

Qualitative Research: Multicultural Women's Experience at St. Olaf College

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Executive Summary

Setting:

St. Olaf College is a residential campus in Northfield, Minnesota, with 2,973 students. Women of color make up about 4% of the student body.

Problem:

Multicultural students encounter many trials and tribulations, in a predominantly white liberal arts college. We have examined the multicultural women's experience at St. Olaf, keeping in mind that gender may play a key role in their college experience.

Methodology:

The population used for our research was multicultural women students, who were not international and whose parents were both of multicultural descent. We conducted sixteen private interviews and one focus group.

Observations:

Multicultural women at St. Olaf feel out of place, but they often find comfort in the company of other multicultural students. They find themselves more attracted to professors who are open-minded and in their field of interest. They also feel they need to represent their entire race in the classroom, and they feel pressured to perform without errors in order to break down stereotypes.

Conclusion:

St. Olaf is a college that prides itself on diversity, but much work needs to be done. In order to fulfill the mission, the college needs to recruit more students, faculty and staff of color. St. Olaf needs to create within itself a population that mirrors actual society and a more welcoming community.

Abstract

The experience as a multicultural student in a predominantly white college can have its disadvantages. For most of them, attending St. Olaf College is taking a step outside of their comfort zone. To an outsider it may appear as though all students of color isolate themselves from the rest of the student body. In our research, we decided to take it further by analyzing the experience of multicultural women, keeping in mind that gender may play a role in their experiences. The constant battle for most of these women is to endlessly educate others about their culture, as they try to make their families proud. Their relationships with professors vary with their field of interest, but they continue to struggle in their social experience at St. Olaf. We have discovered that in order for multicultural women to have a more satisfying experience at St. Olaf, the college needs to recruit more students of color and more faculty and staff of color.

Setting / Community

St. Olaf College is a residential campus in Northfield, Minnesota, which is located in the southeastern part of the state, approximately 45 minutes south of the twin cities. Northfield, Minnesota is located along the Cannon River and has a rich economic industry in agriculture (St. Olaf College website). Northfield has a population of 17,147 and is the home of two higher educational institutions, St. Olaf and Carleton College. As the billboard says when entering town, it is a place of colleges, cows, and contentment. St. Olaf College currently has an enrollment of 2,973 students, and it is a 4-year liberal arts college with 44 academic majors. St. Olaf also offers 27 intercollegiate sports, has an excellent music department, and is known for its vast number of study abroad programs.

St. Olaf is a predominantly white, liberal arts college with ties to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. It was founded by Norwegian immigrants in 1874 and continues to demonstrate many of the traditions that were incorporated since its establishment. St. Olaf strives to bring the world of academics and literacy of theology together.

Approximately 60 % of the student body is made up of females and only 4 % of them are multicultural women. Overall, multicultural students only make up 10.3 % of the student body. In the class of 2007, about 16 % are first generation students and 64 % receive government funding, such as financial aid. The average financial aid package is \$18, 121 (St. Olaf College website). These statistics show that St. Olaf is made up of students who come from a variety of different socio-economic backgrounds. However, there appears to be very few students who come from more diverse racial

backgrounds, which is part of the St. Olaf mission: “*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 College website)

Problem

It is evident that a person of color attending a predominantly white liberal arts college will have a different experience than a white student. Others have researched the experience of multicultural students in predominantly white liberal arts colleges, like St. Olaf College, but we have taken it a step further to learn about the experience of multicultural women, who make up only 4% of the St. Olaf community.

“Each oppressed group in the United States is positioned in a particular and distinct relationship to white men, and each form of subordination is shaped by this relational position. Men of Color and white men maintain power over women, particularly within their respective groups.”(Hurtado, P. 833). Women of color live in dangerous intersections of gender and race. They are double minorities because they are non-white and they are women. As a matter of fact, they continue to deal with racism and sexism that permeates in their lives. For many of these multicultural women, growing up in a setting where they are told what to do or what not to do, makes it difficult for them to make their own decisions without necessarily disrespecting the family tradition. As daughters, it is more difficult for parents to understand that they need to become independent by going out into the real world without their help. Most of them are treated and seen as fragile creatures.

Once they reach higher education, these women struggle to fit in to a community that is not necessarily theirs. Many of them accept stepping out of their comfort zone in order to provide a better life for their families and themselves in the future, but it doesn’t mean that their experiences in higher education are positive and/or easy. Many multicultural women in higher education often find themselves representing and standing up for their race and not as individuals, as they continue to fight the stereotypes of multicultural women and multicultural people as a whole.

Methodology

The population of students we used for our research was multicultural women who were not international students and whose parents were both of multicultural descent. The reason we chose to focus on multicultural women students at St. Olaf is because they are under-represented, and we knew that their experience would be different than the multicultural men and the typical St. Olaf student. We chose to only study females because we believe that their

situation is deeper than their male counterparts, because of their gender. Not only are they a minority by race but they are also a minority by sex/gender.

In order to find out about these women's college experience we sent out invitation letters inviting them to participate in our study. We also contacted these women through personal acquaintance. Once we had received enough letters of consent, we proceeded by conducting sixteen private interviews in which we asked questions about their background, their education, their relationship with professors, support groups and organizations, and lastly their social experience here.

Once the interviews were completed, we invited all participants to attend a focus group. The idea of the focus group was to allow these women to speak openly and share their St. Olaf experience with other multicultural women. One faculty member was also invited to participate in the focus group based on her experience as a woman of color and her relationships with the participants.

The reason why we chose to do private interviews was because we believed that it would allow students, who do not feel comfortable in large groups, to speak more freely. We also believed that this would be the best way to receive as much information as possible. Unlike in a survey, we would be able to see the expressions and reactions that these women had to certain questions. It would also make our research more personal by allowing us to hear personal stories, ask questions, and receive feedback.

The purpose of the focus group was to give those students who were comfortable speaking in groups the chance to relate with other women, to share experiences and realize that they are not alone in their experience at St. Olaf College. We believed that having a focus group would allow the women to interact and feed off one another. The idea was that things that were left unsaid or forgotten in the private interviews would be brought to light and that new topics would arise as well.

As with all research, there are factors that play in to its validity. As I stated earlier we chose to only research those women who had two parents of multicultural descent and who were not international students. The reason that we did this was to limit the amount of information intake and to ensure that we would obtain information from which we could make correlations between experiences. In doing this we have made our research somewhat biased and a representation of the entire student body of multicultural women at St. Olaf College.

Findings and Theoretical Implications

Family

Most of the multicultural women at St. Olaf College come from an urban setting, where they were part of the majority, and from low-income families. The economic status of these women and their families has created a strong connection in the household, which makes things easier for everyone. For most of the women, their families have played major roles in the decisions they have and will make in life. For example, many of these women stayed in their home state for college, so they can be close to their families. For the women that went out of state for college, they are expected to call home very often and talk to everyone around. Many of these women come from parents that migrated to this country in search of a better life for themselves and their families. Their parents have struggled to survive in this country, but their reward is seeing their children attend college, which something that is unreachable for many people in the world. These parents are willing to do whatever it takes to see their children succeed in life, even if that means helping and supporting them when things are not going the way they have expected.

"During breaks I go home to my parents."

"Sometimes I go to my mom's house, and other times to my dad's house."

Half of the women in our research came from a two parent household, while the others had divorced parents. One connection we saw with these women and their parent's relationship was that many of the women with immigrant parents came from a two-parent household, while many of the "Americanized" women had divorced parents or a widowed mother. When asked where they would spend their breaks, most of them responded in their parent's home. For the women that had divorced parents they would automatically respond that they would go to their Mom's house, with the exception of times when they would spend it at their Father's house.

"My parents encouraged me to stay and do well in school in order for me to escape poverty and reach higher status."

"Sometimes my family is not supportive of my decisions, but I do them because I know it is right for myself."

Most of the women receive support from their family members, because they are very aware that in order to reach a higher status in society, it is necessary to be educated. Without an education people will not give you the respect needed, which can make it difficult to succeed in life. Also, if they want to escape poverty it is necessary to attend college, because it is the only way they can secure their future and provide for their families. For many of these women, they would like to help their parents economically, and in order for that to happen it is really important to have a job where one can make more than just enough to survive.

Other multicultural women go against their parent's words, because they believe that in order to succeed in life it is very important to take risks, and parents are usually not supportive of that. Also, many of the parents continue to believe in their culture and beliefs, which are most likely very different from the American ones, and makes it difficult to communicate and understand each other.

"My Mom believes that higher education is very important, but it is not reachable for many."

"My parents don't quite understand what college is all about, but they know that it is important for my future."

"My Dad was very helpful with my academics while growing up. I think it has to do with him receiving his doctorate."

When asked what was their parents' educational attainment, most of the women responded that their parents didn't graduate from high school, and some dropped out in middle school. Even though their parents did not receive a lot of education, most responded that their parents see education as something very important. For many of the women, their parents wouldn't understand what it is like to attend a school like St. Olaf. Some parents even believe that these girls have it easy, because they do not have to work, but they do not understand how much work they are doing without getting paid. The other problem that many of these women showed concern about was the fact that when they had problems in school or they were stressed, their parents were not able to relate, because they had never experienced what these girls are experiencing.

For a couple of girls with parents that attended college and some even graduate school, things are very different. For them, their parents would be able to relate to what they are going through, are willing to help, and they can understand why they feel stressed or tired. Because of their accomplishments in their life, these parents have more expectations of their children. For the other parents, they know that education is the key to success, but it is only for some.

"When my nephew was not motivated to go to school, my sister called and told me to talk to him about school."

"My parents are always asking me to make phone calls for them, because they think that by having an educated person speak, they will be taken more seriously."

Most of these women are seen as role models for the younger generations in their families. Not many of their family members were able to attend college. As the only college students in their families they are expected to teach others about education, and how it is very important for their futures. Attending college, these women are given a different role in their families, which is always good when they had always been treated as a fragile female. Their parents seem to give them more important responsibilities by asking them to call or go to places with them, so their family can be taken more seriously about specific issues.

Education

The majority of multicultural women who attend St. Olaf College have come from large high schools that were very diverse. Often times, they would not have been considered a minority at their schools and/or their communities. Attending St. Olaf College in rural Northfield is a completely different experience from the urban school setting most of them come from. As an outsider, one might ask themselves why did these students choose to come to a school that would force them to step outside of their cultural boundaries. Once these women were asked this question we found their

answers to be very similar. The reasons they had for attending St. Olaf College were: it was a small private school; they were offered a good financial aid package and/or scholarships; they came for the opportunities the TRiO programs offered and provided; it has excellent study abroad programs; and for a large part, many stated that it was far enough away from home to have some freedom and independence, but close enough to go home as often as they wanted or needed.

“While growing up, I saw what happened to many people that didn’t attend college. I didn’t want the same thing to happen to me.”

“I always wanted to help my community, but in order for that to happen, I knew I had to leave my community.”

When asked about their educational experience, thus far at St. Olaf College, we found that when it comes to academics the majority of multicultural women rank St. Olaf very well and feel that they are receiving the right and proper education here. They also believed that they were learning things here that they would have never learned if they had stayed in their communities. Also, St. Olaf would bring them many opportunities, which could not be presented in their communities. Most, if not all, of their majors had to deal with some kind of multicultural studies, or a career that can help their communities.

*** *“Every time I am stressed, I try to call my parents, but they don’t really understand what I am going through. As for my roommate’s parents, they understand because they went through this.”*

All of the women agree that they have a very different experience here at St. Olaf than the rest of the student body. For many, their parents do not possess the knowledge to understand what their child is going through. Most of the multicultural women’s parents had very little schooling and cannot relate to the college experience. This lack of understanding can cause frustration and added stress that most other St. Olaf students do not have to deal with.

“I feel like I don’t fit in because I don’t look like the St. Olaf Mission.”

“A lot of people see me as an open book walking around teaching everyone about multicultural issues.”

Multicultural women also feel that they are constantly not only representing themselves but also their race and/or all minorities in general. There is a tendency for them to feel obligated to educate others on racial issues just because they are a minority. They do not see themselves as the stereotypical “Ole” and realize that they have a completely different perspective on a number

of issues than most of the student body.

“In everything I do, I am constantly trying to break barriers and stereotypes.” Although they have different perspectives, many of the women of color have reported that they do not always feel comfortable expressing their opinions. They feel if they express their opinions, they will be judged and/or criticized. Aside from the few women who admitted that they enjoy stirring up the emotions of classmates, most agreed that it was easier to just avoid certain topics and to represent themselves in a way that would not perpetuate stereotypes.

Many of the Caucasian students are ignorant about multicultural issues, and the multicultural women often feel that their classmates do not understand them and therefore they are forced to edit themselves. Because of the differences between the white students and the multicultural students, mentioned above, most of them do not have a strong relationship, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Professors

The student-professor relationship can be different for every student. When these women were asked about their relationships with professors at St. Olaf, most of them responded that they had a better and closer relationship with professors who are in their field of interest or with whom they share a similar passion. There has been a lot of support from the professors to make the St. Olaf community more diverse, for example the establishment of what is now the Diversity Awareness House. If it weren't for professors, the Residence Life office wouldn't have taken the honor house seriously. Also, the Boxes and Walls project was a success because many professors were willing to support and help with anything. Many of the professors at St. Olaf are willing to get to know their students as individuals and not only as students.

When these women were asked what were the characteristics they most admire in professors they responded with: their openness to multicultural issues, when they are easily approachable, they understand when things are not going the way they are supposed to be going, when they are flexible to meet outside of class, and the ones that have more discussions rather than lectures.

"I got to know most of my professors because I stick out from the rest of the students."

"A professor had to tell a student that I don't represent all of my race."

"Sometimes I feel that I am being targeted because of my experience and not necessarily because of my race."

"In my marketing class, I failed my midterm and I wanted to drop the class. The professor told me No, she actually took time from her busy schedule to meet with me out of class."

Some professors are willing to take time from their busy schedules to make sure that their students understand what is taught in class and to make sure that they don't feel uncomfortable in class. That shows how some professors are willing to do whatever it takes to give their students what they are paying for. With multicultural women, it is very common to see them put their families before anything else, including education. These women have agreed that many professors are very understanding, and they are very aware of what their roles are in their families. Also, professors are willing to defend their students when other students are targeting them. Some are very aware that students will share as much as they can, but it is not necessary to be pointed out in class, because of their experiences. At times, professors feel comfortable pointing the multicultural students out in class not because of their race, but because of their interesting stories. Some professors are willing to learn and listen to others stories and experiences.

"One professor asked me why I never told him that I was the child of an immigrant. I didn't think it was necessary, but he believed it would've been helpful in class."

"In Spanish class we were talking about Plazas in Spain, and the professor wanted me to tell her about the plazas in my country."

"In my Women Studies class, I was not pointed out, but it was obvious that they wanted a Latina point of view."

"Professors tend to put us in a negative category and every positive thing that we do is viewed as suspicious."

"I would rather not ask for help, because I don't want them to think that I cannot do things on my own."

Many professors at St. Olaf are used to having white students in class, so when there is a minority, they feel that it is necessary for them to give their views on things. Some professors are a little more obvious than others, but many of these women are very aware that most of the time their professors ask them to speak because of their difference to the rest of the class. But sometimes these students don't feel comfortable doing it. Also, some professors always ask the minority students to speak for all minorities, being aware that not all minorities deal with the same issues, but they seem to put them all in one category. Because of the stereotype that whites have about multicultural people, it is very difficult to break a stereotype without being accused of cheating or not using your own resources. On some occasions, they would rather not ask for help, just because they don't want to be seen as the typical minority that can't understand things the first time.

"We need more faculty and staff of color."

"I would like to see more staff of color teach the multicultural courses, because they will teach from experience."

"I can definitely relate to all two of the professors of color on campus."

"I can relate to professors of color more because they have probably gone through similar things that I have gone through.."

When these women were asked what is needed to make the multicultural women's experience at St. Olaf better, all the women agreed that St. Olaf needs more faculty and staff of color. It is easier for these women to relate with professors of color, because they might have gone through similar experiences. With the few professors of color on campus, the women believe that it is a form of motivation to do well in class, because it makes their dream more possible and realistic. The professors are often seen as role models to these young women. The multicultural women believe that it is a good idea to have professors of color teaching the multicultural courses because they will speak and teach from experience and not only from what is found in the text books.

During the focus group, it was very interesting to notice how the professor was able to relate to the stories that the women were saying. She actually noted that things have not changed since she was growing up. Everything continues to be the same, which makes it easier for these women to connect with professors like her.

Organizations and Support Groups:

Here at St. Olaf College there are many multicultural organizations that are used as support and awareness outlets for the student body that are interested in those issues and/or for the students that experience them and deal with them daily. These organizations include Hmong Culture Outreach (H.C.O.), Cultural Union for Black Expression (C.U.B.E.), Women of Color (W.O.C.), Diversity Celebrations Committee (D.C.C.), Harambe, Presente, Talking Circle, and Asian Cultures Association (A.C.A.). When interviewing the multicultural women we found that the majority of them participated in at least one of these organizations. Many were also found to be members of other organizations and support groups, such as Student Support Services (S.S.S.), Independent College Educated Sisters (I.C.E.S.), Taking Care Of Business (T.C.O.B), Asian Studies Honor House, and the Diversity Awareness House. Within all of these organizations, a common bond can be found among the members. This bond may be that they come from similar ethnic backgrounds; they are going through a similar experience, or simply because they are coming together for a similar cause. Multicultural women have said that for the most part, these groups help to bring students of color together and make a difference on a campus where they can easily be overlooked.

"Often I feel pressured to join multicultural organizations because if I don't, others will view me as being white washed and unsupportive."

As with all groups the bad comes with the good. Students have stated that sometimes these organizations and support groups lose their purpose and they

become something that they are not supposed to be. Just as much as they bring people together they can at times tear them apart. This can happen when one group becomes fairly large and starts branching out into two groups. There is also a lot of pressure from within the multicultural community to be part of these organizations, to support each other.

All of the women interviewed said that Student Support Services has played a huge role in their experiences at St. Olaf College. Many believed that if it wasn't for the SSS program, they do not think they would have stayed at this college.

Also, Women of Color is an organization that was established as a support group for these women, where they can spend time with other women with similar experiences and where they can speak about any issue, without being judged. Every woman interviewed, was aware of this support group and most of them reported being a member, but many admitted that they do not attend the meetings. As for the women that do attend, they believe that it is nice to be able to bond with women that deal with similar issues, and that the advisors are well-respected faculty and staff.

"In the M.A.C.O. office I don't get judged by what I wear, say, or believe. I feel comfortable saying anything, because everyone respects me."

"I like going to the M.A.C.O. office because I can study, check my e-mails, and even take a nap on the couch."

"The M.A.C.O. office is very important, especially because it is in the most important building on campus."

"M.A.C.O. makes life (at St. Olaf) more enjoyable!"

In Buntrock Commons, there is an office that many white students have no idea it exists. This office is the Multicultural Affairs and Community Outreach Office (M.A.C.O.) and it has proven to be one of the most important places on campus for multicultural students. It is the office of **William E. Green**, Assistant Dean, Director of Multicultural Affairs and Community Outreach and his Administrative Assistant, Lynn Stenstrom. Everyday in this office numerous students can be seen entering and exiting from as early as eight in the morning until five at night, when they are literally kicked out. Students come to this office to fulfill their student work award, to socialize with friends, to use the computers, to do homework, and to even take a nap. One of the most important things that these women have said about the M.A.C.O. office is that it is very helpful, because they can always find someone that is willing to help and/or talk. They say that in this office they feel that they can always be themselves and that everyone around is very supportive. The multicultural women have said that when they are in the

M.A.C.O. office, they feel comfortable being themselves because they are around people who come from similar backgrounds, people who understand them and who can relate to them.

When it comes to making women of color feel more comfortable here, the girls unanimously said that in order to make their experiences more welcoming they should have more women of color as students, faculty and staff. For the most part, these women believed that St. Olaf has done a good job in offering support systems, but without the recruitment of more multicultural women on campus, nothing will ever change. Many also believed that it would be nice to have more leadership retreats for multicultural students to keep them more active with the rest of the St. Olaf community. They also expressed how important their roles are in multicultural organizations because very few people of color are in positions of power outside of these organizations. Another concern was how to get more multicultural students involved in the stereotypically white organizations such as senate. Once again, possibly because they would be stepping out of their comfort zone.

Social Experience:

For most college students, being away from home for nine months out of the year requires creating a second home with alternative family members. That is exactly what the majority of multicultural women do here at St. Olaf. Their friends become their family members and at times they even begin calling each other brother, sister, and cousin. The bonds that they form with their friends are very important in keeping them happy while attending a school like St. Olaf College. Their friends are their support and for the most part, their friends are also multicultural students.

“When I hang out with my Asian friends, we are able to talk about anything without being judged.”

“Because I am a multicultural student I have become friends with other multicultural students who otherwise I would have never met or formed a bond with.”

“When I am here, I am out of my comfort zone, which helps me learn more about myself.”

These women gave many reasons as to why they tend to form friendships with other multicultural students. The overall reason is that they can relate more to each other's experience. They either have similar

backgrounds and/or cultures or they have the commonality that they have a different background and/or culture than the majority of the St. Olaf community. Another reason, is that many of them come from the same socio-economic background. This may not seem that important but it is very hard to relate with someone who has no idea of the struggles that their family has gone through and who is given everything they want or need without having to work for anything.

The majority of the multicultural women simply feel that they are just more comfortable with other multicultural students. They have also stated that if it weren't for the fact that this school is predominately white, they would have never made friends with some of the multicultural students that they are friends with. It is the bond of being a minority at this school that has brought them together.

“When I was in high school, my best friend was white, but at St. Olaf I don't really have any white friends.”

“It's hard for me to accept them (white people) because they don't accept me. I can't respect them, because they don't respect me.”

“One random girl asked me if I could teach her how to salsa dance. I hate it when people stereotype me.”

“I feel as though I have nothing in common with white students. We don't joke the same, we come from different backgrounds, and we have completely different experiences.”

“St. Olaf has dramatically changed my mind about white students in a more negative and stereotypical way. I am more closed to the majority of St. Olaf students.”

When asked about their relationships with other white students, most of the multicultural women interviewed stated that those relationships were very few, if they even existed. They felt that the white students stereotyped them, which in return made them stereotype the white students. The multicultural women felt that they were very different than the white students and that they could not relate with them and/or form strong bonds with them. They said that it was hard to become good friends with a white student because they were constantly having to explain themselves. The white person sees their situation as the norm and the multicultural women's situation as the deviant; it is simply too hard. For the ones who had some white friends, they answered by saying that either it was a different kind of friendship than most of their other friendships or that it was highly unusual. Being surrounded by people who they have nothing in common with was a huge obstacle for these women.

"I have to go off campus to date."

"What dating? I don't think it exists."

"White men are intimidated by women of color."

"Black guys like to date white girls."

When it comes to other aspects of social life, such as dating and athletics, multicultural women tend to have some negative attitudes. As for dating at St. Olaf they believe that it is almost impossible. The reason for this is because the multicultural men are limited and the white men are either intimidated by multicultural women or would rather not date outside of their race. It is also true that statistically men of color are more likely to date white women because they see this as moving upward on the social ladder while white men are less likely to date women of color because it could be viewed as moving downward on the social ladder (Whitney, Page 790). This is a cause of disappointment among the multicultural women, against both the white men and the men of color. And when a relationship does form between a white male student and a multicultural female student, often times it is very hard to maintain that relationship due to cultural differences. Most women feel that in order to date they must look for men off campus.

When it comes to athletics there are almost no women of color on the school teams. The number is so small that those who are on the teams can be named. The reason these women have a low participation rate in collegiate sports, is because it is not their first priority and if they do want to participate they will play in intramurals, and see it as a hobby.

"Being at St. Olaf helps me appreciate home more."

"Sometimes going to Target helps me escape from St. Olaf."

Most of the women feel that all of their social needs are not fulfilled at St. Olaf. Many of them think that in order for their needs to be fulfilled they have to go to the Cities where they are part of the real world and where they can feel more at home. St. Olaf can sometimes feel suffocating and even getting off campus to go to Target can be a breath of fresh air. Although St. Olaf does not offer everything that multicultural women need, most of these women reported feeling extremely satisfied with the strong friendships that they have made here.

Theoretical Implications:

"Identity theory is a micro sociological theory, which links self attitudes, or identities, to the role relationships, and role-related behavior of

individuals,”(UMD – Conflict Theory website). Identity theorists believe that the self consists of multiple identities in which we act according to the specific roles that we play. For a multicultural woman at St. Olaf College the concept of identity theory is very real. Being a woman of color at St. Olaf requires one to learn how to adapt. There are certain ways in which one must act depending upon who is around. Multicultural women may feel comfortable expressing themselves openly to other people of color, but may find that they must edit themselves around Caucasians. They must also adapt to the many groups of people that they will encounter: professors, staff, white classmates, white friends, and multicultural friends.

The life and problems of many multicultural women may also relate to the Conflict Theory. The Conflict Theory states, “*that the society or organization functions so that each individual participant and its groups struggle to maximize their benefits, which contributes to social change,*” (Wikipedia). The Conflict Theory is mainly used to explain conflict between social classes in ideologies. Society is full of opportunities and benefits, but for most of these women society constantly reminds them that those benefits are not reached by everyone, including women of color from a lower class. For many multicultural women not only are they part of a minority race and they are women, but they also have to deal with being from a lower class than most of the students in this liberal arts school. These women are caught in a situation where they have to choose between their low class communities, where there is little opportunity for change, or escape their communities to learn how to become better people, in order to create social change. In many of their situations, job opportunities in their communities are limited and they would only be making enough to survive financially. So, in order to make a social change in their communities they knew that they had to break the norm to make a difference. Which is exactly what these women have done, they have left their loved ones and their comfort zone to make the impossible, possible. They are in college now and many of them have hopes and dreams of returning to their hometowns to spread their knowledge and work, for improvement in their communities.

Summary and Conclusions

Multicultural women at St. Olaf will undoubtedly have a very different experience than the rest of the student body. What we have found in our research is that multicultural women’s interactions will be different and that they will have to adapt in a predominately white college.

Women of color tend to have a strong connection with their family, which thus affects their experience in college. As with all students, they form bonds with professors whom they feel most comfortable with and who teach in

their area of interest. But it is also helpful if the professor is empathetic of their situation and does not pity them. Multicultural students are always educating others on race and are constantly asked to represent their race as a whole. In the future it would be nice if multicultural women were seen as individuals, and not a race, in every classroom.

Multicultural women often feel out of place at St. Olaf because they do not fit the general description of what an “Ole” looks like. They have a hard time relating to Caucasian peers and often befriend other multicultural students. They join multicultural organizations and support groups where they can feel more relaxed and be themselves. In general, these organizations have proved to be very beneficial and have helped to create many leadership roles within the multicultural community.

Being that St. Olaf is a school that prides itself on diversity, it is obvious that it must work much harder to fulfill the image that it portrays. From our research, it is clear that the recruitment of more multicultural students as well as faculty and staff at St. Olaf is not only a recommendation but really is a necessity in making this campus a better place. St. Olaf needs to create within its bubble a society that reflects the rest of the world. Although this process may be long and slow, it can be done.

With this research, it is hoped that the student body as well as faculty, staff, and admissions will become more aware of the current status of multicultural women at St. Olaf, and that with this new enlightenment the process for change may begin. For further research it may be interesting to look at the subject of multicultural students’ experience from all the many angles that it may encompass. Our research dealt with multicultural women’s experience, but what about the men of color, the international students, and those students who are mixed with one Caucasian parent and one parent of color? It would be interesting to see how gender, race, ethnicity, and culture can really play into ones experience here at St. Olaf College.

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