Ethnography of the Sociology/Anthropology Department at St. Olaf College
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Abstract
This study critically examines the culture of the St. Olaf sociology/anthropology department focusing on: how the department embodies the mission statement of the college; why students select the soc/anth major; group identity and group cohesion in the major; and finally power relations within the department. Data was gathered through one-on-one qualitative interviews with both sociology/anthropology students and faculty. The research reveals that the St. Olaf soc/anth department is a tight-knit community composed of people holding similar outlooks and values, such as the need to effect tangible and positive change on the world.

Statement of the Problem
Traditionally Anthropology “studied down” those in inferior positions of power, mostly non-western cultures, often in exotic, far-off locales. Colonialism made it possible for European scientists to explore and examine everyone and everything within their vast empires. With decolonization, the end of segregation in the United States, and increased rights for minorities, women, and others formerly marginalized, anthropology could no longer continue its racist, classist, and colonial approach to ethnography. Today anthropologists are trying to shake off this dark legacy of accessories to oppression by expanding their breadth of possible subjects and revamping their research methodologies. One of the ways they are doing this is by replacing their old technique of “studying down” with “studying up,” a technique that emphasizes studying people with a higher degree of power and prestige. Studying scientists with PhDs in a lab in Silicon Valley sharply contrasts with the stereotypical image of a white male anthropologist in a pith helmet sitting in the bush in Africa observing tribal dances.

Armed with this new vision of ethics in anthropology, we set out to conduct research among those with equal or higher degrees of power than ourselves. After some deliberation, we soon realized that the sub-population that would be least intimidated by our research—and thus in more of an equal
position of power—were those who had already experienced doing their own ethnographic research. Hence we opted to study our own sociology/anthropology department here at St. Olaf College—through personal interviews with both students and professors. Of primary interest to us was the strong community feeling that we as members of the department have experienced. We were interested to see if our thoughts and feelings in regards to the department were congruent with others’ experiences.

We also chose to examine the St. Olaf sociology/anthropology department because we feel this data will add insight to the dialogue within the department aimed at increasing its effectiveness and strengthening its performance within the college. It is our hope that the department will glean some helpful insights and have a base of comparison for future years.

Methodology

Our research consisted of nineteen one-hour interviews: fifteen with St. Olaf soc/anth juniors and seniors; and four with soc/anth professors. Subjects were contacted via email thanks to name identification of majors posted on the Sociology/Anthropology website. In addition, upon completion of an interview, subjects were asked to recommend other departmental majors (of junior or senior status) that they judged would be interested in participating in our research. Interviews commenced with a short survey [attached] asking the gender, year in school, travel experience, exposure to diversity, type of community they grew up in (rural/suburban/urban) and personality (extroverted/introverted). Next, subjects were asked fifteen open-ended questions (if they were a professor) or sixteen open-ended questions (if they were a student) that gauged their attitudes in reference to diverse aspect of the St. Olaf soc/anth major. Questions ranged from reasons why subjects chose the soc/anth major at St. Olaf, to what subjects thought about the atmosphere in their soc/anth classes, to the role soc/anth has played in shaping subjects’ future life goals and/or life plans [attached].

Interviewing of the nineteen participant subjects took place between the dates of March 29th and April 30th and was conducted in the Cage dining area, the main floor of Rølvaag Library, and on the concrete patio outside the south doors to Buntrock Commons. Confidentiality was assured by deciding not to employ the use of first or last names.
Setting

The setting for our research lies in rural southern Minnesota, approximately forty miles south of the Twin Cities, in a town named Northfield, famous for its two colleges and Malt-o-Meal cereal headquarters. On the outskirts of this town lies a college perched atop a large hill that offers scenic vistas of the surrounding countryside and quaint center of downtown Northfield nestled up against a meandering river. This college is a unique institution, founded by Norwegian immigrants in 1874 at a time when only seventeen Minnesota communities had high schools, and higher education was anything but practical. Students call it home, professors call it their livelihood, but most people just call it by its name—St. Olaf College.

The setting of St. Olaf is one of cultivated beauty. It is surrounded by natural lands of all sorts, including prairie, oak forest, and marshland. Closer to the heart of campus, large oak trees surround imposing limestone castle-like buildings; some of which are hidden in lush ivy for a majority of the year. Any time of year, St. Olaf radiates with nature. Yet, there is more to the campus and academic departments than the physical surroundings. A strong residence life program consisting of enthusiastic “junior counselors” and “residence hall assistants” fosters an infectious community spirit among students. This spirit of community is echoed throughout campus in the behaviors of students, staff, and administration. Yet this spirit is difficult to describe without turning to the St. Olaf mission statement:

St. Olaf, a four-year college of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, provides an education committed to the liberal arts, rooted in the Christian gospel, and incorporating a global perspective. In the conviction that life is more than a livelihood, it focuses on what is ultimately worthwhile and fosters the development of the whole person in mind, body, and spirit.

Now in its second century, St. Olaf College remains dedicated to the high standards set by its Norwegian immigrant founders. In the spirit of free inquiry and free expression, it offers a distinctive environment that integrates teaching, scholarship, creative activity, and opportunities for encounter with the Christian Gospel and God's call to faith. The college intends that its graduates combine academic excellence and theological literacy with a commitment to lifelong learning.

St. Olaf College strives to be an inclusive community, respecting those of differing backgrounds and beliefs. Through its curriculum, campus life, and off-campus programs, it stimulates students' critical thinking and heightens their moral sensitivity; it encourages them to be seekers of truth, leading lives of
unselfish service to others; and it challenges them to be responsible and knowledgeable citizens of the world.

St. Olaf’s mission statement has been simplified into what is now called the RICH statement. This statement says: “In order to nurture and foster the spirit of the St. Olaf community, I will strive to practice and encourage among my colleagues: Respect for the dignity of others, despite differences in our beliefs; Integrity in action and intent; Celebration of the gift of community by becoming engage in it; Honesty in all aspects of life, in and out of the classroom; and recognizing that community has no boundaries, I will carry these values with me as I travel, work, study and serve.” Students are asked to put a printed card with the statement on it in their wallet or purse, carrying it wherever they go.

It is within this unique St. Olaf College “spirit” that we regard the St. Olaf sociology/anthropology department, the focus of the research in this paper. The department is relatively small as departments go, with no more than approximately twenty majors per graduating class, and a total of seven professors (two half-time, and five full-time). In addition, the department is rather new. Originally conceived as a strictly sociology major—which tends to focus on domestic issues within Western culture and complex societies—the department eventually added anthropology. The department website is quick to point out that “as academic disciplines, sociology and anthropology have different histories, special theoretical traditions, and a different focus—anthropology more on the societies and cultures outside Europe and the U.S., and sociology more on modern, industrial societies and their problems. But both disciplines share an interest in understanding how societies work, the meaning of culture, the process of social change, and the relationship between us as individuals and the groups and societies of which we are a part” (http://www.stolaf.edu/depts/sociology). By combining the two disciplines, a unique opportunity was created in which students could seriously pursue the critical study of human interaction within societies and between cultures. Thus, the soc/anth department aims to help students examine the world and draw insight from both domestic and international frames of mind.

Embodying the St. Olaf RICH and Mission Statements

The sociology/anthropology department at St. Olaf explores “the human condition” by examining how society and culture influence individual’s lives. As a department at the college, it has the obligation of fulfilling the
school’s mission statement. It is hoped that all departments and activities at St. Olaf would strive to fulfill and live by both the college’s mission and RICH statements. Our research suggests that the sociology/anthropology department does an excellent job at incorporating these goals and attitudes into both the curriculum as well as the everyday behaviors of those involved in the community-in and out of the classroom.

The global perspective is crucial to the department and is one of the means by which both disciplines can be brought together into one major. By definition, the field of sociology looks at the social structures of complex society, in order to discover how they shape the individual’s social situation, while anthropology studies how culture impacts all aspects of one’s society and life. While this divide is present at St. Olaf, all classes also include the global perspective of the college that lessens their differences. Historically, sociology examined Western problems and complex societies, while anthropology explored small-scale societies in far off exotic locales. However, at St. Olaf every member of the department has a global worldview. Here, sociology professors examine the social structures in other countries, speak foreign languages, and conduct research in non-Western fields. Anthropology professors also don’t restrict themselves to non-Western subjects and encourage the exploration of sub-cultures within the United States through their classes and course readings. The international perspective of the department was widely recognized by the students and staff interviewed, with comments such as:

“The faculty is well traveled.”

“Every professor speaks other languages.”

“Profs have exposure to diverse peoples, cultures and languages.”

“There is an awareness of international problems.”

“The department has helped me become more accepting of the world.”

“We think about other cultures.”

“It is more global, more classes are interested in an international perspective.”

“People are open to other cultures.”

“People in the department aren’t ‘cookie-cutter’ like the rest of St. Olaf.”

This perspective allows the students to explore other worlds, and encourages them to branch out in their awareness of the people across the earth—learning not only their diverse challenges but also the commonalities among cultures, social structures, and social problems everywhere.

One of the required readings for the Department’s Anthropological Theory class during fall 2003 was a book entitled Exotic No More by Jeremy MacClancy, in which anthropologists try to counter the stereotypes and labels traditionally associated with the field of anthropology. MacClancy swears by the potential of anthropology to explain and empower marginalized people, to understand social issues in order to contribute to the betterment of society, all
while trying to cast off its traditional association with colonialism, racism and inequality. MacClancy hopes to make the study of anthropology approachable to people from a range of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds as well as to give it a social significance by demonstrating its potential as a tool for social justice. This seems to reflect the view of the anthropologists in the department at St. Olaf, as well as the goals and motives of students majoring in Soc/Anth. Everyone interviewed stressed the importance of social and economic justice, as well as how they wanted to ‘change the world’:
“The professors are liberal progressives, focused on human rights and equality.”
“There is a desire to aid in the department, a desire for social change: people are not satisfied with the status quo.”
“Our department is similar to some others, but what makes it stand out is how socially engaged everyone is.”
“The major has reassured me that helping people is the way to go; I have to interact with people, help them open doors, and change lives.”
“The department has made me want to work in social justice, since I am more aware of the problems and how to make a difference.”

These excerpts are not only great examples of how the major strives to fulfill the goals in the mission statement of the college by “leading lives of unselfish services to others” and living responsibly, but also how the RICH statement is practiced in sociology/anthropology at St. Olaf.

St. Olaf is a Christian school, and hence the soc/anth department finds itself in an interesting position—for it does not promote any one religion over another. In the department, the anthropological theory of cultural relativism—which says that moral “truth” is relative and cultures must therefore be studied with the suspension of moral judgments—predominates. Following in this theory, Christianity is not championed as the one true religion. This tension between ideologies can be somewhat problematic, and some within the department feel that it has led soc/anth to play a diminished role within the college. A quick comparison with the secular Carleton College points to the fact that the St. Olaf soc/anth department is comparatively small. Though Carleton College’s student population is roughly two-thirds the size of St. Olaf, the college’s soc/anth department is nearly the same size as St. Olaf. Nonetheless, in the larger picture, St. Olaf’s values are largely aligned and fulfilled by the soc/anth department—namely, the ideals of equality, justice, and the pursuit of knowledge.

Hardly any student in the department is looking for a “livelihood;” rather, like the missions statement asserts, they tend to have a vocation to help make society better, and are committed to “what is ultimately worthwhile”. Students spoke of values and success in different terms than the typical capitalist
understanding—which strives for economic capital in the form money.

Comments included:
“People are not in the major for the money.”
“Money doesn’t matter to people in Soc/Anth.”
“Success is when I am happy.”
“The topics we look at examine social problems that put a human over an economic face.”
“No one is very marketable; nobody goes into the major for economic motives, but for social justice.”
“Majors are not for corporate high paying jobs- we have no money orientation.”

The majors seek justice and have learned from their professors and other role models that accumulating economic capital is not the only means of making a difference in the world or of achieving success, prestige, or happiness. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explains: “According to my empirical investigations, [the] fundamental powers are economical capital (in its different forms), culture capital, social capital, and symbolic capital, which is the form the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate” (Bourdieu 17). Thus, soc/anth majors are not interested in the sole acquisition of economic capital; rather, they recognize the potential power in social, cultural, and symbolic capital.

Bourdieu goes on to explain how symbolic power—derived from social and cultural capital—can have a noticeable impact on the world: “Symbolic power … is a power of ‘world-making.’ … [T]o change the world, one has to change the ways of world making, that is, the vision of the world and the practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced … symbolic power has to be based on the possession of symbolic capital. The power to impose upon other minds a vision, old or new, of social divisions depends on the social authority acquired in previous struggles. Symbolic capital is a credit; it is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition” (Bourdieu 22-23). Thus, soc/anth students use the soc/anth department as a means to acquire symbolic power—through cultural and social knowledge. This symbolic power opens up the possibility for majors to accomplish their goals by making a difference in the world.

This idea that knowledge leads to empowerment is echoed in the writings of Michel Foucault. Power is often thought of in negative terms—as a tool of oppression and corruption. However, Foucault realized that power is necessary and can be harnessed for the benefit of society: “What makes power effective, what makes one obey it, is not simply that it is felt as a power that says no, but that in fact it produces things, it produces pleasure, it creates knowledge, produces discourse; it has to be seen as a productive network which seems
through the social body, and I far more than just a negative instance whose function is to punish” (Foucault 137). Our research shows that sociology/anthropology majors have been exposed to these ideas and influenced by this perspective. Knowledge is not simply acquired for the sake of knowledge; instead it should be used to promote tangible action to effect changes on society. Foucault says it best when he exclaims: “power exists only when it is put into action” (219).

The ideas of Bourdieu and Foucault can be complemented by individual agency, first pioneered by Max Weber. This theory says that if we understand the structures that surround us, we can take action to improve our situation and the situations of others by manipulating the system (class notes). Drawing upon these ideas, Peter L. Berger uses a metaphor in his book—“Invocation to Sociology”—to explain the ability we have to effect change on our situations: “We see the puppets dancing on their miniature stage, moving up and down as the strings pull them around, following the prescribed course of their various little parts. We learn to understand the logic of this theater and we find ourselves in its motions. We locate ourselves in society and thus recognize our own position as we hang from its subtle strings. For a moment we see ourselves as puppets indeed. But then we grasp a decisive difference between the puppet theater and our own drama. Unlike the puppets, we have the possibility of stopping in our movements, looking up and perceiving the machinery by which we have been moved. In this act lies the first step towards freedom” (Berger 176). Soc/anth majors know that by learning about the structures that bind and oppress people, they can liberate themselves and others.

Choosing the Sociology/Anthropology Major

At the onset of this research, we were particularly curious about the reasons or motivations behind why students chose to be sociology/anthropology majors. Was it childhood experiences? Was it personality traits? Was it parental ideologies? In reviewing the literature, we found a handful of different studies, though none of them qualitative. A study by Karen Leppel, Mary Williams, and Charles Waldauer entitled “The Impact of Parental Occupation and Socioeconomic Status on Choice of College Major” argues that parental occupation has a detectable influence on a student’s choice of business versus non-business curriculum. Employing the use of pre-collected data from the Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the authors of the study conclude that “having a father in a professional or executive occupation has a larger effect on female students than does having a mother in a similar occupation. The opposite holds for males. Women from families with high socioeconomic status are less likely to major in business; the opposite holds for males. Students who believe that being very well off financially is very
important are more likely to major in business than are other students” (Leppel 373).

A second study authored by Donna Y. Ford, “Perceptions of University Students Relative to Gender and College Major,” analyzed student perceptions regarding what does or does not constitute a family. At a significant level, Ford showed that student education majors were willing to accept more liberal definitions of what it meant to be a family; thus—making the case that ideology could play a role in the selection of college major.

A third study authored by Jennifer S. Thompson, “The Effect of Single-Sex Secondary Schooling on Women’s Choice of College Major,” makes the case that gender composition in preparatory schooling can influence major selection in college. Females from all-girls’ high schools were more likely than females from heterogeneous high schools to major in “sex-integrated” fields compared to “highly female fields” (Thompson 257). Thompson discusses the fact that feminist attitudes, nurtured in an all-girls’ school, may be partly responsible for the observed differences.

In conducting our research among junior and senior St. Olaf sociology/anthropology students, we found no apparent relationship between parental socioeconomic status and tendency to select the soc/anth major. However, parents did play a key role in students’ selection of the soc/anth major. Most soc/anth students come from families with parents who provided ideologies and environments conducive to understanding diverse cultures and working to further such goals as social justice. Confirming the earlier predictions made by Ford, most subjects had similar ideologies, and perceived themselves to be left of center on the political spectrum—agreeing that society should provide for the disadvantaged. Finally, in regards to Thompson’s study of same sex high schools, we found that most soc/anth majors were female, possessed feminist viewpoints, and viewed the soc/anth department as an inherently gender integrated department—thus supporting Thompson’s argument that feminist attitudes can promote females to choose “gender integrated majors.”

In general, we found that the quantitative research studies mentioned provided only small and obscured views of the greater picture. College major selection is inherently an individual experience shaped by a complex set of criteria that defies quantitative explanation. However, from a qualitative point of view, we were able to find patterns and trends. Our data suggests that St. Olaf sociology/anthropology majors tend to choose the major in response to: parental ideological influence; life experiences with diversity or cultural exposure; values and goals that place an importance on working with people and helping them; individual experiences with the St. Olaf sociology/anthropology department; and a subjective “feel of the
The following quoted and paraphrased student interviews reflect these wide ranging reasons for becoming soc/anth majors:

[Student 1] “I came to St. Olaf for the excellent music and study abroad programs. In the fall of my sophomore year I traveled for the first time outside the United States — on the St. Olaf ‘Term in Asia’ program. The experience opened my mind to the cultural aspects of the world such that when I returned, I no longer wanted to be a music major”; rather, [I wanted to be] a Sociology/Anthropology major.

[Student 2] Hmm…how did I become attracted to the Soc/Anth department? Well, I really liked the professor that taught my Introduction to Sociology course. I’m also concerned with social justice, which probably came from my parents (my mom is a pastor). I grew up in a very diverse area out, so that might’ve shaped my interest in ‘sosh’ [sociology/anthropology]. My elementary school was across from ‘the projects’ so there were lots of African Americans and other children in my classes. …While growing up, I also attended a 150 person summer camp with only 10 white kids (talk about being a minority). …I also received a lot of sociology credits by going on “Term in Asia,” so it made practical sense for me to major in soc[iology].

[Student 3] In the beginning, I was more attracted to the education department, but I enjoyed my “Social Problems/Social Change” course and loved the people in the department. Professors were very welcoming; almost like surrogate parents. I felt like (and still do feel) that I can go to them for whatever help I need.

[Student 4] I grew up in a tri-lingual family, so I’ve always been fascinated with other cultures. This fascination eventually turned into an appreciation and love for anthropology, which I plan to continue studying in grad school. I’ve studied at other schools, and the atmosphere here in the sociology/anthropology department is very different than I’m used to (for the better). I feel like professors really care about their students and are willing to help them outside of the classroom. This sense of “community” in the department really helped me decide to join the St. Olaf Soc/Anth. major.

As the responses of these four students show, choosing the sociology/anthropology major — and perhaps any college major for that matter — is a complex process based on many factors. Condensing such a list of factors can be daunting, but many of the traits can be grouped together into patterned associations. Life experiences with diversity or cultural exposure, the influence of parental ideologies, individual experiences within the soc/anth department — such as a first course in soc/anth, and “feel” of the department can all be categorized under the broad category of “life experience.” Such life experiences are applicable to Max Weber’s theory of life chances — whereby the paths of our lives are directly affected by our access to opportunities (i.e.

the “economic or market situation” we are born into by chance) 
(http://highered.mcgraw-hill.com/sites/0072817186/student_view0/chapter4/chapter_summary.html). Let us take a moment to examine these life chances, their impact on student subjects’ goals and values, and the subsequent tendency of St. Olaf students to select the soc/anth major.

Effect of “Life Chances” upon Major Selection

A common theme in our data shows that most subjects selected the soc/anth major due to common goals and values that place an importance on working with people and helping to make a direct difference in society. Such goals and values were not crafted overnight, but rather through experiences created by “life chances”—most notably: exposure to diversity, parental ideological influences, experience with the soc/anth department, and subjective “feel” of the department. In general, the more exposure to diverse peoples and racial groups a subject had, the more likely they were to embrace the values of the soc/anth department (values of equal opportunity, anti-racism, and social justice, for example).

“I grew up in a middle class diverse household. Until seventh grade I was [one of] the minority, (though I didn’t mix with the other diverse peoples that continued to move in). When coming to St. Olaf, I took a class called ‘Latin American Culture’ and felt for the first time that I could identify with others [from my ethnic group]. I feel such a connection to the major, that I’m considering becoming a sociology professor one day.”

Likewise, parental ideology similar to the department’s tended to make students more likely to select the soc/anth major.

“My parents have always encouraged social justice. My mom’s a pastor and dad’s a salesman, but they’re both concerned with social issues. Growing up, we would talk politics at the dinner table, and that has helped to shape my perspective on life. I really want to help others, and I feel that most of my fellow soc/anth majors feel the same way”

“My parents always told me that different lifestyles are ok; they’re just not how we do it. One time when I was around nine years old, my parents drove me through the ‘Red Light District’ in Amsterdam. They explained to me that this is how these people live their lives. It’s neither better nor worse than the way we live our lives, simply different. I think I also was attracted to sociology, because while growing up, my mom always liked to stare in peoples windows, and observe them.”

In addition, many students selected the major based upon positive interactions
with professors, or because they liked the “feel” of the department.

“I was initially only an English major. But I chose to add the soc/anth major because I loved the concepts of anthropology, and the ‘feel’ of the soc/anth department. It was not at all like the English department [which is larger and less personalized].”

In summary, our research suggests that life chances in student’s lives have had an impact on their choice of the soc/anth major. Student subjects did not choose the race or the ideological views of their family, nor did they have complete control over their experiences with the department. Nearly all said they thoroughly enjoyed their first class in the department. Yet, these attitudes may be partly due to the chance of getting a professor that they got along with, the availability (or lack) of other majors, thinking style, or having had the opportunity to devote sufficient time to succeed in the class (as opposed to having to spend time working, etc.). As in life, many of our decisions are influenced by forces outside our control that push or pull us in a certain direction; subjects’ decisions to major in soc/anth at St. Olaf appear no different.

Exchange Theory approach to Soc/Anth major selection

Exchange theory, developed by respected theorists such as Homans, Blau, and Emerson, suggests that people act in ways that “maximize their benefits” and minimize their consequences (Ritzer 402). Thus, subjects who choose the soc/anth major can be viewed as acting in this type of rational cost/benefit manner. Selecting the sociology/anthropology major brings with it certain negative consequences. For one, soc/anth does not necessarily lead to a high-paying job or career out of college. Students who study soc/anth do so largely because they like it the best or because it will bring them non-economic rewards in the future, such as having the ability to help their community in the future, thereby gaining social status and respect. Values play a large part of determining the net balance in a cost benefit analysis, and this certainly remains the case in selecting the soc/anth major. One of the questions we asked subjects in our research was: “What is success for you?” Nearly everyone had similar answers. Success to them was doing something that made them happy, and doing something that was other-oriented rather than self-oriented. Subjects gave similar responses when asked about the importance of money:

“I don’t deny that money is important, but it’s not the driving force for success in my life”

“Success to me is finding a vocation that allows me to help people and the world. It’s what I believe will bring me the most joy. I didn’t become a soc/anth major for the money”
“Money oriented people go into psychology, economics, or medicine. If you’re a soc/anth major, chances are that you’re not in it for the money” Nearly all gave responses similar to these, indicating that while money is necessary in life, it does not constitute the end all, be all. In summary, exchange theory offers another lens with which to view the choice of college major, adding depth to our discussion.

Group Identity / Group Cohesion
The idea of group cohesion is central to any small community. Carron, et al., explain that this concept can be measured and understood “through the perceptions of individuals within the group” and that it “represents shared beliefs of the membership” (470). The sociology/anthropology department at St. Olaf is a great example of such a definition: a small and cohesive group with shared values and meanings. As discussed above, the department has common goals that reflect those of the mission and RICH statements, such as a global perspective, unselfish service to others, respect for differences and also the celebration of community—while providing a liberal arts education. As students of the liberal arts and majors in sociology/anthropology, majors in the department have shared meanings and concepts, such as ‘culture’, ‘social deviance’, ‘anomie’, ‘Feminism’, “the other”, etc., that are just apart of everyday language in the classes and during discussions outside of structured courses. There are also shared meanings for the definition of otherwise abstract terms or goals that are played out in the lives of majors, such as “what does success mean to you” or “what values are important to you?” Having strong values and opinions about life goals or actions seems to be common in the department, and the responses for these questions were very unselfish, reflecting their wider desire to help society, or the global community, by
making a difference in one way or another. Hornsey, et al. point out that their research found that participants who had a weak moral basis for their attitude conformed to the group norm on private behaviors. In contrast, those who had strong moral basis for their attitude showed non-conformity on private behaviors and counter-conformity on public behaviors (319), and this may explain the behavior of those in the department. This strong moral basis felt by those interviewed for this study permits them to stand firm in their motives and goals, despite the fact that their views are not held by the majority of the larger American society. The ‘self-categorization theory’ might also play a role in the construction of strong and similar values and goals in the department. It hypothesizes that an intragroup process of conformity creates a polarized or more extreme version of the members’ initial opinion of an in-group norm (McGarty 1). This suggests that students and/or professors might not have held such staunch views on injustice or inequality originally, but once part of the culture of the department, their ideas on such subjects became reinforced and thus made more extreme.

The other possibility is that members of the small society of the sociology/anthropology department are motivated by either informational or normative influence within the small group of the major. In ‘informational influence’, a person relies on others to determine what is correct, especially if the reference group is seen to be more competent and informed, while in ‘normative influence’ people want to ‘fit in’ with the majority, so they pretend to agree to be accepted socially (Hornsey 320). In this view, when individuals entered the major, they might not have held such strong values about social and economic justice and equality, but they either acquired them from their role models in the department, such as favorite professors, or felt pressure to express such views when surrounded by other majors, and reflected this when interviewed in order to avoid social censure. Either way, those in the Sociology/Anthropology department at St. Olaf stress the common goal of saving people and the planet, whether or not that is a genuine attitude or not, and whether they will actually act on their spoken values when confronted with actual decisions in the ‘real world’.

Central in many communities in a variety of cultures is sharing meals and drink (commensality) with the fellow members of one’s group. Few eat with strangers, and thus the consumption of food and beverage with others is both a symbol of a group and also an action that reinforces the feeling of community and cohesion between people. Jose E. Limon wrote of the messages layered in food and the meanings of the actions of those involved in its preparation and consumption, explaining that food is a code, in his essay entitled Carne, carnales, and the carnivalesque: Bakhtinian batos, disorder, and narrative discourse. One key piece of information from Limon that is applicable in the
description of the sociology/anthropology department is that according to him, “one does not speak ideologically of friendship and community; one practices it in the symbolic action of meat, body, and language” (480).

Our research shows that many people in the department enjoy food and drink in the student lounge. Countless subjects mentioned buying pop, enjoying free candy, enjoying coffee and tea, often watching professors store or heat their lunches. Eating is a central part of the laid back and “homey” atmosphere found in that space. Other times, homemade cookies, chips, or apples can be found for those who pass through, reinforcing the community feeling in the department and making the room very appealing and welcoming to the hungry and stressed college student in need of an energy boost. Both authors have experienced many good and fun times eating, drinking, or conversing with fellow majors or professors in the lounge, and this is a trait that allows the department to stand out from the others at St. Olaf, reflecting how particularly close, comfortable and equal members of the group feel with each other. This demonstrates how we ‘practice’ community, and practice the ideas we learn from our professors and speak of in our classes, such as acceptance and tolerance for all people (one will not eat with those they disrespect) and equality and a lack of hierarchies (feminist and Marxist theories).

Others interviewed spoke of how they eat meals in “the caf” with fellow majors, and one of the authors witnessed a particularly relevant occurrence just this week: a few majors sat down together at lunch when they were randomly joined by the author, and when the four noticed a major eating by himself, they moved to a larger table to accommodate everyone and include him. Once at the larger table, they were quickly spotted by another department member who added to the group—making an impromptu party of six and a collectively improvised lunch. This seemingly trivial event is noteworthy because it properly reflects the close-knit community of the St. Olaf soc/anth department. In addition, some majors even go out to the bars to drink together, an act that further reinforces that the department is cohesive, since ‘going to the bar’ involves making plans with one another ahead of time. The possible equivalent among the professors, for such student interaction, is the dinners and/or brunches they occasionally share in their homes. However, as one senior member of the department noted, such ‘get-togethers’ were more common when all professors lived in Northfield. Now that a larger percentage of the professors reside in the Twin Cities, such off-campus ‘get-togethers’ are more infrequent.

The sociology/anthropology department at St. Olaf is a caring and supportive community for its members, and those interviewed spoke very highly of it, as well as the crucial role it has played in their overall experiences at St. Olaf. It is a small and personal group where most people know everyone else, the
atmosphere is friendly, the classes are ‘laid back’ and the professors genuinely care. Very strong words and encouraging sentences were used when describing the department and the relationships within it, such as:
“This is the only community I belong to on campus.”
“It feels like home.”
“We are cohesive and the interactions between students and professors are more on the lines of friendships, or could be described as motherly and fatherly.”
“There is a lot of love and support.”
“Everyone is a family.”
“It’s homey.”
“I have a lot of good friends in the major.”
“It has made my St. Olaf experience better and more enjoyable.”
“I love the people and feel close to other majors.”
“Profs are more personal and students can share family concerns or discuss life choices openly with them.”
“The department is close-knit.”

On the other hand, the fact that a “Soc. Clique” might exist was brought up, and one major described the group as being “like a cult”! This highlights the idea of group identity, and the fact that some majors might feel like ‘insiders’ to the community, while others see themselves as ‘outsiders’ in the otherwise cohesive department. It is thought that those who spend significant amounts of their time outside class with other majors and hanging out in the soc/anth lounge are parties to the ‘insiders clique’, and it should be added that these people do feel most attached to the major and describe it using the most positive language. The individual who used “cult” to describe the group was also only one of two people who admitted during the interviews to feeling more committed to their other major, reinforcing her ‘outsider’ status.
Power Relations

A common theme that emerged from our data was the feeling that the interpersonal interactions within the soc/anth department—be they professor/professor, student/professor, or student/student—make the department a unique place. In general, such interactions make the soc/anth department a welcoming place conductive to a safe and comfortable learning environment that upholds the very ideas and ideals the department teaches. Particularly interesting in the context of such interpersonal interactions is the perception of power relations—both from the perspective of students and the perspective of professors. Hence, the following section shall be devoted to such a discussion.

Richard Emerson, a notable exchange theorist, devoted a large part of his academic life to “power-dependence theory” (Ritzer 418). Emerson defined power as the “level of potential cost which one actor can induce another to accept, while dependence involves the level of potential cost an actor will accept within a relation” (418). Emerson went on to say that “where there is an imbalance in the dependencies, the actor with less dependence has an advantage in terms of power. Thus, power is a potential built into the structure of the relationship between A and B” (418).

Nowhere is this inherent power structure clearer than in the college classroom and academic department. Not only do professors have years—often decades—more academic experience than their pupils, which gives them inherent power, but they also have access to a large power source in the act of grading. With their access to near unilateral control of the grading process, professors can be seen as the gatekeepers that students must get past to achieve success in the future. Therefore, professors hold not only the power of evaluating how well students do in their classes, but also the extent to which students will be able to excel in the future. Being college students, we can attest to the power of professors. Students gripe and complain about the amount of work professors assign them, but those who wish to succeed in the future eventually stop complaining and start “doing as they are told.” Such power difference can often lead to students feeling a certain amount of hostility and animosity towards their professors, which can impede the learning process.

The St. Olaf soc/anth department does not differ from other academic
departments in the level of work required; in fact, many students say the
department “expects more from students than other departments;” “requires
classes and assignments that are hardcore;” and “dumps the workload on
students.” But the department does differ from “other” department at St. Olaf
in the overwhelmingly positive perceptions students hold regarding the power
relations and generalized “feeling” in the department. The following is only a
sampling of student attitudes in regards to Soc/Anth professors and the
department in general:

[Student 1] “One thing unique about the St. Olaf Soc/Anth department is that I
don’t feel the presence of a power relationship between profs and students.”
[Student 2] “Profs are crazy, but love their students. Each one loves their own
subject matter.”
[Student 3] “Professors are really approachable. Even if you don’t know them,
you can approach them. They gave me great advice about grad schools, even
though I don’t talk in class.”
[Student 4] “Professors are quirky, and dress funny, but they’re really nice,
concerned with the interests of students, and have the best intentions”
[Student 5] “Professors help to nurture a relaxed feeling of open interaction in
the department. I feel free to say my opinions”
[Student 6] “Professors create a laid back attitude in and outside of class. One
wears crazy Mexican outfits, and has a cup of tea in class. He speaks with long
pauses, and doesn’t demand a rushed pace. Another professor used humor in
his classroom, saying: I know this tough, you know this material is tough; I
don’t want to be doing this, you don’t want to doing this; but let’s do it. So
let’s do it.”

Widespread presence of such positive attitudes towards soc/anth professors
and the soc/anth department at St. Olaf begs a multi-causal explanation. Yet,
power relationships without a doubt play some role. In our research, students
tended to notice that professors attempted to treat them in an egalitarian
fashion.
[Student 1] “On the first day of class, my professor asked the class to call him
by his first name. That was really weird and awkward, but now I don’t give it a
second thought.”
[Student 2] “Professors often sit down with students in the classroom setting,
rather than distancing themselves by standing behind a lectern. That helps the
conversation, discussion, and learning among students by promoting open
interaction and a relaxed feeling.”

Such interactions go against the norm discussed by Emerson’s exchange
theory. To understand why professors acted in such a manner that encouraged
downplaying power relations, we interviewed four professors. One professor
felt confident in his position of power by the simple fact of sitting at the front
of the class, and didn’t feel the need to stand behind a lectern. He felt it created a more comfortable atmosphere for the students. Another professor felt that students learn better in a relaxed environment, and hence behaved in such a manner as to maximize such learning. Perhaps such behavior is a by-product of the inner desires among soc/anth professors and staff to create an environment reflective of the soc/anth ideology. Soc/anth ideology includes among other things a strong belief in equality. Perhaps soc/anth professors strive to treat students in a more equalizing manner so as to encourage and further the student’s learning of the material (not only do students hear the message of equality and fair treatment in class, but they also “live it” in their day to day activities within the department). This is only a suggestion, for we do not have conclusive data on the matter. However, it seems entirely possible.

The professor/student interaction is not the only relationship de-emphasizing power structure; student/student and professor/professor interactions do as well. In our experience with the soc/anth department, students also serve as moderators of the power structure. When a student violates the unwritten terms of classroom interaction—for example, by taking it upon themselves to be overly critical of a professor or fellow students, acting like they are the only ones who know the material, or dominating the conversation—students employ methods to reel the group member back to the egalitarian power structure that predominates in the classroom. From the authors’ personal experience, such methods include: ridicule/teasing of the person through humor, strong disagreement with the offending student, and talking strongly behind their backs. In any event, our research shows that students have solid relationships with fellow classmates both inside the classroom and outside. St. Olaf soc/anth majors are united by common ideologies towards life and other people, and serve as a support system when other (more conservative) ideologies prevail. “I don’t know what I’d do without my soc/anth group of friends and classmates. Most of my friends are conservatives and I’m much more liberal, so it’s nice to know that there are other people who share my views.”

By working together under a common ideology, soc/anth students serve to act out their ideologies by maintaining equality of power in the classrooms and department setting.

Finally, our research shows that the intra-departmental interactions between professors and other professors serve to create a sense of community that attracts students. “This is the most pleasant department I’ve worked in,” says one professor. “I’ve been to everyone else’s house [in the department].” “We’re very committed to the material,” says another professor, “and united by our collective focus on cross-cultural education.” From a student’s perspective, this “us” over “me” mentality makes the department a pleasure within which to work. Professors are not plagued by internal strife;
hence students have a set of wonderful role-models to emulate. In fact the data attests to this point. Almost all students, when asked who their role models were, listed at least one professor from the department.

In summary, the typical power relations discussed by Emerson’s exchange theory are notably absent within the department as compared with a “typical” major. Professors aim to treat students more as equals on the path of learning, rather than inferiors that must be subordinated. This attitude is generally shared in the student-to-student relationships and professor-to-professor relationships. This helps to create a sense of satisfaction among students majoring in the department, and helps to develop a strong “community” feeling.

Conclusion
The data obtained through our ethnographic research on the soc/anth department confirmed many of the authors’ own opinions about the culture of the department. Almost everyone interviewed highlighted common themes, such as the ‘close-knit’ feelings within the major and the strong relationships among students and between students and faculty.
Both faculty and student majors also share a strong desire to help ameliorate the condition of oppressed and marginalized people and strongly believe in the
need for and values of social and economic justice. Many hope that through the pursuit of knowledge—specifically the study of the structures of society and the cultures of the world—that they may be able to use this symbolic power to change present inequalities and injustices.

The fact that the majority of students interviewed shared extremely similar motives, goals, and opinions was slightly alarming to the authors. The overwhelmingly positive responses to our questions about the department were at times surprising, especially because as members of the department ourselves we have personally observed contradictory information. We hypothesize that our status as members of the group under study, and the fact that this research was for a class in the major, has skewed the data to an unknown degree. It is possible that under these circumstance students and staff were more reserved about their own opinions and chose to repeat positive caricatures of the major, and ‘stick to the party line’ so to speak. It should be remembered that the soc/anth major is a relatively small major, populated by curious people who both enjoy and are trained to eavesdrop on others and communicate with all types of people. This makes it an ideal breeding ground for gossip, despite strong efforts to ensure complete confidentiality. Aware of this fact, many people might have preferred to be positive and optimistic, rather than risk the possibility of being ostracized by the group.

Future studies should take this hypothesis into consideration. Having non-majors conduct the same research may reveal somewhat different data—perhaps a greater degree of diversity—in the responses. The possibility that the St. Olaf sociology/anthropology department has fallen victim to the ‘group-think’ phenomenon is also a legitimate concern, however, we personally believe the first hypothesis is more reasonable.
Works Cited:


Appendix A

Verbal project information protocol

Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in my project for a research methods course required for my major in sociology/anthropology taught by Professor Carolyn Anderson, who is supervising my project. My project is aimed at examining the subculture of the Soc/Anth Department at St. Olaf College. We are particularly interested in understanding the experiences students have as members of the Soc/Anth department at St. Olaf, and I will be interviewing junior and senior students. I will be asking you a number of questions, and the interview will take about an hour. I will write a paper that will be available on the sociology/anthropology department web site, and I may present a summary of my findings at a professional sociology or anthropology conference.

I will protect your identity and the confidentiality of the information you give me. This means that I will not disclose your participation in this project to anyone else or include information in any papers, presentations, or discussions about my project that would allow someone else to identify you.

I hope the results of my study will contribute to a greater understanding of the reasons students select and stay with a particular major; a greater understanding of how the Soc/Anth lounge relates to the subculture of the
Soc/Anth Department; and administrative understanding for how to better serve the needs of Soc/Anth students and professors.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may decline to respond to specific questions, or you can stop the interview at any point. If you change your mind about allowing me to use your information after the interview, please let me know by April 30, 2004.

Do you have any questions? Thanks again for agreeing to be interviewed. I am anxious to hear your responses to my questions.

Appendix B

Contact Information

Interviewers
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Appendix C
Justification for Research / Value of this Research

While this research effort will not pose a significant threat to participant subjects, it will undoubtedly cost interviewees a fair amount of their time. However, this time investment will be offset by the benefits this research will offer to the St Olaf college community and Sociology/Anthropology department. These benefits include, but are not limited to, a greater understanding of the reasons students select and stay with a particular major, a greater understanding of how the Soc/Anth lounge relates to the subculture of the Soc/Anth department, and administrative understanding for how to better serve the needs of Soc/Anth students and professors. In addition, the interviewees will have a valuable chance to reflect upon their experiences with the Soc/Anth department, in addition to being provided with a positive vehicle to voice concerns—thus helping to strengthen the department.

Appendix D

(To be read before the interview begins)

- You have the right to abstain from answering any of the following questions, if you so desire.
- If you feel uncomfortable at any point during questioning, you have the right to terminate this interview.
- Information will be used for analysis purposes only, and will be kept strictly confidential.

Questions for Students

1- Are you majoring in—or do you have a concentration in—any department(s) other than Sociology/Anthropology at St. Olaf?

   Probe How committed do you feel towards this/these major(s), compared with the Soc/Anth?
2- What drew you to the Soc/Anth major?

3- Can you explain any aspects of the Soc/Anth major that make it different from other majors at St Olaf?

4- Do you feel that the Soc/Anth major is perceived as being a male or female major?

5- What were your initial thoughts or opinions about the department?
   
   Probe  How have those ideas changed with increased exposure to the department?

6- Do you perceive a political orientation to the department?

7- What do you think Soc/Anth majors have in common?

   Probe  What do you think St Olaf Soc/Anth professors have in common?

8- How do you associate or socialize with fellow majors outside the department setting?

9- How would you describe the atmosphere in your Soc/Anth classes? (i.e. how do students interact with each other and with their professors and what kind of feelings does this create?)

   Probe  Is there a difference between the “core” major classes and the “elective” classes?

10- How does this atmosphere—in your Soc/Anth classes—compare to classes you have taken outside the Soc/Anth major?
11- How do you use the Soc/Anth lounge?

   Probe   In your opinion, how does this space help to promote interaction between students and professors?

12- How well do you get along with the professors in the Department?

13- How do Soc/Anth professors compare with other professors you have had at St. Olaf?

14- What role has the department played in shaping your experience at St. Olaf? (through classes, people you’ve met, professor’s ideas, etc.)

15- What role has the department played in shaping your life goals and/or future plans?

16- Is there anything else you would like to share with us about the department?

(To be read before the interview begins)
-You have the right to abstain from answering any of the following questions, if you so desire.
-If you feel uncomfortable at any point during questioning, you have the right to terminate this interview.
-Information will be used for analysis purposes only, and will be kept strictly confidential.

Questions for Professors

1- What drew you to the Soc/Anth discipline?
2- Can you explain any aspects of the Soc/Anth major that make it different from other majors at St Olaf?

3- Do you feel that the Soc/Anth major is perceived as being a male or female major?

4- What were your initial thoughts or opinions about the department?
   
   Probe How have those ideas changed with increased exposure to the department?

5- Do you perceive a political orientation to the department?

6- What do you think Soc/Anth professors have in common?
   
   Probe What do you think Soc/Anth students have in common?

7- How do you associate or socialize with fellow professors outside the department setting?

8- How would you describe the atmosphere in your Soc/Anth classes? (i.e. how do students interact with each other and with their professors and what kind of feelings does this create?)
   
   Probe Is there a difference between the “core” major classes and the “elective” classes?

9- How do you believe this atmosphere—in your Soc/Anth classes—comparbes to other classes at St. Olaf?

10- How do you use the Soc/Anth lounge?
Probe  In your opinion, how does this space help to promote interaction between students and professors?

11- How do you get along with other professors in the department?

12- In your opinion, how do Soc/Anth professors compare with professors who teach in other academic departments at St. Olaf?

13- What role has the department played in shaping your experience at St. Olaf? (-through classes, people you’ve met, student’s ideas, etc.)

14- What role has the department played in shaping your future aspirations or plans?

15- Is there anything else you would like to share with us about the department?

Appendix E

Questionnaire

If this questionnaire, or any questions asked herein make you uncomfortable,
you have the right to abstain from answering that/those questions. You also have the right to refuse to fill out this questionnaire in its entirety. Information will be used for analysis purposes only, and will be kept strictly confidential.

Year in school: ___ Junior ___ Senior

Sex: ___ Male ___ Female

In what setting did you spend the majority of your developing years?
___ Rural
___ Suburban
___ Urban

Do you consider yourself to be .?
___ Extremely well traveled
___ Well traveled
___ Somewhat well traveled
___ Somewhat less traveled
___ Less traveled
___ Extremely less traveled

About how much contact would you say you had with "diverse" social or racial groups while growing up?
___ Above average contact
___ Slightly above average contact
___ Slightly below average contact
___ Below average contact

What personality type would you say you are?
___ Extremely extroverted
___ Slightly extroverted
___ Slightly introverted
___ Extremely introverted
Appendix F

Telephone Conversation

Hello, my name is Matt Van Vleet / or / Katrina Vigen, and I am a fellow Soc/Anth major.

We are conducting ethnographic research in regard to the Sociology/Anthropology department here at St Olaf.

We would like to interview Soc/Anth majors to find out heir thoughts and feelings about the department.

Interviews would last roughly 1 hour, including time allotted for a short questionnaire.

Would you be interested in participating in this research?