an individual person's sense of comfort.

Paul also has a positive viewpoint of Minnesota Nice. He grew up just across the border of Minnesota, in Wisconsin. He recently took a trip to New York where he was quite shocked by the behavior and attitudes of New Yorkers: "In New York, I felt like there were so many people; they were everywhere yet there is such a feeling of being alone. No one gives a fuck who you are unless they want something from you; they only ask if you look like you fit in. You need to

walk like you have a purpose and beat the cross walks. Look like you're pissed off, and you fit in. The most important thing in New York is you have to have an ego. You can't look clueless; you need an ego and need to show it. The thing is, in Minnesota, if you walk around with a massive ego, people think of you as an asshole. Perhaps, then, Minnesota Nice is really a lack of self confidence; people are so afraid that what they say is going to end the world." Paul touches on the fear of conflict that was brought up by other students which is stereotypically a part of Minnesota Nice. He also notes that he constantly felt alone in New York, despite constantly being surrounded by people. He believes that the constant politeness and (some say) meaningless greetings add a sense of closeness to the community. He is comforted by those aspects of Minnesota Nice, and needs them to feel connected to the community. It is interesting that he does not seem to notice the constant rushing around campus that other students noticed. Perhaps it seems like nothing in his mind when compared with the rush of the lives of New Yorkers. The city setting would also certainly affect how people interact. It is not possible to know everyone in a city as big as New York; most people you will never see again. Because of this, it is not necessary to be kind to polite to everyone you see.

Because St Olaf, unlike New York City, is so small, you will definitely see everyone at least twice, and probably far more than that. Because most people realize this, they try to be polite to most people that they interact with. This forced politeness because of proximity probably contributes to the fake niceness that most people feel. Upon meeting someone for the first time and interacting with them, it is easy to believe that you are closer than the you of actually are because of how nice and polite the interaction was. However, that is not the case. It seems to be universally acknowledged that there are certain steps that must be followed in order to build closeness and grow into a "friend" (i.e. someone you can call when you're bored, don't need a

reason to interact with them). Part of being at St. Olaf is interacting with others, but there is a balance and process in which you need to follow in order to truly have a meaningful relationship. George believes that “sometimes you try to meet and say hi to people but it is often too rushed or too slow. It has to be done at the right pace. Not always does it work that way but it takes some effort and time to really get to know people. It won't happen instantly so you have to get it time.” George thinks that because people generally seem very friendly at first, they think that they can instantly become friends with someone. However, it is possible to try to be too friendly too quickly. There is, therefore, a balance needed in establishing relationships that may develop over time. It is important, as George said, that even though someone seems very nice and friendly the first time you meet, they may take some time to warm up to you on a friend level, and may not immediately show such overt friendliness after your initial meeting. However it is important to note that you can break through the perceived politeness barrier of Minnesota Nice. Others, such as Sally, have had an equally frustrating time trying to figure out the politeness of Minnesota Nice and how that relates to friendship and acquaintanceship: “At first you start to really wonder about if people are nice on the surface. I find that it is difficult to get deep with people so that you can have an established relationship in which you interact deep with. In my mind I see it as three layers. The first is the surface layer, where everyone seems to be so sweet and nice. However they only mean it on the surface. Then after a while it seems that when you try to interact with them later on, their initial politeness of the first layer does not exist, it seems superficial. This second layer becomes crucial because often times most people do not break it. While they may appear to be nice and sweet upon initial meeting them, they tend to back away the more you interact with them. Finally if you are able to keep having interactions with them you are able to break open the two-layered Minnesota Nice to start really connecting with them.

It tends to take a long time to crack this second layer open to get to the third layer which is where you really start to create a deep and meaningful relationship”. Sally believes that there are three steps that are necessary before both parties are comfortable enough with the other one in order to be a true friend. It is especially interesting that she specifically notes the presence of Minnesota Nice in her first layer: "everyone seems to be so sweet and nice".

Minnesota Nice is present in types of relationships in addition to friends and acquaintances. It is also manifested in road relationships. Rick is from the Chicago area and commented that the way that people drive is different in Minnesota than where he is from: “In Chicago, it is very easy to get hit by a car. Even in the suburbs. Part of it, I think, is that Minnesotan cops are stricter on the speed limits; where I’m from, you can easily go 10 over the limit and be perfectly fine on normal streets (but probably not neighborhoods). On the express way, speed limits don’t even matter; the rule is blend with everyone else. Going 85 mph in a 65 on the expressway is totally normal. Here, cars actually let you cross the street. It’s amazing. [...] The problem is that people usually don’t like my driving here. When I pass a car on the highway, they say I’m cutting them off. I’m just more used to aggressive driving I guess.” Rick's way of driving is seen as aggressive and out of control by Minnesota drivers. We don't actually know what kind of driver Rick is, whether or not he is actually an aggressive driver, but it is interesting that he believes other drivers feel that he is cutting them off when he is simply passing them. They must make it obvious that they are uncomfortable with his driving style.

These observations about the style of driving specific to Minnesota were confirmed a few other times during a focus group. Allison and Jonathan, locals to Minnesota, can usually tell when non-Minnesotan or -Wisconsin drivers are around. What does this say about Minnesota Nice? It seems that Minnesotans drive “nicer” than drivers from other states. Perhaps the

attitude of a Minnesota driver in a particular situation is a microcosm of Minnesotan's general attitude toward others, i.e. "Minnesota Nice". Minnesota drivers are more likely to let others have the right of way, including pedestrians; they drive slowly and cautiously; they follow the law (speed limits). This shows that they are passive in their relations with other people - they are not willing to confront someone, even in terms of right of way. They are more comfortable when they move slowly in relation to other people, which is indicative of the need to reach certain levels of knowing before closeness can be established. They like having rules to follow.

Students also have differing views in the matter of whom you can carry out conversations with on campus. There are some, like Jasper, who say hi to everyone they know, no matter how well they know them. Others, like Jasmine, overanalyze their brief acknowledgement interactions. She explains that she often merely smiles at people that she recognizes, and then feels bad when they give her a vocal greeting. She is also acutely aware of the possibility of people not saying hi back to her, as she says that this has happened many times, and she always feels embarrassed about it. Sally, who has spent her whole life growing up in Minnesota, has what seems to be the majority opinion of greeting interactions: "If you know someone really, really well you stop and have a conversation with them." Even with those who Sally may not know on a huge personal level there is still "somewhat of an awkward hi or hello, but not a meaningful and personal conversation". For most people, you only stop to have actual conversations with those with whom you have already established a relationship, and you greet most of the people you recognize most of the time, either verbally or simply with a smile or a nod. There is also the in-between interactions, where you don't simply acknowledge recognition, but also don't have a conversation. Rex explains what seems to be the common script to follow: "Hi!" "Hi, how are you?" "I'm good, you?" "Good!" This is a common script for people to

follow, and is widely acknowledged. It gives the impression of caring about the other person and how their doing without any of the responsibility for their feelings because this conversation nearly always takes place while the two people are walking past each other. Other safe topics for simple (acquaintance-level) conversations are "how was your weekend?", "how are your classes going?", and (especially at the end of the year) "what are you doing this summer?".

Many students have observed that those constantly go out of their way to meet people and make conversation with acquaintances tend to be freshman. The level of acquaintance conversation could depend on class year. George observes that "interacting with people differs on class ranks. Seniors tend to only want to talk with people you know and not branch out from their friend group. Freshmen on the other hand might want to talk and meet with everyone". This could explain why the normal script for our interviewees is so terse and meaningless; we interviewed mostly upperclassmen who already have an established friend group. The people that we interviewed have people with whom they have meaningful conversations, and do not feel the need to converse in depth with people they don't know very well. Freshmen usually go out of their way to have conversations with others because they do not have an established, meaningful friend group yet, and are working to establish that friend group. Rex, and others that we interviewed, felt that it would be strange for a complete stranger to initiate conversation. Most agreed that they would maintain the conversation at the time for the sake of politeness, but would not consider that person a friend or an acquaintance.

However, that is not the attitude of all students. Oliver, an international student, is impressed by how St. Olaf students go out of their way to meet and say hello to others; he feels that class year may play a role in level of conversation, but it does not reflect the entire St. Olaf population's rules for interaction. Oliver describes students on campus as "conscious [of being]

politically correct and being a good Ole. The Minnesota Nice definitely plays a role into that image of being nice and perfect”. It is clear that Oliver believes students are genuinely nice even if you may or may not know the person. Oliver says that, unlike in his home country, “at St. Olaf, when people break certain social rules of interaction, people can often interpret them as just being nice”. While it may seem awkward at first when people have conversations with you and you may not know them, in Oliver’s opinion most people at St. Olaf view those conversation starters as simply being friendly. This friendliness, he says, is due greatly to the culture of St. Olaf and Minnesota, and especially the distinct social phenomenon “Minnesota Nice”.

In spite of the universal distinction between friends and acquaintances, Minnesota culture and the tendency to be genuinely friendly on campus often outweighs the awkwardness of meeting random strangers and having some sort of forced conversation with them. Despite his negative attitude towards acquaintances, Rex notices and seems to appreciate the politeness of first encounters and forced conversations. George agrees that while it may seem strange and odd to have someone come up to you and have a conversation you tend to “engage in the conversation even if you don’t want to, just to be nice”. Oliver also believes that part of being a student in such a residential campus and community is learning “not to stereotype. I like to talk to anyone,” he says, “if they approach me because they often have an interest to hear my opinion and my story. While at first it might be a little offsetting, I tend to be as nice as possible because that is just what an Ole does. Plus if I’m rude it might be awkward if I see them around again”.

This ties back to the necessity to be polite (Minnesota Nice) all the time because of how small the campus is; if you have one bad day and are rude to one person, you will certainly see them again, and that is not pleasant for anyone.

Paul had a somewhat different point of view on the matter. He appreciates his alone time, and dislikes the need to constantly be polite to random people: “If I am walking around by myself or eating alone in the cafeteria, it’s usually because I am in some sort of a funk and want to be alone. Of course, I would be nice or polite to the person, but I can’t see myself being emotionally invested in the conversation. The person who approached me would definitely have to be the one holding the conversation. That said, it can sometimes be refreshing when a stranger starts talking to me. It really enforces that we are actually humans and not just objects walking around.” Paul's point of view recalls the different layers of Minnesota Nice that Sally believes in: one can be polite without actually caring. The important thing is to seem nice.

Another issue that comes up when interacting with people is the concept of who you keep eye contact with. In some cases not everyone keeps continuous eye contact with whom they are speaking to. Oliver claims “I try to keep contact with everyone I am having a conversation with but that doesn’t always happen. Say I’m speaking to a girl (or someone of the opposite sex), I try to do my best to have continuous eye contact with them. In part just to show respect but also because back home in my country it is almost a hidden social rule that if you talk to someone of the opposite sex you show that you truly care about them regardless if you actually do or do not. While I try to maintain eye contact with other fellow males I can honestly say that I don’t do as good as a job with males than I do with females”. From this instance there is clearly a cultural weight and influence on how you interact with others. Eye contact is certainly a sign of respect. However, lack of eye contact does not necessarily mean that there is a lack of respect. Selena has noticed that people, in general, are self-centered, in that they look out for themselves before they care about anyone else. “People look around constantly when you're talking to them because there's probably someone else that they're waiting to talk to, and they're looking for them. Or

they're checking the time to make sure they're not late to their next appointment." Selena notices the lack of eye contact, but simply attributes it to everyone being so busy.

There seems to be a major cultural divide between those who are originally from Minnesota or have lived in Minnesota for most of their lives, and those who have come to Minnesota from out of state, especially international students. Again, Oliver describes being shocked when he first arrived in Minnesota as to how friendly people on campus were: "In many parts of the world, people care about only themselves and often don't acknowledge others in public, but that is not the case at St. Olaf and Minnesota. From what I've seen students are aware of those around them and aren't afraid to go out of their way to say hello to you". He is able to really see how outgoing and polite people are here because it is so unlike the culture that he grew up in. George also has seen this in terms of the setting and culture of St. Olaf and Minnesota. He describes it as "a cultural stress on loyalties, it is almost clannish. It's like small town loyalty in Minnesota where you have to get to know and be nice to people because they are like part of your family...". George also says that there is a relationship with a small town feel here at St. Olaf despite St. Olaf already being in a small town, a community within another community. "...It's the same here at St. Olaf, everyone is the same family so people are usually nice to others and want to get to know others because it is the same environment". George also attributes this to the culture and setting of St. Olaf. The fact that St. Olaf is itself a residential college makes students part of a community within the greater Northfield community. Northfield also plays a big role in promoting a close community due to its size; as George observes, Northfield is "not too big and not too small. If this were a bigger town or university then obviously the dynamics would change. There is a big difference in small towns compared to larger cities. It's the same at St. Olaf, it is the perfect size of a school that promotes community but also gives you the freedoms

that smaller colleges might not have.” “An interesting study for further research,” George says, “would be to do the same study in a larger community and school.” He believes that there is a stronger community at a smaller school like St. Olaf than there would be at a larger school such as the University of Minnesota.

Selena, like Oliver, is not from Minnesota. Unlike Oliver, she believes that people are fake here. She is from Colorado, and does not understand why people always have such meaningless, uncaring conversations. She is used to greeting most people, but she is used to people being engaged in and caring about the conversation and the person they're having it with. "I hate having the scripted, meaningless conversation with people that I pass. It feels so empty and useless, like it was a waste of breath and energy to even vocalize it." She would rather have meaningful conversations, and actually cares about everyone that she talks to. She says that it can become exhausting to constantly have conversations that aren't "emotionally reciprocated.

There is not an overall consensus of social rules on campus. However, all our interviewees differentiate between friends and acquaintances, and most tailor their interactions, greetings, and feelings toward that person based on that definition. There are varied feelings about Minnesota Nice which seem to somewhat be divided by in-state student opinions and out-of-state student opinions. Of course there are a few notable exceptions: Oliver is from out of state and feels like Minnesota Nice is genuine friendliness; Jasmine has lived in Minnesota for most of her life, but believes that Minnesota Nice is icy and unwelcoming.

Summary and Conclusions

It was very interesting to study perceived relationship rules on campus; we hadn't realized how varied our own feelings were about social rules, so we were not expecting there to be quite such a wide variety of answers. It was especially enlightening to realize that not everyone thought

about social rules in the same way, even within the context of our three person group. We loved the discussions that were fostered amongst ourselves as we were discussing our results from our individual interviews. We found that despite us all being from out of state, we all had very different opinions about Minnesota Nice, ranging from passive aggressive and fake to genuine politeness and friendliness. While there is the possibility that how one interacts relies solely on the personality of the individual there has definitely been a somewhat clear broader trend than just individuals. We found that since different people had different opinions, more often than not those opinions seemed to be in some way influenced by the culture at large.

This research can be used to analyze the prevalence of Minnesota Nice, and could be a jumping off point for research pertaining to how indicative St Olaf culture is of the culture of Minnesota as a whole. It would be interesting to research how accurate the “Minnesota Nice” perception and attitude is on campus compared to how non-college-student Minnesotans think of it; perhaps the passive-aggressive Minnesota Nice that people know on campus is simply due to the selfish attitude that is inherent in a high-pressure school such as St Olaf. We would also be interested in how the Minnesota Nice on St Olaf campus compares to the perception of Minnesota Nice on other similar size Minnesota colleges. Perhaps a larger study on social interaction rules and how Minnesota Nice plays into social interactions in Northfield would also be interesting since St. Olaf does make up an important part of the greater Northfield community.

It would be helpful for students, especially those from out of state, to read something like this research paper before starting school at St Olaf. Our data is not representative of the entire campus, but there certainly seems to be a different culture here than what many students might be expecting, as is shown by current students not understanding the culture sometimes. Having

prior knowledge of or an idea of some of the possible differences in culture would be useful to many incoming students. It was quite a shock to one of the researchers when she started school, and was unaware that people here are, for the most part, uncomfortable talking about “conflict”, meaning any negative feeling they have toward anyone.

This was a very enlightening project, and we hope that further research will be done. When discussing our project with another group, we realized that they would complement each other very nicely because they studied romantic relationships. It would be interesting to see how these two projects could intertwine, and there are certainly other projects that would also complement this one very well.

References

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