

A Qualitative Study by Leah Hakkola and Kim Pham

St. Olaf College, Northfield, M

May 2005

So/An 373: Ethnographic Research Methods

Prof. Chris Chiappari

Executive Summary:

Senioritis: Myth or Reality

An Analysis of the Senior Experience at St. Olaf College

Setting:

St. Olaf College: the sample population was St. Olaf seniors. The interview subjects were five women and five men.

Problem:

St. Olaf College seniors are on the cusp of a transitional stage in their lives. They are in the process of leaving a comfortable and stable environment to embark upon what many St. Olaf seniors call “the real world”, which can be exciting but also very stressful. We wanted to investigate, through our interview subjects, who has, what is, and why seniors have senioritis. Additionally, we wanted to explore what senioritis means to students and the characteristics that seniors display when they are “infected” with senioritis.

Methodology:

We individually interviewed ten students, five female and five male seniors. We asked them about their experiences with and opinions about college senioritis.

Observations:

- Five areas of concern are career related, change and loss related, graduate professional school related, class related and support related.
-
- Senior students who had less class structure tended to be affected with senioritis more.

-
- Most senior students possessed a “last chance” mentality about their second semester.
-
- Female senior students tended to be more concerned with balancing career and relationships after college. They also were more concerned with the emotional aspects of senioritis. While senior males focused primarily on career aspirations, money, grad school options.
-
- Senior students expressed the increasing desire to give into impulse and desire, reorganize their priorities, and have as much “fun” as possible before graduation.
-
- In order to cope with senioritis, seniors often complained to each other, procrastinated, or viewed it as a natural process as a senior, and thus not something that could be dealt with.

Synopsis:

Senior year at St. Olaf College is a transitional phase where seniors experience common sentiments, and create traditions, habits, and customs in order to better understand and cope with this unique period in their life.

Abstract:

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of St. Olaf College seniors who are affected by senioritis. In this study St. Olaf seniors defined senioritis as possessing a lack of academic motivation, experiencing an increase in concerns regarding future plans and relationships, and an amplified desire to embrace social activities. We interviewed five women and five men. We wanted to find out the various negative and positive ways that senioritis influences seniors. In addition, we wanted to explore how seniors cope with and understand the process of senioritis, and whether they believe it to be a uniquely American phenomenon. We used sociological theory as a framework for our findings.

The Sociological Problem:

St. Olaf College seniors are on the cusp of a transitional stage in their lives. They are in the process of leaving a comfortable and stable environment to embark upon what many St. Olaf seniors call “the real world”, which can be exciting but also very stressful. We wanted to investigate, through our interview subjects, who has, what is, and why seniors have senioritis. Additionally, we wanted to explore what senioritis means to students and the characteristics that seniors display when they are “infected” with senioritis.

We (Kim and Leah) were very interested in the idea of the transitional stage. From our own experiences, we have found that transitional stages are places where emotions, concerns, and values are most heightened in an individual. Transitional stages are also places where people often need each other the most. Thus, we felt that the college senior transition would be an enlightening journey into human social behavior. We wanted to understand whether and how seniors are able to cope with each other during such a poignant time in their lives

We are also in our senior year at St. Olaf College and thus are participants in this phenomenon known as senioritis. We felt that it was appropriate to study this subject as it has been addressed increasingly within the past year with our friends and classmates. As seniors, particularly after spring break, we found that we had a difficult time finding motivation to do homework outside of our classes. We felt an overwhelming sense of apathy towards our classes because we felt that it did not apply to our future lives. We found that if our course was not meaningful or practical to our lives, we had the tendency to have a more relaxed mentality towards the work. All our courses were required to graduate and finish our major.

Similar to some of our senior interviewees, we found that the lack of structure in our classes made it difficult to focus on completing assignments that were not graded, as there were no consequences for not finishing. Most of our classes were discussion based which meant that we had a significant amount of reading, discussed the readings in class, and then had to write one or two major papers before then end of the course. This kind of structure led to procrastination because much of the motivation to complete the work was placed on the students, and rightly so. However, because of certain unique circumstances largely due to the affects of senioritis, we found it difficult to motivate ourselves up to the academic level needed in order to perform how we

had prior to our senior year.

Moreover, we realized that if our course was not applicable or practical to our lives, we had the tendency to have a more relaxed mentality towards the work. Because we were taking our senior seminar classes, we found the coursework to be repetitious of what we had learned in these past four years at St. Olaf College. We also felt that the homework for our courses became a redundant process of reading and discussion of the same topics. Thus, as long as we managed to finish the assignments by the due date and maintain a certain GPA for graduation, we allowed ourselves to focus on aspects of our lives that were important or relevant to us such as cementing friendships, housing matters, summer jobs, and law school.

Both of us decided to take the LSATs and apply to law school last fall. Because this decision was a significant stepping-stone in our vocational paths, we tended to concentrate more of our time and effort into studying for the LSATs and properly completing our applications for these schools. We discovered that many of our interviewees had similar experiences as they were applying for medical school, or some type of graduate school program. Thus, they were also very future-oriented during the fall and winter of their senior year, making it difficult to focus on their classes at St. Olaf.

Furthermore, current law school students told us horror stories about what the first year for them was like and how demanding it was on their time. We were told that it was very hard to make, let alone cement any kind of “real” friendships in law school because of the overly competitive atmosphere. Hence, we developed an overarching concern to start establishing our friendships at St. Olaf before we moved out of this comfortable environment and into a more distant and aloof social setting. Moreover, because we knew we would soon be living on our own, without the “in loco parentis” St. Olaf community, we viewed our senior year as our last time to enjoy the luxuries of having a close-knit social life, relaxed environment, and freedom to not worry about “real world” responsibilities. As a result, we found ourselves reprioritizing our time and schedules in accordance with our newly developed “last chance” mentality.

In order to understand the phenomenon of senioritis, it is important to look at why students attend college in the first place. According to a survey conducted by S.V. Brown, if asked why students chose to go onto higher education, approximately 75% of today’s college students will quickly respond “to get a job” or “to make more money” (Grossman, 2005). Students’ chief motivation is to acquire a job and make money, and thus putting homework on the backburner makes sense as students devote the majority of their time toward acing that interview or applying to graduate school. Thus the problem remains that the students do not get much out of their college experience academically

in their final year.

At the same time, students do not feel adequately prepared to take on “real world” tasks, particularly when colleges dedicated to the liberal arts train students to think in certain ways rather than to apply themselves to the “real world.” According to a study done in the *Journal of Employment Counseling*, students feel that they are not prepared to meet the demands of a highly diverse, competitive, and technologically oriented economy (Woods, 2004). Some St. Olaf College seniors have complained about the lack of computer courses or workshops available on the campus and feel unqualified at the realization that many jobs require specific computer skills in programs such as Excel, Adobe Photoshop, and PowerPoint. According to Frances Woods, author of “Postparchment Depression: A model of Career Counseling for College Seniors” notes that as the students approach graduation, they feel mentally paralyzed as what to do next and thus resolve to do nothing (Woods, 2004). Thus, the phenomenon of senioritis, where students resort to procrastination, invest more time in their social life, or complain and worry with their friends and classmates becomes their means to prolong their transition.

Senioritis comes with mixed emotions of apathy, excitement, and fears and worries of life after college. For seniors at universities, college is sometimes extended five to six years before the students actually graduate. Grossman says, college is the institution that most of us entrust to watch over the transition to adulthood, but somewhere along the line, that transition has slowed to a crawl (2005, 44). This phenomenon suggests that graduating in four years, which most often occurs at liberal arts colleges, creates a sense of rush feelings and pressure for this generation of students.

Methodology:

The interviews we conducted explored the characteristics, sentiments and behaviors of college students during their senior experience at St. Olaf College. This study applied a qualitative research design to address the nature of the problem. Our research consists of the information collected from talking with ten senior students whom we interviewed for approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour each. We used a tape recorder in order to get accurate quotes. We wanted to find a collection of students with diverse feelings and experiences about their senior experience. In addition, we chose students who had varied future plans and options regarding post graduation, i.e. professional schools, internships, career, uncertain. Our primary intention was to interview seniors who felt that they were affected by senioritis and also observe how gender influenced their responses and perceptions of senioritis. Because students at St. Olaf College are essentially living in a “bubble”, it was easy to find participants

experiencing this phenomenon.

We used “snowball sampling” as our method of recruitment for our interviews. Snowball sampling is a tool of research recruitment by which we collected information about several of the individuals in the target population. We then asked those five individuals in the target population that we knew to participate in our study. Following their interviews, we asked them to provide us with names of individuals in the same target populations whom we could potentially interview. We chose to use “snowball sampling” because it allowed us to begin the study with people we were familiar with while amassing more subjects that were suggested by the initial five interviewees. We approached these people in person, through email, and by phone to set up interviews that took place in our dorm room, in the library, or in the fireside lounge. We made certain that the environment was conducive to open conversation by creating small talk prior to beginning the interviews.

We began by giving them the project consent form and then asking them a list of thirteen questions. The first half of the questions related to the classes the student was taking, how they felt about their last semester at St. Olaf, and their goals for the future. The latter half of the questions related to the actual term senioritis, characteristics that describe it, and how the interviewee copes with it, if at all. We encouraged them to talk about anything that they thought of during the interview because we wanted to obtain a wide variety of answers.

The interviews usually concluded with the subject asking questions about our own personal experience with senioritis. After commiserating with them about our struggle with this phenomenon, we asked him or her if they could suggest anyone they knew who would be a good candidate for a potential interview with us. This methodology worked well for us because we started off with a diverse range of students dealing with senioritis. As a result, we were able to obtain a mixed group of contacts from our initial five subjects. Unfortunately, one major problem was getting a hold of seniors and scheduling a time to interview them, as seniors are particularly busy during their second semester. We were also able to conduct only ten interviews, which may not reflect the general consensus of St. Olaf seniors. Another concern of ours during the research process was whether our own biases as seniors would interfere in the way we led follow up questions during the interview. At times when the interviewee was at a loss of words, we listed off certain feelings that we had during our senior experience and asked them if he or she might have felt this way as well. Providing suggestions might have skewed the interviewees’ own perceptions of their senior experience in one direction. All of these factors limit our ability to generalize our findings. In order to gain insight into our qualitative research, a grounded theory

methodology was used as the guideline for our study. According to Strauss and Corbin:

“A grounded theory is one that inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents. That is, it is discovered, developed, and provisionally verified through systematic data collection and analysis of data pertaining to that phenomenon. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other. One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather, one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge” (Brown, 2002, 23).

This methodology was beneficial to our study because starting with theories prior to our research and findings would have made it easy to try and contort our results into them rather than understanding the phenomenon of senioritis and proceeding thereafter.

Literature Review:

The significance of this literature review is to provide continuity in the discussion of the senior experience in college within the sociological and anthropological world of research. Secondly, it will establish some background into prior research of this topic so that when we refer to different studies in relationship to our findings they will make more sense to the reader. The little research that has been done on the different issues within the senior experience became a springboard for further analysis of these themes in our study.

Procrastination during the senior year, the most prominent physical symptom of senioritis, is one of the themes where we found little research. However, one study conducted by Solomon and Rothblum uncovered findings suggesting that 95% of college students procrastinate; outcomes of procrastination include poor academic performance, and the inclination for students to procrastinate escalates as they progress from the freshman to senior level (Saginak, 1998, 29). This evidence is of particular interest relative to better understanding why seniors might feel the need to procrastinate more so during their final year.

Another issue that often came up in our literary research is this generation of college students' need for a sense of purpose and meaning in their vocational careers. Arnett, author of *Emerging Adulthood*, affirms that they're not just looking for a job. They want something more like a calling, that's going to be an expression of their identity (Grossman, 2005, 46). With this new mentality of self-actualization, college seniors may devote much of their time to searching for a job rather than homework, because they feel it defines who they are. We wanted to delve further into this idea during our interviews and also see whether this need for self-actualization was what promoted the devotion to attending to social hobbies as well.

However, the major concern we found in our literary review is the need to

simply find a job. According to a study in *Time Magazine*, so many more people go to college now – a 53% increase since 1970 – that the value of a degree on the job market has been diluted,” (Grossman, 2005, 45). Thus, seniors are engrossed in a sense of fear of whether they will find a job. This uncertainty provoked us to question whether this fear is prevalent at St. Olaf College and whether it promotes the epidemic of senioritis.

A study at a large public university conducted by sociologist, Matthew Pistilli suggests that the second most prevalent concern for seniors during their final year experience is the notion of change and loss. Four areas are encompassed: a) leaving people behind or being left behind, b) needing to establish new friendships, c) the upcoming change in identity, and d) the end of the student lifestyle (2003, 45). The concept of change and loss aided in the development of many of the questions we wanted to ask our interviewees to see whether this was a phenomenon that was particularly relevant in a small setting such as St. Olaf College.

Although we came across several themes in our literary review, we found little research within each issue. The themes found above in our research of literature facilitated further analysis of these issues in our findings. When conducting our research and analyzing our interviews, these themes were also a springboard towards finding additional subtopics relative to the study of senioritis, particularly the issue of time.

Social Theory:

The focus of this study was to understand the perceptions and emotions of college seniors in relationship to an important transition in their lives, from the “bubble” to the “real world.” A central objective of this research was to attempt to provide theories that would address these issues more clearly, particularly the overall transitional experience for seniors. Thus, the purpose of this section is to provide background to the theories that we found relative in the conclusion of our findings. The patterns that developed during the interview process provided the foundation for which to condense the data from several categories into core theories that reflects the nature of the senioritis phenomenon. These social theories will be useful in understanding how social institutions are the forefront for change.

One theory that we came across after our initial research and interviews was the Transition Theory. The author of *Development of the Senior Concerns Survey* described this theory by Nancy Schlossberg as one where an individual’s resources and deficits can either aid or inhibit that individual’s ability to cope with impending change. The areas that affect an individual’s ability to cope are self, situation, support, and strategies (Pistilli, 2003, p. 40). The self represents personal and demographic characteristics, the situation refers to duration, role change, timing, trigger, etc., support refers to network of

friends, institutions, and family, and strategies refers to the four coping mechanisms: direct action, information seeking, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior.

Using the transition theory as a framework for the senior experience, we found that all of the seniors that were interviewed used one of the four transitional strategies as a means to cope during their last year experience. Different personal and demographic characteristics of seniors and their different social networks might explain why some seniors cope more easily or differently in comparison to others with senioritis. The interviewees consistently addressed their concern regarding social “support” post graduation. The students felt they needed to hang out with their friends, attend social gatherings, and cement relationships. This concern reflects the “support” portion of the Transition Theory in that this desire for social networking influences the way individuals choose to confront and cope within their transition as seniors.

Another theory that provided a framework for the findings is the Attribution Theory. The attribution suggests that when an individual has erred, he or she will more likely use external attribution, attributing causes to situational factors rather than blaming him or herself (Brown, 1999). The Attribution Theory was developed overtime by social psychologists, Fritz Heider, Edward Jones, Keith Davis, and Harold Kelley. The Attribution Theory justifies why senior students use external factors as an excuse not to do their homework and instead spend more time on social activities. St. Olaf seniors often credited their lack of academic motivation to what they deemed the “natural” phenomenon of senioritis. They viewed senioritis as a disorder that they could not control and therefore could not blame on themselves, but rather on the social and academic elements around them.

Findings:

In this study St. Olaf senior students defined senioritis as possessing a lack of academic motivation, experiencing an increase in concerns regarding future plans and relationships, and an amplified desire to embrace social activities. In our interviews, mixed feelings of apprehension and anxiety were present as well as feelings of anticipation about advancing into “the real world”. Several students attributed these sentiments to the major they chose at St. Olaf. One senior insisted that “if [she] had majored in something more practical, like economics or something scientific [she] probably wouldn’t be as freaked out about what [she is] gonna do after [she] graduate[s]”. She followed this response by recognizing that she would not have changed her major, but nevertheless feels the pressure and anxiety of living in “the real world”. She replied, “I mean, I love my major, don’t get me wrong, but I gotta make enough money to survive, you know, and unless I go to, like, grad school or something, English isn’t gonna do anything for me”.

This student's sentiments clearly display the disjuncture between the mission of the liberal arts degree versus a technical school or program. St. Olaf College prides itself on being

“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” (St. Olaf Mission Statement).

Hence, from our research we found that the seniors that attend this college were encouraged and tended to major in topics that truly interested them rather than concentrating on a discipline that would merely focus on money. While this lifestyle was accepted and enjoyable during their four years at this college, many senior interviewees displayed anxiety about being unprepared for any type of career post graduation.

Moreover, because St. Olaf College is considered a liberal arts college, it offers an abundance of diverse classes. However, although many seniors expressed delight in having exposure to a variety of academia, most also voiced real concern that they were not readily prepared for “the real world”. This concern was particularly present in students that were majoring in what many would commonly consider a “gut” major rather than a “practical” one. A female senior stated, “while most of my classes at Olaf were really fun and interesting [laugh], I don't feel like I'm really ready for a job because my major is not practical enough. I feel like I need to go to grad school or something... and that's why I decided to apply. Luckily I got in otherwise I don't know what I woulda done”.

Thus, there is a great possibility that colleges similar to St. Olaf, which emphasize a wide range of classroom study, as well as focus on not only practical coursework but “teaching, scholarship, creative activity, and opportunities for encounter with the Christian Gospel and God's call to faith”, (St. Olaf Mission Statement) “forget to truly prepare their students for finding a good job in “the real world”. Instead of St. Olaf training students for some type of job or directing them towards a particular career path, seniors discussed how their experience here was a more holistic process of discovering their identity and interests, while also, as one senior noted learning “how [their] interests in life might help [them] find a job [they] would enjoy doing everyday and hopefully for the rest of [his or her] life”.

The majority of the senior students that we interviewed at St. Olaf felt excited about the plethora of choices that they had post graduation, but also felt overwhelmed by these choices. In 2002, professor David Brooks led several focus groups consisting of leading seniors at Princeton University and found a

similar sense of excitement, as well as a great deal of ambition and industriousness amongst the groups of students. However, unlike our findings at St. Olaf, he did not observe any seniors that felt overwhelmed because of their future plans post graduation. Rather, he discovered that

“[t]hese super-accomplished kids aren't working so hard because they are compelled to. They are facing, it still appears, the sweetest job market in the nation's history. Investment banks flood the campus looking for hires. Princeton also offers a multitude of post-graduation service jobs in places like China and Africa. Everyone I spoke to felt confident that he or she could get a good job after graduation. Nor do these students seem driven by some Puritan work ethic deep in their cultural memory. It's not the stick that drives them on, it's the carrot. Opportunity lures them. And at a place like Princeton, in a rich information-age country like America, promises of enjoyable work abound—at least for people as smart and ambitious as these. "I want to be this busy," one young woman insisted, after she had described a daily schedule that would count as slave-driving if it were imposed on anyone” (Brooks 2002).

Although Brooks interviewed students across the nation, his article was about students at one elite college. Therefore, there is a great possibility that these exceedingly confident sentiments and opinions about post graduation are unique to students at Princeton University. His research contains several confounding variables affecting the groups' answers such as their majors, interests, and potential career fields. Moreover, in a response to Brooks' article, Elizabeth Arens, a Princeton Alumni asserted that his observations “didn't sound like many people [she] had encountered at Princeton, and the article makes immediately evident that Brooks' research contained what social scientists call a “self-selection bias” (Arens, 2001). However despite these potentially confounding variables, in our interviews, we observed a similar sense of confidence among male and female seniors about post graduation options.

When defining the characteristics of senioritis, many of the seniors we interviewed noted how socializing became a priority while homework was put on the backburner. One major finding during our interviews was senior students' increased concern and attempt to cement relationships prior to graduation. Similar to many of their high school senioritis experiences, St. Olaf seniors expressed concern that they would lose touch with their friends if they did not allow for ample time to socialize and spend quality time with their close friends doing social activities. One female senior replied,

“I want to make sure that my friends know I want to be friends with them after I graduate.... You know how there are some people that you just know that you won't be friends with, so why spend time with them anymore. But my

other friends, yeah, I have to make sure I get their addresses and stuff all set up before we leave and everyone goes their separate ways.”

Clearly, the vast majority of seniors established a tight-knit community with their peers during their time at St. Olaf. The recognition of the possibility of losing this community after graduation resonated within all of the seniors we interviewed, which led some students to reorganize their priorities. A male student said,

“I have a class Thursday at 1245p, and sometimes, it’ll be like Wednesday night, haven’t done my homework yet, it’ll be 10pm, and I have the choice of going to Brad’s bar and hang out with the buddies or I can do my homework, alone, in my room while I think about how everyone is having fun without me. Some of these guys I won’t see for a while because they are going to China to teach or whatnot. So the logical answer to this dilemma is for me to go to Brads. I can do a half ass job on my homework in the morning. I still get it in on time.”

The Transitional Theory can frame the recurring sentiment of social loss and change amongst St. Olaf seniors (Pistilli, 2003, 40). According to the transition theory, the desire for “support” is one of the four factors that influence how individuals act during their transition period. Thus, St. Olaf students are coping with their senior experience by attending more parties and other social gatherings as a means to cope with their sense of loss and change during their transitional period.

Although both males and female seniors were concerned with social relationships in their last year of college, the females showed more distress than their counterparts. We observed that senior females were more anxious about the emotional aspects of senioritis compared with the senior males. Senior males focused primarily on career aspirations, money, and graduate school options. Males appeared to be more confident of their future prospects and attainment of their goals post graduation. Four out of the five females we interviewed expressed a significant amount of worry about maintaining friendships, while only one out of the five males mentioned any kind of anxiety about this issue in depth. Two of the men spoke of friendships as their reasoning for partying when they should be doing their homework, but beyond that there was little reference to the topic.

Female St. Olaf seniors also tended to be more concerned with balancing career and relationships after college. Yet recent research suggests that 1) young men are now reporting that family is at least as important to them as work, 2) Professionally trained women and men want to be challenged and engaged at work and at home, and 3) working men have as much work-family conflict as do women (Barnett, 2003, 308). However, our study of St. Olaf seniors suggests a different finding than Barnett’s observation. One woman

interviewee stated, “In five years, I don’t even know where I’m gonna be. Well, but, I guess I’m mostly worried about how I’m going to have kids, make money, and stay competitive in my career. It’s not really something my husband will have to worry about... or at least, I doubt he will.” This concern was prevalent in the majority of the interviews we conducted with female seniors.

We cannot ignore the fact that there are several studies indicating differently from our findings at St. Olaf, but our assumption is that the questions in the studies Barnett refers to pertained to marriage-career conflict and were potentially quantitative in nature. The St. Olaf seniors were not specifically asked these types of questions; therefore, the fact that these females managed to bring up this topic while the males did not is indicative of a gender difference in grappling with this issue as seniors.

Several of the interviewees mentioned that they wished that they had spent more time with friends and less time on homework during their four years at St. Olaf. When we asked one senior woman why she had decided to start “slacking off” this year in her classes she said, “Well, like freshman year I felt like I lived in the library. Then sophomore year, I kinda slacked off a little bit more, but, like, I still sometimes did homework on the weekends. And by my senior year, I was really sick of it. I just wanted to have fun. You know like how some people say college was the best years of my life, well, I didn’t feel like I had that, so I started to I guess change my priorities a lot more. I started hanging out with friends more.”

Another senior concurred with this belief in asserting, “I think most seniors just don’t see the point in getting A’s if it means giving up spending time with friends, you know, like, going to the bar, going to clubs, watching movies.” These sentiments reveal how St. Olaf seniors were inadvertently feeling the affects of Americans’ perception of time.

All ten of the senior students we interviewed possessed some kind of “last chance” mentality about their second semester. Eight out of ten of the participants mentioned phrases such as feeling like this year was their “last chance” or “last time to enjoy the ideal lifestyle”, which is said to be in college. They also discussed the desire to “live it up” their last semester so that they would have “no regrets” because they believe that “time [was] running out”.

In order to truly understand what these phrases indicate about St. Olaf seniors, and college culture in the United States, it is necessary to explore the origin of this type of time framework. In our interviews we repeatedly heard complaints that made reference to time running out before graduation. This sentiment echoes throughout American culture in that most Americans feel that

they never have enough time, we hear phrases like, “time is of the essence, and “don’t waste time”.

Americans time has been converted into a commodity, wherein time is a tangible source that should and can be used and sold. Hence, it is easy to understand Americans’ perception of time as a cultural construction rather than as a universal force independent of human thought. Americans’ lives used to be governed by the natural rhythms of the sun, moon, and seasons. However, in accordance with modernization, American society started to become structured by such cultural temporalities as work schedules, age norms, and by the "open" hours of stores and businesses (National American History Museum). Accordingly, the seniors we interviewed possessed sentiments about time as a tangible source “running out” because their lives are governed on a linear time efficient model.

However, particularly with students who have studied abroad while at St. Olaf, we discovered a tension in belief versus practice of time. Several of these seniors said that during their first years here they were very productive and followed the usual grind of “breakfast, class, lunch, more class, homework, dinner, then more homework, sleep...” One senior disconcertedly acknowledged the fact that this “monotonous schedule was [her] life for two years”. Moreover, she stressed that increasingly, she “felt like [she] wasn’t experiencing college for what it was supposed to be.... [she] knew [she] had a problem when [her] parents told [her] to go out and have fun more”. Despite this request, she did not truly change her schedule or perception of time until after traveling abroad on the Global Semester during her junior year. Since many students do not travel abroad until their junior year of college, it is understandable why it is seniors who are feeling the most strain with time.

While traveling around the world, she discovered that most cultures structure their lives in a “way more relaxed” manner. She felt that people tended to “care more about making sure I was, like, always happy, instead of always keeping with their schedules”. She also noticed this within the classroom setting abroad. She discussed the vast difference between the time-oriented cultures of Hong Kong and South Korea, versus the more relaxed countries such as India and Thailand. Moreover, because her trip was organized in a very structured and Americanized way, “for the first time in [her] life, she felt clash of cultures” which largely had to do with the way they structured their time. When she returned to St. Olaf, she finally recognized how unfulfilling her life in college had been and thus decided to “reorganize her priorities”, which meant spending more time on social events and essentially relaxing her schedule. This woman, along with four other senior interviewees described a similar reorganization process of their time after traveling abroad.

Because these seniors were able to travel out of “American time” they inadvertently stumbled upon the two dominant perceptions of time. The first group consists of the polychronic “P-time” people. This kind of culture focuses on people and human relationships. In *The Dance of Life*, Anthropologist Edward T. Hall reports that “[p]olychronic people are so deeply immersed in each other’s business that they feel a compulsion to keep in touch.... Their involvement in people is the very core of their existence” (Hall, 1962, 46). Since sustaining and promoting relationships are more important than schedules for these cultures, P-time people never consider time as a force that can be wasted, nor is it a commodity that can be sold. The female senior experienced P-time cultures in India and in Thailand, where she expressed that they cared more about making certain that she was happy than maintaining any type of schedule.

The second group consists of the monochronic “M-time” people. This mentality is pervasive in American culture. Within this perception, time is viewed as a commodity, a tangible entity that can be wasted, spent, lost, and most importantly, never regained. M-time cultures focus on tasks, schedules, and procedures largely because categorizing their time allows for optimal time usage, thus, putting to use phrases such as “making the most of your time”. Furthermore, M-time people are more likely to compartmentalize, which implies that they are less likely to see their activities connected to any type of larger framework. In effect, schedules can alienate M-time people from themselves and others by reducing context (Hall 1983, 46). Hall affirms that since scheduled time implies that one must organize activities, people, and events into their agendas, “what gets scheduled constitutes a system for setting priorities.... Important things are taken up first and allotted the most time; unimportant things are left to last or omitted if time runs out” (Hall, 1983, 45). As a result, Americans usually place schedules, and in turn using their time the most efficiently, as more significant than maintaining and advancing human relationships. The majority of the St. Olaf senior interviewees expressed much of this mentality. Many of them realized senior year that they were living too much by the clock, governed by demanding schedules of work, extra-curriculars, homework, and meals, which left little time for friends and other social activities. Especially after traveling abroad, these seniors realized the need and desire to be more like P-time cultures. Many people believe Americans have a very rigid and inflexible sense of time. In *Communications Between Cultures*, Larry Samovar and Richard Porter offer several differences in cultures citing, “[i]n Britain and North America one may be 5 minutes late for a business appointment, but not 15 and certainly not 30 minutes late, which is perfectly normal in Arab countries. On the other hand in Britain it is correct to be 5-15

minutes late for an invitation to dinner. An Italian might arrive 2 hours late, an Ethiopian later, and a Javanese not at all—he had accepted only to prevent his host from losing face" (Samovar, 1991, 220).

Samovar and Porter clearly elucidate Americans' need for time efficiency and productivity, as they have the perception that time can be lost, wasted, spent, and never regained. Because a common American belief is that humans are only given a finite amount of time on this Earth, they must use it as proficiently as possible, otherwise it is wasted, which means their lives are wasted as well. This system of time organization is present from the day we are born into American culture. As children we have a completely different conception of time. In *The Challenge of the Passing Years*, anthropologist R. MacIver stresses that "children's emotions are fleeting, and [they] pass from tears to laughter without transition. [Their] wants are immediate and urgent. [Their] expectations and dreads are rooted in the primacy of the moment" (MacIver, 1962, 34). Essentially, children live for the moment, with no comprehension of past or future. However, as people mature, the concept of time takes on much more significance. Americans are socialized into a culture dictated by schedules, and since much of how children grow is through mimicking what elders do, this new culture of time is engrained in their lives.

Another source of socialization is through the American educational system, which is largely based on a bureaucratic time schedule, where being on time is stressed, and punishment prevails when students are "tardy", or skip class altogether (De Graaf, 2005). Thus, as Americans mature, time becomes "a stretch from the now to the then, rather than continually living in the present with little reflection of the past or future time (MacIver, 1962, 34). Undoubtedly, our senior interviewees expressed many of these perceptions, sentiments, and experiences, with time, and what they want to do with their last finite amount of time left at St. Olaf.

We found several ways in which seniors coped with senioritis. All ten of our interviewees reported feeling symptoms that they attributed to senioritis. Moreover, they responded that their friends often complained to one other about feeling "less motivated", and "tired", as well as experiencing an "increase in procrastination" and "wanting to go out more". As one female senior replied, "Oh yeah, it's funny, we know it's our fault that we don't, like, do our work, but, like, all we do is complain to each other, and we still never get anything done". Many of the students felt guilty about having senioritis and therefore enjoyed commiserating about or participating in the phenomenon of senioritis with others versus alone. One male student said, "I like to find other people who are slacking off and join them. Makes me feel a lot better when I know there are other people slacking off too." By experiencing senioritis with others, individuals felt better about their behavior.

Furthermore, six of our ten senior participants viewed senioritis as a natural process in their experience as a senior, and thus not even an issue that needed to be dealt with. Using the Attribution Theory might be useful in understanding why college seniors have coined the term senioritis to explain their senior experience. The Attribution theory suggests that when an individual has erred, he or she will more likely use external attribution, attributing causes to situational factors rather than blaming him or herself (Brown, 1999). This theory rings true when one looks at some of the responses given for why they as seniors are apathetic towards their homework:

“You just got to accept senioritis. Go with it. It’s part of the senior experience.”

“It’s a disease isn’t it? I can’t help it, it’s not my fault. I’m a senior anyways. I

deserve to be a slacker.”

St. Olaf seniors wanted to enjoy their final year while without having any feelings of guilt about their relaxed lifestyle.

The attribution theory may be the case in some aspects, but on a larger scale, the American phenomenon of choice and freedom seems to be crucial. Kat Galantha, 28, spent seven years in college before she obtained a four-year degree. She says, “My problem is that I am really over stimulated by everything, I feel there is too much information out there at all times, there are too many doors, too many people, too much competition,” (Grossman, 2005, 46). As Woods says, the students are mentally paralyzed as for what to do as a result of having too many interests and options to choose from. Three of our ten senior interviewees agreed with this sentiment. One senior said, “I do feel overwhelmed with how many choices I have to, like, choose from, but, it’s almost like, uh, kinda like I’m frozen, because I don’t really know what I want to do...and I don’t really feel qualified to do anything right now...except be a student”.

Another avenue that needs to be explored when attempting to better understand college senioritis is what makes people happy. A common American social phenomenon is the perpetual need for instant gratification. Bill Fray, a demographer, with the Brookings Institution states, “They don’t think long term about health care or social security. They’re concerned about their careers and immediate gratification,” (Grossman, 2005, 46). This statement suggests that senior students are more likely to disregard their homework because immediate gratification such as going out to a party that night, hanging out with friends, or doing well at an interview the next day is more important, more practical, and more immediately gratifying than finishing one’s schoolwork. Several senior students we interviewed expressed views that supported this claim. When asked why he did not usually finish his

homework he retorted, “Ha! Why would I? Really, do any seniors really ever do their homework? Not in my Pod! I don’t really need an A in the class, and my prof doesn’t collect the homework usually, and well, what can I say, it’s more fun to just, well, I dunno, go out and get drunk...[chuckles] no, I’m just playing, but really, I might as well have fun with friends instead.”

Moreover, not only does immediate gratification make the American individual happy but social relationships do as well. According to a survey in Time magazine, the American people reported that their top three answers are related to family connections and friendships. 76% said that friends and friendships were the most significant sources of happiness, 64% said the activities you do in your leisure time, and 75% said contributing to the lives of others (Wallis, 2005) made them the most content. Thus, Americans need for immediate gratification and the desire for social relationships helps explain why college seniors are much more willing to reprioritize their time by placing friendships and leisure time at the top of their list of concerns.

At the same time, the senior students we interviewed generally expressed excitement about leaving St. Olaf College. There was a widespread feeling of anticipation and willingness to “get out into the real world”. Seven out of ten of the seniors discussed the desire to finally get “out of the bubble” or off of “the Hill” we call St. Olaf and live in a more diverse and challenging community. These observations were quite effective in demonstrating the average college student’s future-oriented perspective.

After interviewing countless college elite across the country, Professor David Brooks from the University of California, San Diego, discovered that youth these days are now very futuristic and “industrious”. In his article *The Organization Kids*, he stresses that college students think college “is a means for self-improvement, résumé-building, and enrichment. College is just one step on the continual stairway of advancement, and [students] are always aware that they must get to the next step (law school, medical school, whatever) so that they can progress up the steps after that” (Brooks, 2002). Hence, because this step on the college seniors’ life is almost over, many seniors are already heading toward the next level on the “stairway of advancement”.

Conclusion:

Senior year of college is an emotion-laden journey filled with an abundance of highs and lows. Senior students must organize a variety of responsibilities, commitments, deadlines, and plans for the future, while attempting to experience as many social activities as possible. At times this process can be difficult, as the pressures of Americans’ rigid perception of time, and colleges’ competitive atmosphere conflicts with the desire to cement relationships and “live it up” before graduation. We discovered five prevalent areas of concern, which were career related, change and loss related, graduate professional

school related, and support related.

This transition period is a difficult time overflowing with mixed emotions and demands regarding change and loss. The lack of strong career counseling services and senior support programs at St. Olaf College forced many seniors to look in a different direction for possible networks of support. The Transition Theory suggests that during times of transition, individuals need a community of support in order to successfully cope. An individual's resources and deficits can either aid or inhibit that person's ability to cope with impending change. When dealing with this process, senior students looked to each other and faculty members for support and advice, as they could not find sources of support elsewhere on campus.

In addition to the Transition Theory, the Attribution Theory provides a framework for senior students' behaviors. We found in order to eradicate the guilt of "slacking off", students often commiserated with each other and blamed their behavior on senioritis. The Attribution Theory explains how seniors were able to continuously cope with the overwhelming feelings of change, while growing closer to their fellow classmates, because they blamed their behavior and actions on external factors such as senioritis.

During our interviews a recurrent theme we observed was that seniors possessed a highly future-oriented mindset. One senior reported that she "can't wait to graduate and finally start taking classes that are more practical in what [she is] actually going to be doing for a career", which is business. Simultaneously, she expressed the difficulty in trying to enjoy her last semester in college, while wanting to be out in the real world to "get [her] real life finally started". Accordingly, college for some seniors, while fun and educational, was not *the* pivotal "time- of-[their]-life" experience, but instead, was merely a stepping-stone to future endeavors. As one male student exclaimed, "the end is near and I'm ready to be done!" This senior's career path was mapped out for the next two years making it easy for him to look forward into his future after graduation. For other interviewees, the future was not as clearly defined, thus making some students feel ill prepared for "the real world". Regardless of their future plans, however, all students reported experiencing the phenomenon they called senioritis.

The implications of this study are to provide ideas for instigating seminars, support services, and stronger career counseling programs that would make the transition easier for college seniors. St. Olaf seniors are at a shortfall when it comes to the networks of support available to them during this critical transition period. New programs could be executed such as a Senior Seminar, which would tackle the various challenges students encounter during their final year. Another idea would be to have each senior student meet with an alumni mentor or professor once a month to aid them in the process of

graduating. Faculty can use the information from this study to incorporate career related information into their courses. In addition, St. Olaf students are also beneficiaries of this study, as they will become aware of the issues regarding senioritis in order to better understand and cope with this process.

WORKS CITED

Arens, E. (2001). An Organization Kid's Response. Retrieved April 25, 2005, from The AFF Network Web site:<http://www.affbrainwash.com/archives/007451.php>.

Barnett, R. C., Gareis K. C., Boone J., and Steele, J. (2003). Planning ahead: college seniors' concerns about career-marriage conflict. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 62. Retrieved Mar 1, 2005, from www.csa.org.

Brooks, D. (2002). *The Organization Kid*. Retrieved April 25, 2005, from University of California Website: <http://career.ucsd.edu/parents/TOK.shtml>.

Brown, K. M. (1999). Attribution theory. Retrieved April 29, 2005, from

http://hsc.usf.edu/~kmbrown/Attribution_Theory_Overview.htm.

Brown, S. C., Stevens R. A., Troiano P. F., and Schneider, M. K. (2002). Exploring complex phenomena: grounded theory in student affairs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 43. Retrieved Mar 13, 2005, from www.myacpa.org/pub/pub_jocsd.cfm.

De Graaf, John. (2005). *Take Your Time Back: fighting overwork and time poverty in America*, Berrett-Koehler, <http://www.simpleliving.net/timeday/>.

Grossman, L. (2005). Grow up? not so fast. *TIME*, 42-54.

Hall, E. (1983). *The dance of life: the other dimension of time*. Garden City, NY: AnchorPress.

MacIver, R. (1962). *The challenge of the passing years: my encounter with time*. New York: Pocket Books, Inc.

Pistilli, M. D., Taub, D. J., & Bennett D. E. (2003, Apr). Development of senior concerns survey: an exploratory factor analysis. *Journal of First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 15. Retrieved Mar 15, 2005, from www.csa.org.

Saginak, M (1998). College Seniors and their final year experience: perceptions and emotions of transitions. Dissertation Abstracts International Section A: Humanities and Social Science., Vol 59 (4-A. Retrieved Mar 15, 2005, from www.csa.org.

Samovar, L., Porter, R. (1991). *Communication between cultures*. CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

St. Olaf College (2005). *St. Olaf Mission Statement*. Retrieved April 20th, from the St. Olaf College Website: <http://www.stolaf.edu/president/guidingdocuments/mission.html>.

Wallis, C. (2005). The new science of happiness. *TIME*, , A3-A10.

Appendix A: Recruitment letter

Statement to Recruit Subjects (Contact by phone with follow-up email if necessary)

Hi, my name is Kim (or Leah) and _____ gave me your name as a referral for our anthropological research paper for our Qualitative Research Methods class. My partner, Leah and I are conducting a research project on senioritis at St. Olaf College. We need to interview twenty senior students. The interview will last for about half an hour to an hour. You will likely be paired with one other interviewee and we will ask you some questions regarding your senior experience. We will put the questions in your P.O. box before the interview so that you have a chance to look them over. We will maintain complete confidentiality of any personally identifiable information we collect from you. If you are interested, please email phamk@stolaf.edu or hakkola@stolaf.edu with some times that would work for the interview.

B: Project Information Form

An Investigation of Senioritis at St. Olaf College: Myth or Reality

PROJECT INFORMATION FORM

Background Information:

You are invited to participate in a research study using individual interviews to explore the characteristics, sentiments, and behaviors of college students during their senior experience. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a senior at St. Olaf College and 18 years old or older. If you are younger than 18, you are ineligible for this study. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before deciding about being in this study.

This research is being conducted by Kim Pham and Leah Hakkola from Sociology/Anthropology 373 Ethnographic Research Methods at St. Olaf College.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to do the following:

- Participate in an interview, lasting approximately a half hour to one hour.
- Give us permission to audio-tape the interview, so that we may transcribe accurate notes.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

There is little risk involved in participating in this interview. If you agree to participate, you can choose not to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained in connection with this study will remain strictly confidential. You will not be identified in any reports produced from this study. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify individual participants. Research records will be kept in locked files and only the researchers will have access to the records. The audio-tape will be destroyed after data transcription is completed.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. By participating in the interview you are giving your consent to be in the study. Your decision whether to participate will in no way affect your current or future relations with St. Olaf College or any of its departments.

Contacts and Questions:

The researchers conducting this study are Kim Pham and Leah Hakkola. You may ask any questions you have now. If you think of other questions later on, please contact Kim Pham or Leah Hakkola at (507) 646-6435.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the St. Olaf College Institutional Review Board. The address is St. Olaf College, Administration 127, 1520 St. Olaf Avenue, Northfield, MN 55057. The telephone number is 507-646-3910

You may keep a copy of this consent form for your records.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

An Investigation of Senioritis at St. Olaf College: Myth or Reality

Interview Questions:

1. How important/interesting are your classes this semester?

2. What are your plans for after graduation and where do you see yourself in the next five years?
3. What are some of the concerns of seniors at St. Olaf College?
4. Out of the concerns you have listed, what is the most relevant to you?
5. How do you define college senioritis? How is it different from high school senioritis?
6. What would you say are the physical and emotional characteristics of a person who has senioritis?
7. Have you or are you experiencing senioritis or any of the characteristics that you have attributed to this term?
8. Describe when and where you first heard the term senioritis?
9. What one goal do you want to accomplish most during your last semester at St. Olaf College?
10. Do you think senioritis is a uniquely American phenomenon?