



Perceptions of Socioeconomic Class Among Students At St. Olaf College

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It [the American dream] means the opportunity to go as far in life as your abilities will take you. Anyone in America can aspire to be a doctor, a teacher, a police officer or even, as Oprah said, a President. But you can't get any of those important jobs if you don't have the opportunity to acquire the skills you need . . . And that's why I believe that the key to the American Dream is education.

—Former President George Herbert Walker Bush, 1997

Abstract:

Discussing the topic of class in America is an extremely difficult and complicated task, because our culture features a strong aversion to acknowledging class differences, despite the obvious hierarchy that exists. Even the vocabulary used when we do engage in talking about class is extremely limited and poorly categorized. Terms ranging from “poor”, to “lower class”, “working class”, middle class”, upper middle class”, and “wealthy” serve to be the only real terms by which Americans label class. To compound this fact, America clings to a universal ideal of being a classless society, or one that features one big middle class.

Our project aimed to understand the perception of socioeconomic class among the St Olaf student community and how this perception reflects students own social class identity, as well as their perceptions of their peers. Our project focused on how students perceive indicators of class in relation to material wealth, post-undergraduate wealth aspirations, and value structures surrounding higher education. We collected information about these issues through focus groups, anonymous email surveys, interviews, and participation observation.

We found that St. Olaf students, like much of the American public, have a very difficult time thinking and talking about socioeconomic class as it appears on campus. This difficulty they experience seems to stem in part from the homogenous, middle class, Caucasian background that is so predominant at the college. Indeed, we found that the college itself plays a role in how socioeconomic class remains structured and perpetuated on campus. Despite this fact, it was in fact very apparent that students still engage in the practice of perceiving socioeconomic class both within themselves and of their peers here at St. Olaf. We discovered several intriguing aspects of how students perceive socioeconomic class, including dress, speech, volunteerism, religion, region and even race. Ultimately, we found that all of these elements combined to a strong conclusion that

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Executive Summary:

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Main Points:

- Socioeconomic class in America is an incredibly complex, difficult topic to approach and discuss. Americans tend to harbor a staunch belief in the American Dream, thus making perceptions of socioeconomic class a vague and complex topic to discuss.
- Students perceive their own identities of socioeconomic class through their family and regional backgrounds, as well as by the fact that they attend St. Olaf College. Students express a desire to be perceived as part of the middle class, and aspire to be much the same, despite differences in their current class status.
- Students perceive the socioeconomic status of other students through their outward appearance, speech and to some extent, their body language. Students expressed the importance of not showing off wealth and maintaining a humble outward expression of wealth and class.
- "Wealth guilt" is an existing phenomenon on the St. Olaf campus, and in fact seems to be integrated into the service-oriented value structure of the college itself. Thus, while many

students aspire toward a middle/upper middle class future, they also harbor aspirations of volunteerism.

- St. Olaf's homogenous population ties in with how perceptions of region, religion, and race tie with with perceptions of socioeconomic class.

Setting/Community:

St. Olaf College is a private, four-year undergraduate liberal arts college affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). It is located in Northfield, Minnesota, a somewhat rural town of roughly 18,000 people, which is also home to Carleton College. St. Olaf asserts its rank as an academically rigorous institution rooted in the liberal arts tradition where coursework is integrated across disciplines. St. Olaf College also emphasizes its standing as a college of the church, and students are required to fulfill general education requirements that explore elements of the Christian faith. The college also takes pride in its strong community atmosphere, which is steeped in the Norwegian-Lutheran tradition (St. Olaf College Website: About) <http://www.stolaf.edu/about>).

Of the roughly 3,000 full-time students, 43 different states (and the District of Columbia) are represented, as well as 19 foreign countries. 14% of the population is first-generation college students. 55% are women, and 45% are men. 8% identify themselves as racial/ethnic minorities. In terms of religious affiliation, 41% of students identify themselves as Lutheran, 19% other protestant, 14% Catholic, 18% no response/no affiliation, and 1% world religions (St. Olaf College Website: St. Olaf By The Numbers), <http://www.stolaf.edu/admissions/numbers.html>).

Academically, the median ACT score of entering students is 29 and the median combined SAT score is 1320. The average high school un-weighted GPA of entering students is 3.65, and 54% of the class of 2011 graduated in the top 10% of their class (St. Olaf College Website: St. Olaf By The Numbers).

Tuition at St. Olaf College during the 2007-2008 school year was \$38,500 in comprehensive fees of tuition, room and board. 82% of students receive need-based aid or merit scholarships from the college. The average need-based financial aid package is \$23,700 (St. Olaf College Website: St. Olaf By The Numbers).

One unique feature of St. Olaf College is its residential campus and emphasis on community. 96% of students live on campus, which is situated on the top of a hill, about a 20-minute walk from the central area of downtown Northfield. The college only allows a certain number of students to live off-campus each year in an effort to preserve this residential, community feel. Each week, the college schedules forty-five minutes of "Community Time" when classes stop and students are encouraged to participate in various community-based activities. Whether or not students use this time to build community or see themselves as being a part of the St. Olaf community is beyond the scope of this research project, however, it is something the college administration greatly prizes and seeks to endorse. (St. Olaf College Website: St. Olaf By The Numbers).

Another unique feature of St. Olaf College is the high numbers of students who study abroad. St. Olaf is first among liberal arts colleges of its size in the number of students who study abroad, and 78% of each graduating class studies off campus. Study abroad programs vary in length, location and cost (St. Olaf College Website: St. Olaf By The Numbers).

The setting of St. Olaf College provides a clearly defined, unique setting in which to conduct our ethnographic project. The college's various distinctive qualities, values, and demographics allow for a fascinating look into a specific culture and its perception of socioeconomic class.

The Problem:

Socioeconomic class in America is an incredibly complex, difficult topic to approach and discuss. Americans tend to harbor a staunch belief in the "American Dream," which insists, "hard work and educational advancement are rewarded with upward mobility (Hochschild: 53, 1995). These beliefs are such deeply embedded features of American culture that they often serve to negatively brand members of the lower class as unsuccessful, useless, or lazy. These beliefs can also act as an effective blinding mechanism for Americans to avoid or ignore questions regarding class status and wealth distribution. However, this is not to say that all Americans aspire to be upper class, either. Survey research indicates that most Americans identify themselves as "middle class" (Bullock and Limbert: 694, 2003 quoting Kelley & Evans 1995). Why do so many Americans want to be middle class and why do they avoid issues of class stratification?

While many people are not likely to openly discuss or question class hierarchies, Americans are constantly processing and constructing ideas about class in their daily lives. While some Americans harbor a tremendous desire to be identified with the middle class, others aspire to higher levels of social strata. The disparity between mobility aspirations directly influences those looking to ascend the class ladder to utilize the notion of the American Dream. The problem remains, however, that class mobility "up the ladder" is incredibly difficult to achieve, and most Americans do not experience permanent, dramatic changes in class status (Bullock and Limbert 2003). Despite this deterrent, it is certain that Americans place a great deal of value on social class, whatever their views, as they engage in a continual process of perceiving and constructing social class.

In light of St. Olaf's generally homogenous, white, upper-middle class population, we sought to explore the different ways in which students think about social class, its relationship to themselves, to St. Olaf, and the wider world. In doing so we examined how students talked about and displayed wealth, as well as how they consciously and unconsciously tried to conceal and ignore it.

Class and Educational Inequality in America

Before examining perceptions of socioeconomic class at St. Olaf, we must first question how students are able to attend a small, liberal arts college in the first place. The most obvious answer is that they received good grades in school, probably had some type of leadership role in an extra-curricular activity, and volunteered for a service program. The real question then, is what factors enabled these students to accomplish so much as elementary, middle, and high school students? Why are they at St. Olaf, a small, competitive, expensive liberal arts school, when they could be at a larger, less expensive state or community school? Why didn't they drop out of high school like some of their hometown peers? What enabled them to succeed?

On the first day of Sociological Theory at St. Olaf College, Dr. Samiha Peterson voices a variety of profound ideas about society and the world in general to her students. One such phrase is remembered with renewed significance in the researchers' minds. She informed us: you are not here because you are smart. You are here because other people have given you opportunities. St. Olaf students have been given opportunities throughout their lives to succeed academically. They succeeded where their peers did not because of these opportunities. Herein lies the beginning of our

discussion regarding the relationship between class and educational success, both before and during college.

Much research has gone into the study of educational success and lack thereof. The book *Schooling in Capitalist America* by S. Bowles and H. Gintis examines, amongst other issues, how schools reproduce inequalities and socialize children into class patterns. One particularly pertinent quote used by Bowles et al. from Frank Freeman's "Sorting the Students" succinctly describes the purpose of the school (*Education Review, 1924*): "It is the business of the school to help the child to acquire such an attitude toward the inequalities of life, whether in accomplishment or in reward, that he may adjust himself to its conditions with the least possible friction." Bowles et al. describe schooling in America as a meritocracy, whereby students are taught to accept "preexisting economic disparity" while the upper class legitimates its success through meritocratic principles. They have succeeded because they work the hardest and are the smartest, most skilled, and most gifted (Bowles et al. 1976).

We must question the validity of this reasoning. Why do most students who attend St. Olaf come from the middle to upper middle classes, even when financial aid is readily available to help those in need? Why do the majority of students come from white, suburban neighborhoods as opposed to minority areas in the inner city? These seem like basic questions, but they are at the core of why we want to study perceptions of socioeconomic class at St. Olaf. In our study, we wished to address why and how students at a school with such a homogenous population think about socioeconomic class, how they perceived their own place within socioeconomic class, and how their backgrounds influenced their perceptions. Most importantly, we wished to examine how St. Olaf's students actively participate in creating perceptions of socioeconomic class on campus and how they fit into the wider class structures of the United States.

Methodology: Part I

In studying perceptions of socioeconomic class at St. Olaf, we used four basic methodologies: electronic surveys, interviews, focus groups, and participant observation.

The first, most basic source of information came from 209 electronic surveys sent randomly to, full-time St. Olaf students. We chose to include this angle of research in our project because we thought it would be interesting to see a broader spectrum of responses to general questions in addition to the smaller, deeper scope of interviews and focus groups. Though the surveys provide a very shallow view of the issues and are by no means statistically significant, we meant for qualitative and quantitative data to inform each other and expand our understanding of the student body's socioeconomic perceptions.

Survey questions ranged from a gathering of background data to more in-depth, personal questions. Background questions included the subject's sex, race, socioeconomic background, whether or not they were given work-study, and whether they were a first-generation college student. Both questions of sex and race were placed at the end of the survey so that they would not overly influence the person's other answers. More specific, personal questions asked about how comfortable the subject felt talking about money and socioeconomic class with their friends at St. Olaf. We wanted to know how comfortable students felt talking about these subjects and if there was a difference in comfort levels between the two.

The remainder of questions asked were meant to explore each subject's perception of socioeconomic class with respect to themselves and their peers. With these questions, we wished to investigate what socioeconomic class students assigned themselves to and which ones they wanted to be seen as belonging to? What socioeconomic class do students think the majority of their peers

belong to and which do they see themselves as being a part of 10 years from now? Do students want to be perceived as belonging to a different class than they are actually in? We asked these more pointed questions on the survey not to rest our analysis on subjective and most likely statistically insignificant numbers, but to get opinions from a broader spectrum of the St. Olaf populace than we could reasonably accomplish with interviews and focus groups.

While some of our interview questions were the same as on the survey, others probed more deeply into the “why” and “how” of each question. For example, we asked, “Why did you decide to go to college?” and “Do your parents have any specific expectations of you as far as continued education or post-St. Olaf professions?” We also looked for specific indicators of class, exploring how people qualified their perceptions, and wanted to know how they incorporated perceptions of social class with elements of dress and appearance, body language, and friendship groups. In general, we attempted to more deeply and specifically explore issues of socioeconomic class at St. Olaf.

Focus groups were highly valuable to us in gathering new ideas and observing student discourse about socioeconomic class. As has already been stated, Americans rarely discuss class; it might almost be called taboo, especially if the conversation is between two people of different classes. Therefore, the focus groups were extremely valuable at gauging how students expressed their thoughts about mostly unstated social norms, even though most students were from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. As different ideas and issues were raised, we were able to adjust our questions for the next group. After the first session, we added a question probing the relationship between class and race. We also asked about body language as an indicator of class, in addition to dress and appearance.

The set-up of the discussion was such that the researchers sat at the end of a large, square table around which members of the focus group sat. Researchers posed questions for discussion and participants responded informally, discussing the topic until the conversation naturally ended. Two of the focus groups had six participants, while the third had only three. Although approximately two hundred random emails were sent out to St. Olaf students asking them to participate in the focus group, only two individuals came to one of the three groups. Therefore, because of time constraints, the researchers were forced to ask people they knew to participate in the focus groups. While much of the conversation was very useful to the researchers, the participant group demographic was admittedly biased because of their previous association with the researchers.

Participant observation also provided a lot of useful information through daily interactions with various friends, acquaintances, and even strangers.

Findings:

Survey Results

One hundred thirty-nine of the surveys were taken by females and sixty-five by males. One hundred ninety-eight students identified themselves as white, three as Asian or Pacific Islander, and two as Hispanic or Latino. None identified themselves as American Indian or Alaskan Native or Black. One hundred and two people identified themselves as being upper-middle class and another seventy-nine as middle class. A negligible total of 8 students placed themselves in the upper class or poor. Most students identified themselves as being from Minnesota, Wisconsin, or other Mid-Western states. Therefore, most Saint Olaf students who filled out the survey were white, middle to upper-middle class and from the Northern-Midwest.

The rest of the survey results will be discussed throughout the remainder of this paper, as we have broken down and categorized the results as they relate to the different aspects of socioeconomic perception we discovered throughout this project.

Student Perceptions of the St. Olaf Majority Population

Michel Foucault's ideas on power and knowledge provide a useful theoretical framework for the setting and analysis of the St. Olaf population. Foucault states that power and knowledge remain inextricably bound to one another, as "the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge, and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power (Foucault: 52, 1980). Power and knowledge therefore create a framework by which people determine and experience class levels, in terms of whether they are the ones in power or under the jurisdiction of those who have it. Foucault directly relates this to a university setting, which serves as "the most visible, most sclerotic, and least dangerous form of [the power/knowledge] phenomenon (Foucault: 52, 1980). It is in this setting that knowledge is transferred and taught to those in the privileged position to receive it. In turn, those relaying knowledge also carry power. This power/knowledge then becomes transferred through the process of higher education. In our culture, the mere fact that someone has graduated from a university imbues them with an undeniable source of power and knowledge over others who have not accomplished such a thing.

In light of Foucault's ideas of power/knowledge and class, it is especially interesting to examine the findings of our study of student's perceptions and desires surrounding the class identity of the St. Olaf majority as compared to their own. Throughout the various methods of study (survey, interview, focus groups, and participant observation) engaged in by the researchers, students at St. Olaf seemed to give a consistent answer to the question of what socioeconomic class they thought the majority of St. Olaf students belonged to. Perhaps the most interesting part of this is found in the survey results. While the largest number of students placed themselves in the upper middle class (107), and one hundred fifty-one said they felt the majority of St. Olaf students belonged to the upper-middle class, 107 said they wished to be perceived as a member of the middle class. While (as stated in the methodology section) these surveys will not be analyzed as statistically significant, the given responses display a range of legitimate opinions from the St. Olaf student body and should be recognized as such. This desire to be a part of the middle class is also pointed out in the film "People Like Us" (Alvarez and Kolker 2001). Even though class divisions certainly exist in modern America, it is almost un-American to admit to being anything other than middle class. Does recognizing social class somehow, embarrassingly, prove that liberty and justice is not for all in America? Perhaps we jump to conclusions a little too fast on this point, but it is an important point to think about why, even at a small liberal arts college with many upper-middle class people, we desire to be perceived as middle class.

Many of the same opinions were voiced in the survey, interviews, and focus groups. Most students viewed the majority of St. Olaf students to be upper-middle class. Almost all the people interviewed individually and in focus groups perceived the majority of students to be upper-middle class. At the same time, however, diversity did exist even within the general trend. One interviewee said that for the first two years she attended St. Olaf she assumed almost everyone was from the upper-middle class, but has since then seen more students who struggle to pay for school and are not part of this category. Another student interviewed said she knew many students who struggled to pay for school, one of whom had dropped out because she could not pay. One frequently assumed detail was that parents were paying for student's education. While this was true for the majority of students interviewed, it was not the case for at least one of them.

Self-Perceptions of Class

All but one of the students we interviewed one-on-one, whether they considered themselves to be upper-middle class or middle class, did not want to be seen as part of a different class than the one they perceived themselves to be a part of. Interviewed students seemed to take relative pride in the class they came from, since they said they would not actively dress or act differently to change the perceptions of others. Many implied, however, that if they were from an upper or upper-middle class background they didn't "flaunt" their wealth. As one interviewee succinctly put it, people don't "appreciate" it when others flaunt their wealth. Therefore, while students may not actively try to change other people's perceptions of them regarding class, there is an unspoken rule that if you do have lots of money, you don't let everyone know. No one should necessarily stick out as being "rich."

One interesting point, however, was that some students put themselves in a different socioeconomic class than their parents. While most students took the question of their own socioeconomic class to be that of their parents, some made a differentiation. The issue of awareness is important in studying this topic. While most interviewees indicated that their own socioeconomic status was the same as their parents (since they are still dependant on them to pay for college) one interviewee very clearly differentiated her own class from that of her parents. Although it is not known whether her parents pay for school, her reasons for their different socioeconomic status was level of education. Neither of her parents had been to college and both, according to her, were of the working class. Her grandparents, however, were middle class, as was she, because she received a higher education. Socioeconomic class is often measured by more than just wealth and possessions. Many Americans measure class by education. Even if an assembly line worker makes more money than a teacher in any given town, the teacher might consider his or herself to be of a higher class than the assembly line worker because he/she has a higher degree. The teacher has what the assembly line worker does not: cultural capital, access to ideas and concepts associated with a higher class. Although the assembly line worker could potential pay (with his higher income) to convert material wealth, or capital, into cultural capital, or education, many debate whether it is actually possible to learn to be in a new class. We therefore postulate that our interviewee perceives herself as middle class because she has been educated at a higher level than her parents and already has some cultural capital from her grandparents.

"Wealth Guilt" and Volunteerism

Throughout the course of our study, one aspect of student experience with socioeconomic class surfaced concerning the burden that comes with wealth and inheritance of a higher class. In a 1988 study on the practice philanthropy of the wealthy, Schervish and Herman discovered a pervasive feeling of guilt among wealthy people:

Wealth is experienced as a burden when it leads inheritors to devalue their self-worth, when it operates as a source of guilt, when it stigmatizes individuals as being different from the rest of the social world, and when it sets them up as targets for others' jealousy, envy, hatred, and financial dunning. (46)

Schervish and Herman discovered that wealthy people who experience their wealth as a burden engage in certain behaviors in regards to their wealth. People who find their wealth to be a burden

tend to engage in a basic strategy to separate themselves from it. These people may try to disguise or deny their wealth in many different ways.

Several students that participated in our study and who classified themselves as “well-off” or “upper middle class” confirmed Schervish and Herman’s findings. One interviewee classified herself as upper-middle class, based on the fact that she “doesn’t have to worry about finances much.” She added that it was only in the past few years that she had come to classify herself as upper middle class because before that point, her family had struggled with finances. Thus, according to this student, she and her family effectively experienced movement up the ladder, at least in terms of strictly economic class. This student said that if other students didn’t know her, they might consider her to be of a lower class than she actually is. However, she perceived that the more others get to know her, the higher they would consider her class to be. The student said that while she doesn’t really care that much about what other students think of her socioeconomic classification, she does prefer that people perceive her as middle class.

When asked if she ever did anything to make sure that other students saw her in a slightly lower class way, she spoke of her tendency to stay out of conversations whenever the topic of finances arose. “I tend to disengage from the conversation and I don’t share much about myself (in regards to the topic of finances). If people don’t know about me, but heard me talk about finances, they might think that I’ve been pretty wealthy all my life. I don’t want people to think this of me, because I’ve had the experience of struggle and hardship when it comes to money.”

Schervish and Herman also presented the idea of wealth as a form of opportunity and responsibility. They found that while some wealthy people become consumed with guilt and self-doubt, some find an opportunity to reverse that guilt by turning their wealth into a means for good. These people “come to hear a certain call to duty, a vocation to use the freedom of wealth to “make a difference” in the world, to contribute to the betterment of society in a way that most people have neither the time nor the money to do” (Schervish and Herman 1988: 57).

Another female student who participated in a focus group demonstrated this experience of wealth and status. This student remained fairly talkative throughout most of the focus group, but did not volunteer the following information until the very end of the session when we asked if there was anything else that anyone wanted to share or that we hadn’t covered. She said:

I think the concept of guilt for St. Olaf students is somewhat of an issue, especially for people who are wealthy, or even just middle class, you feel like you kind of owe something to the community at large or people in another country. So volunteering obviously isn’t the selfless act that everyone purports it to be, but I feel like it’s a way for people to compensate for the guilt that they feel about being so wealthy. Like me, I come from a pretty well off family, but I want to go to law school and I want to be a human rights lawyer to help the less fortunate and immigrants, specifically. And sometimes I wonder why I’m really doing this—is this what I actually want to do or is this just me trying to make it okay that that’s my background? It’s something I can’t change.

Apart from this particular wealthy student, several other students we talked to mentioned the pervasiveness of volunteerism at St. Olaf as a factor of wealth. On several occasions, students mentioned that volunteering is indeed a luxury, because most people in the “real world” do not necessarily have the means, time, or ability to volunteer and still maintain a supportive income. One student pointed out that, “a lot of people here seem to go on to do some sort of medical school or law school or a graduate program of some sort. Or they do volunteer work—which is another indicator of wealth.”

This observation highlights a strong correlation with the institutional framework of St. Olaf College, and supports a strong culture of socioeconomic structuring. It also harkens back to Foucault's ideas on power/knowledge structures within the university setting. Almost anyone familiar with St. Olaf College is aware of how the college prides itself as an institution dedicated to service and social conscientiousness. Catchphrases pepper much of the "lingo" used by administrators and college literature materials. The college continually purports "ideals to action", prepares students for "lives of worth and service" and "inspires students to act on intellectual ideas and ethical ideals to better the world at home and abroad" (St. Olaf College Website: About <http://www.stolaf.edu/about>). In fact, St. Olaf is one of the top suppliers of students to the Peace Corps. While these ideals and morals are not explicit indicators of the wealth-guilt that Schervisch and Herman write of, there is an unavoidable connection between the pervasive middle/upper-middle-class demographic at St. Olaf and the omnipresent reputation of student volunteerism, or "vocation".

As opposed to other higher education institutions, St. Olaf College has a very specific and deliberate structure of academics and vocation. Students are aware of this difference, and it became a significant point of discussion among our study participants. During many of the interviews and all of the focus groups, a participant would point out the uniqueness found in the majors that are *not* offered at St. Olaf. Students were quick to point out that the college does not offer a business major, whereas other institutions do. Students relayed that a major like Business tends to connote an economic focus on money and wealth, which tend not to be the valued ideals at St. Olaf. During one focus group session, a student noted that

St. Olaf doesn't even offer a Business degree, and there's no business school. At St. Thomas you can major in "Entrepreneurship". I feel like people here would just laugh at that kind of thing." (Indeed, as soon as the student finished her sentence, all of the participants started to laugh) "St. Olaf definitely doesn't condone the idea of going to college just to make money...it's more about changing who you are as a person, and whether or not that actually happens, it's what St. Olaf wants us to believe.

Students, therefore, seem to be acutely aware of the structural mindset employed by the college. They at least have a sense of understanding and a somewhat shared belief in the ideals being impressed upon them, enough to follow through with their education under the institutional guidance of the college. It is interesting to note, that the college does indeed offer courses in Entrepreneurship, and has the Finstad Center for Entrepreneurial Studies. Students in our focus (as well as the researchers) were not aware of this fact. This provides some indication that some students would not expect the college to even have such an element of the institution. Indeed, students seemed to indicate that between the influence of the values impressed upon them and the influence of the college's environment, their post-graduate lives would be affected by their time at St. Olaf.

Post-Graduate Plans and Class "Aspirations"

One student acknowledged the fact that "Unless I make a concerted effort to go out and get a factory job after college or something, I'm probably going to remain with people like this (St. Olaf students), to some degree, for the rest of my life...I don't think many people think they're going to be wealthy upper class necessarily, but, they certainly don't think that they're going to be working in a paper mill." Most students we asked had at least a vague idea of post-graduate plans after graduating from St. Olaf that ranged from graduate school to volunteer work. Most students claimed

that their parents did not have any concrete expectations of them in terms of post-graduate plans, though most said that their parents expected them to eventually maintain independence for themselves. No one explicitly indicated that becoming wealthy (or even making money) was an important element of his or her post-graduate future. Our survey results also supported this mindset. 79 students classified themselves as "middle class" and 102 students classified themselves as "upper middle class", but when asked what class they see themselves belonging to 10 years from now, 98 said "middle class", while 85 said "upper middle class." Thus, St. Olaf students harbor a very specific mindset as to how wealth and class factors into their future, and the value system supported by the structure of the college supports this mindset.

Perceptions of Region and Class

Region is often associated with class in America, whether stratified across the country, across a state, or across a neighborhood. People tend to live in neighborhoods that they can afford and they feel comfortable in. This often means that neighborhoods are grouped and separated by class. Many students in the focus groups referred to the inner city as having a lower income population, and this was often associated with minority, non-white populations. Some students referred to Ebonics as "city speak," tying together aspects of region, race, and class. The issue of race will be discussed later on in this paper, but it is important to recognize the association of "proper" or mainstream, white English with region, class, and race.

Although the survey did not ask about the neighborhoods or regions students grew up in (rural, suburban, urban) it found that most came from the upper Midwest. While few opinions were expressed about the socioeconomic majority in the Midwest, several allusions were made to places outside of the Midwest, specifically, the East Coast, which helped to clarify people's perceptions of their own region in regard to money and class. The East Coast was often referred to as "rich," wealthier than the rest of the country, and, more specifically, the Midwest. One student in a focus group said that although some people in the Midwest may be wealthy, they are also "humble" about it. Another student, while eating in the cafeteria one day, expressed how grateful she was sometimes that the Midwest did not have as much "old money" as the East Coast. She suggested that those with "old money" flaunt it more than the "nouveau riche." This was especially interesting in light of a comment made in the film "People Like Us" which stated that people who have gained wealth throughout their lifetime tend to flaunt it more instead of the other way round. The film stated that overtly displaying wealth could often be an indicator of lower class, even though that person might possess just as much wealth as the upper class (Alvarez and Kolker 2001). Many students in interviews and focus groups also stated that flaunting wealth was not appreciated, and that it was an indicator of being "lower class." Therefore, we found that not all opinions were uniform, and that regional stereotypes could often be combined with class stereotypes.

Comments made by St. Olaf students regarding region and class exhibit their general Midwestern, middle to upper-middle class background. Regardless of whether or not the East Coast has more wealth (though it probably also has more inner-city, low income minorities as well), many students felt the need to distance themselves from this image of the upper or upper-middle class, which takes its wealth for granted. Most students thought of themselves (or at least wanted to think of themselves) as "humble," even if they, too, were of a middle to upper-middle class.

Race and Class at St. Olaf

Issues of race and class in the United States are inextricably bound. The general division between the white suburbanites and minority inner-city population is as real and strikingly problematic today

as it was almost fifty years ago with the civil rights movement of our parent's generation. As can be seen from the survey, very few students categorize themselves as being part of a minority group. All one needs to do to get a sense of St. Olaf's racial demographics is walk through Buntrock Commons, the school's central building, and note the obvious majority of Caucasians. Although historical factors obviously figure into the relationship between race and class in America, many theories have tried to identify how inequalities are perpetuated in the classroom. Among these are the sociolinguist position of the 1970s, which argued that low achievement of minority groups in school resulted from cultural misunderstandings between student and teacher (Erickson 1987). This was a socially relativist position criticized strongly by Ogbu, who stated that it was caused, instead, by unequal access to employment (Erickson 1987). Regardless of whatever theory one subscribes to, it cannot be denied that different cultures have different ways of communicating, and that in America, through historical circumstances of slavery, emigration, and urban planning, race and class are divided by culture. Erickson speaks of Gumpurz's "*speech communities*" and "*speech networks*" which are "sets of people who associate closely and who come to share similar assumptions about the appropriate uses and styles of communication." This disparity between communication and the general underachievement of minority populations in school, as well as the ways in which this reproduces socioeconomic inequality, can be seen on St. Olaf's campus.

Minority students that attend St. Olaf are usually ushered into the TRIO program, even before the rest of the freshman classes get there. It is through this program that http://stolaf.edu/depts/sociology/major/373/373final_papers_2008/diversity.htm minority students can meet others in the same position as themselves and form friendships that will last throughout college. Many students in our focus groups mentioned that there is racial segregation on campus. In the cafeteria, the minority students usually sit together. Some students in the focus groups stated that these students "almost tend to segregate out themselves" although most other students admitted it was hard to integrate from both sides. One student in a focus group stated that on an abroad trip, the student's friendship circles were mostly separated into minority and Caucasian groups. She also remarked that the former would sometimes make comments about the latter taking another "expensive road day." However, it seems that there is so little contact between the minority and white students at St. Olaf that very little direct interaction occurs. In this study, we did not interview or have any minority students in our focus groups. Therefore, we are left somewhat in the dark as to many relationships between class and race at St. Olaf. The fact remains, however, that the small percentage of minority students at St. Olaf and general segregation supports the idea that socioeconomic class retains its ties to power/knowledge being passed on to the privileged.

Perceptions of Religion and Class

One interesting aspect of class perception voiced by students surfaced during one of the focus group sessions. The discussion progressed around the topic of separation between race and class on campus, and one student pointed out that the differences in class are not limited by appearance or race. The student said,

"I'm mostly friends with the 'church kids', and if a non-church kid wanted to sit with us in the Caf, I'm sure they would feel a sense of that divide. But I think that's just how St. Olaf is set up...you make really strong friendships right away and its difficult to break away from those groups and into new ones later on."

This point prompted one student to ask the speaker, how much the "church kid thing" tied in with economic class. The student responded:

"Well, the ELCA, I think, as a whole, is more middle to upper-middle class. And so, if you come from an ELCA background, you're more integrated into that class, even if you're not a part of it in actuality, but you know how to behave that way, and exist within that class structure. "

The student indicated that the 'church kids' communicate their class status with sets of behaviors like good grammar, and knowing how to dress nicely for church on Sunday.

Another student noted that she thought that the ELCA represented the "majority, acceptable mainstream line of faith. People who are ELCA tend to be a part of it because they were born into that, as their families are also ELCA and their ancestors were too."

Another student noted that the, ELCA is often seen as a progressive kind of faith, and she perceived progressive people as more educated and well off.

We asked if the participants were aware of any opposite counterparts to the ELCA middle/upper-middle class status. There was a brief silence, which was then filled by a near-joking exclamation of "the Baptists!" from one participant. The participant went on to give an example of a fellow student on campus that "takes pride in her poor, Alabama Baptist roots." The other participants did not disagree with this student, and one in fact said, "I can't think of another denomination besides that one that would be more associated with a lower class."

The St. Olaf College setting and value structure as an ELCA-affiliated institution therefore seems to play a role in student perception of socioeconomic class, as well as active student construction of their own socioeconomic identity.

Awareness of Socioeconomic Class at St. Olaf

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of our study at St. Olaf College was student's lack of awareness of socioeconomic class. Most students who were interviewed had to first sit back in their chair and think for several seconds before answering, making comments such as "oh wow" and "this is hard." It was as if this was the first time they had really considered such a topic, or at least thought about it in a direct way. In one focus group, students had an extremely difficult time expanding on their answers. It seemed like they wanted to voice their opinions about the topic, but did not feel comfortable sharing them at that moment in such a setting. This is a testament to how hard it is for students to talk about socioeconomic class as well as how little they consciously think about it on a day-to-day basis. Many students who were like the rest of the majority of St. Olaf students (middle to upper-middle class), and had experienced similar homogeneity in their hometowns and high schools, seemed to think about and voice less of a strong opinion on class issues.

Students who saw themselves as being in a different socioeconomic class than the majority, however, answered interview questions more readily. They did not have to think about their answers for as long as the others and seemed to think about and be more aware of socioeconomic class in general. They had previously formulated opinions about their own socioeconomic class, that of the majority, and the relationship between the two, which seemed to result from their difference experiences. Likewise, students who were from the same socioeconomic class as the majority of St. Olaf students, but had experienced more of that diversity in their hometown or high school, or had experienced a change in socioeconomic class, were able to talk more easily about class differences.

Conclusions

Our research ultimately shows that at St. Olaf College, student's level of socioeconomic awareness increased with the amount of actual socioeconomic diversity they had experienced in their lives. "Socioeconomic diversity" would indicate a person who has come from a minority class of family wealth or class range (especially on the very high or very low end). "Socioeconomic diversity" also includes people who come from a socioeconomically diverse area, or have been in contact with a range of others from very high or low class ranges.

The majority of the students we spoke with did not seem to experience as much socioeconomic diversity and had a harder time formulating their opinions on the subject although, that is not to say that they were completely unaware of socioeconomic class in their daily lives. Rather, it is natural for people to be unaware of something that they have not experienced diversely. Many St. Olaf students do not experience drastic socioeconomic differences in their daily lives and, therefore, have little reason to think about socioeconomic class in general.

While class can be fairly visible (how people dress, how they act, what they eat) it can also be invisible. How one dresses within the confines of a certain class does not always positively correlate with money. We used Weber's concept of the difference between class, which basically measures "bracket of income," and "status groups" which refer to "life style and other "shared similarities"" collectively when we refer to socioeconomic class (Bond, 1981). While much depends on income and the opportunities an individual can gain with money, much also depends on the individual's "life style." Class is different from other stratifying factors in America, such as race and gender, in that many of its aspects are not so quantifiable or easily seen.

St. Olaf College is not totally devoid of socioeconomic diversity. However, it must be remembered that such a highly competitive institution of higher learning needs money to remain so, and only so many students can even be admitted who cannot pay at least something or full price. The admissions process is not only a balancing act of students' GPA and ACT or SAT scores, but of how much they can pay and how much aid they will receive. Clearly, power, money, and knowledge are still inextricably combined at St. Olaf, even though its academic areas might not make the former their primary goal. Although we and many other St. Olaf students would like to think otherwise, class divisions rule American society and have already positioned another generation to receive that knowledge and power.

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