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Ethnographic Research Methods 373

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## The Social and Academic Experience of Male St. Olaf Hockey Players

### The setting

St. Olaf College is a Liberal Arts school located in the small town of Northfield in southern Minnesota, about 40 minutes south of the Twin Cities. It is home to about 3000 students pursuing Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Music degrees. The town of Northfield is still a quaint, quiet town of approximately 17,000 residents, although it is currently experiencing urban sprawl. St. Olaf is a beautiful campus, famous for the beautiful limestone buildings and the colors of the trees in the fall. The St. Olaf choir is world-renowned and also important, although on a somewhat smaller scale is the athletic program. St. Olaf College athletics are home to 27 intercollegiate varsity sports composed of approximately 350 athletes. The athletic department employs 32 coaches, directors and professors. Half of the sports teams are for women, and half for men. Along with the varsity sports, there is a wide variety of intramural and club sports offered at various times throughout the year for all students to participate in. St. Olaf has three different facilities affiliated with athletics: Manitou Fieldhouse, Skoglund Fieldhouse, and the Tostrud Center, along with a number of outdoor athletic fields, courts, and tracks. These buildings are open to all students and are used as places to workout and participate in various other sports and activities.

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The group we chose to study was male students at St. Olaf who came to school after playing hockey in the Juniors league. This means that these men finished high school and then were either invited to join a team or tried out for and made a team in the Junior league. This league is for players age 20 or younger to play in before going to college. Some of the players on these teams are still in high school, but the majority of the players have graduated from high school in the spring and enter Juniors in the summer or fall of that same year. These teams are for the more elite players and serve to better them as hockey players

and aim for the players to get scouted and recruited by a college and/or a professional team.

The stated specific goals of Junior hockey are as follows: Skill Development, Quality Coaching, Social Maturity, Educational Advancement, Recruiting Exposure, Advanced Competition, and Protection of Amateur Status. In the United State and Canada there are 48 different Junior leagues, with approximately 9 teams in each of these leagues with an average of 25 players on each team.

After spending a year or two on a junior team, the majority of these guys go on to play in college. The St. Olaf students we studied were either current or past members of the varsity hockey team and all had played in juniors, making them older than the average freshman when they entered college.

## The problem

The problems we wanted to study were the differences in the academic and social lives of these older aged hockey men compared to the average aged student. We wanted to know in what ways life was harder for them and in what ways it was easier for them. As we continued to study them, it also became important to find out how they differed

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from other hockey players who never played juniors and therefore were not older than the average freshman, as well as how they differed from students who do not play hockey at all. The three theoretical frameworks that influenced how we framed the problem were the identity theory, theory of community, and the theory of power. Each of the theories describes a different relationship and atmosphere among the teammates, school, and hockey.

Coming into college older than most students there is a different understanding and power structure, which can be look at through the power and knowledge theory. The difference between the men who took some time off before coming college is the production of knowledge they have about living on their own away from home and paying their own bills. They have more knowledge of the outside world away from college. Since those with the most knowledge have the most power, these men are at an obvious advantage. They have gained valuable insight through living on their own and finding themselves and with that comes a sort of dominance when they first came to campus as freshmen.

Playing college hockey has many expectations and roles. The men's hockey team at St. Olaf consists of around 40 men who have many things in common, especially hockey. The team atmosphere and values can be looked at through the community theory. These men are responsible for giving all they have to

their team. Being a part of this team is a contribution to the whole St. Olaf community, helping with integration within the community. Working for a common goal and striving for success is a way of coming together and also represents the entire college as all St. Olaf students identify this team as “their” hockey team.

Each of these men has many identities, which can be focused on through the identity theory. Not only are they playing hockey but they have to be a full-time student

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as well. Also, many of them participate in other activities. Within each identity there are different roles these men have to play. Since each of the subjects plays their roles in their own way, there are various differences in how they approach social situations, academic life and personal choices. Much of the identity these men now have comes from their experience in Juniors, as they cite Juniors as a time they have come to know themselves as people and grown up and become who they are during that time.

The methodology

We chose to mainly collect our information by interviewing each of our subjects personally. We made a list of about 18 questions and basically just asked those questions. Each interviewed differed depending on the answers, the follow-up questions and the tangents that we went on. We felt this would be a good method for collecting data because the students we were interviewing would be comfortable talking to us and feel that the whole thing was more serious if they weren't in a big group. Also, some of the questions would have taken much too long to fill out in survey form, so this was not a practical form of collecting information. The interviews made things more confidential than a focus group would have. Another strength of the interviews was that the subjects felt they had freedom to talk about whatever they wanted to and we kept the rapport very lighthearted so there would not be any pressure on anyone. In general it seemed like the guys liked talking about their experiences and sometimes it even had a reminiscent feel to it. A weakness of our methodology may have been that the subjects did not want to disclose everything to us, especially things that may have been more personal. This was not really a problem though, because there was very little being asked that would be considered too personal.

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While there was very much information that seemed generalizable, there are limits to this generalizability. While the information seems to hold for the group of guys who played hockey in Juniors and attend St. Olaf College, it is

hard to tell if the patterns will hold for this same population at other colleges, particularly larger schools and division I schools.

## Findings

The questions we asked during our interviews fell mainly into three different categories: social life, academic life, and personal choices and opinions. Within these categories, the main aspects we wanted to study in this group were the differences that existed between them and students who entered college right away and were therefore younger than our subjects.

### Social

When asked how being older influenced their social lives at St. Olaf, there was some commonality in responses. Most of our subjects quickly realized they were on a different maturity level than those students who had come right from high school to college. In Juniors these young men lived away from their families and were responsible for their own time management and finances and had already had time to adjust to being away from their families. The difference in maturity level wasn't really seen as a problem, but it was noticeable. The subjects consistently pointed out that being older than the average freshman made making friends somewhat easier. They were not shy or afraid to be friends with upperclassmen and actually often found it easier to relate to them than to students in their own grade level.

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Another aspect of social life that was often brought out was partying and drinking. The majority of our subjects explained that they did not go crazy with alcohol and partying when they first came to college because they did not need to. They had either gotten it out of their system during Juniors, or had just seen enough of it to know it was not how they wanted to handle themselves.

Our subjects also made it clear that they felt they had gained much insight into themselves during their time in Juniors. They were able to get to know themselves and therefore were more confident in meeting people and did not succumb to peer pressure. Rather they already had "found themselves" and did not need to follow others around and worry about trying to fit in.

We also talked to the subjects about how they relate to the students in their own class year in their dorms and around campus. Most of the guys told us that it was not different at all. They said that they felt they were just another classmate and that most of the time they did not even think about age at all. Some claimed that they had run into people at times who felt it was weird, but for the most part their age was not an issue at all.

The experience that these subjects had with living in the dorms is somewhat

different than that of the average age student. Many of the subjects are intentionally placed in dorms for upperclassmen instead of the typical freshmen dorms during their first year at Olaf. Because of this they miss out on the typical freshmen activities that go on during Week One and throughout the year. The guys seem overwhelmingly happy about this. They feel that those activities are a little much and do not want to be a part of them. The guys that did end up in actual freshmen dorms had mixed feeling about it. Many of them feel that they were treated like babies and could not relate to those around them. They also had varying relationships with their JCs. While some of the guys felt

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they were able to be friends with their JCs, others felt it was an awkward relationship, particularly in the case that the freshman was actually older than their JC.

When it comes to relating to other hockey players, the guys seem to share the sentiment that the hockey team is where their best friends are. Many of the subjects felt that it was their responsibility to be the examples and leaders of the team. While no one gets excluded from the group, the guys who played juniors tend to relate better to each other because of their shared experiences. One of the interviewees explained that they felt they were happy to be able to help the kids right out of high school learn to trust themselves and their coached and become better players. There were also a number of people who explained that the same maturity gap that exists between themselves and other freshmen carries over onto the team both socially and within hockey ability.

Another aspect of social life that we touched on was the dating scene and how these guys have experienced it. For the most part, the guys said that they had no problem with dating. They felt that their age made no difference, or if anything maybe helped because they know themselves more and are more aware of what they are looking for in a partner. There were some less enthusiastic feelings about senior year though, with a few of the subjects explaining that they would not or do not feel comfortable dating a freshman when they are seniors since there is a 6 or 7 year age gap in between them.

An interesting response was repeatedly given when the subjects were asked to compare themselves with other students who didn't play hockey. Over and over the guys said they "can't really compare" or they "don't ever compare" and that the only difference is that they are older. This seems interesting because they know that they are members of a pretty well-known group on campus and earlier told us about the differences in maturity level, but when asked to compare they all were completely humble and modest, stating that comparisons do not fit.

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## Academic

We next asked about the academic experiences of the guys. There was a definite feel from most of them that their time in juniors made them much more appreciative of school. As one subject explained “There was a lot of motivation to be back in school after playing in Juniors. Sitting around and doing nothing made me realize how badly I do want a career and that being bored and having nothing to do gets old really really fast”. Over and over again the subjects told us stories of just sitting around and playing video games, sleeping and watching TV with the time that they weren’t playing hockey. The guys used phrases such as being “hungry” and “fired up” to be back in school and learning again.

At the same time, many of the subjects explained that school was not necessarily easy to get back into. One interviewee explained “It was hard to have a good work ethic when I first got back into school. Most of the study habits I had from high school were completely lost”. The subjects explained that it was a bit of a shock to have homework and one guy said he was most helped by getting into a solid routine and working from there.

The members of this group seem to feel they have an edge when dealing with professors and coaches. It is not that these authority figures like them more or anything, it is just that they know how to deal with them better. The subjects seem to have very much respect for authority figures. They had to deal with such a variety of people in ways that the average 18 year old does not necessarily have to. The subjects seem to agree that while they were away from home and on their own at Juniors they developed some “people skills” and understand how to approach people in a tactful, respectful way. One of the subjects explained, “If you get kicked out of a host family’s home for being

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disrespectful to them, you are off the team. And if you try anything like that with a coach you better already have your bags packed”.

We also were interested in why these men chose to come to St. Olaf College. The answers varied in many ways, but all centered on the fact that this was a good school and that they could play hockey here. Most of the subjects say that their decision was not solely based on hockey, but all of them said that hockey had something to do with it. There was much said about the community feel here and the fact that people are friendly and smart. Also, most of these guys are not too far from their homes, so their families are able to see them play hockey. Overwhelmingly the subjects agreed that they had made the correct decision in the choice of their college.

## Personal

The men were able to have a chance to share some of their personal stories and go more in depth about themselves with us. We asked them how their experience in Juniors differed from being at St. Olaf. Some of the guys explained that being at St. Olaf was overwhelmingly more rewarding. They are now able to challenge themselves and reap rewards in both hockey and academic life. The guys know the importance of a career and know that they don't want to spend their lives doing nothing. They stated that they liked the feeling of being busy again and that it was great to be able to meet new people and make new friends. While Juniors was an important part of their lives, they were quite clear about the fact that college is much more fulfilling.

Some of the major differences in the lives of these men since coming to St. Olaf include they feel they are better at decision making, they are more mature, they appreciate school more, they feel more free here and they can now focus on their future and are actually able to picture themselves in the future now. It was interesting that the

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answers to this question were basically all positive ones. It seems that there is a pattern that the members of this group are the kind of guys who take advantage of where they are and what they have in life and appreciate the time they have and do not spend it wishing that something else were going on.

When asked about the most positive thing and the most negative thing about playing in Juniors before entering college, there was quite a bit of repetition in the answers. Although everyone was able to come up with something positive about his experience, there were a few times when the interviewee was just not able to think of anything negative no matter how hard he tried. Some of the negative aspects that subjects stated included a tougher time getting back into academics, losing friends to graduation since they quickly become friends with older students, having a tougher time relating to first years, feeling separated from other students at times, knowing that the time spent in Juniors could have been used to better themselves academically, and feeling as though they may be a bit behind at "starting life in the real world" as they are graduating 2 years older than their classmates.

Positive aspects of the Junior experience ranged a lot for each of the guys, which is to be expected, as it is a very personal question. A number of the subjects again said that the maturity level they reached and the fact that there was not a rough transition coming to college was a huge plus. Another was just the fact that it was a good, fun experience that gave the player a chance to figure out what they wanted to be the next step in their lives. One subject mentioned that his time in Juniors was a huge confidence builder; another stated that he gained a broader, more holistic view of life through his experience. A few of the subjects cited their greater appreciation for academics

and one explained that he gained much character development through his experience. And of course, we had one subject put it simply “Chicks dig older guys.”