

Family and Community at St. Olaf College

Marie Buchner, Cameron Smith, two additional authors

Abstract

In this ethnography of family dynamics at St. Olaf, we researched the family life of students from various backgrounds as well as life at Olaf in order to examine whether or not there are connections between their “community” and “family”. We wondered whether these similarities are contingent on student’s individual background and family upbringing. We spoke with people from different ethnic, religious, and regional backgrounds and examined the similarities and differences we observed. We hypothesized that students, despite their different upbringings, will have a collective experience of belonging to the St. Olaf community. Our research showed that students often refer to their friends at St. Olaf as their “fictive kin” or family. We found that despite different backgrounds and conceptions of belonging to the broader community at St. Olaf, students all found a sense of belonging and kinship with their created personal communities.

Summary of Main Points

- Analysis of family backgrounds of St. Olaf students
- Analysis of the sense of community at St. Olaf College
- Analysis of how familial upbringing contributes to the sense of community at St. Olaf College

Setting + Community

Our participants are students studying at St. Olaf from across the country along with international students. We spoke to one student from Northfield, five students from suburbs of the Minneapolis/St. Paul area, three students from the East Coast, three students from the South, and three international students. Many of the participants are involved in some type of extra curricular group such as an athletic team, music ensemble, or honor house. Our findings reveal that each participant creates their own sense of community within the larger whole of St. Olaf.

Olaf is a small liberal arts college of about 3,000 students. It is historically Lutheran and Norwegian, resulting in the majority of students being white Christians. When prospective students tour the campus, guides often describe the college as a warm, welcoming community, in which there's a place for everyone to interact and feel at home. Buntrock Commons is the main building for students to gather; it houses the library, cafeteria, and college chapel, as well as other dining facilities, study areas, meeting places, and student organizations. Tour guides highlight the sense of trust in the community by showing the post office where each student shares an unlocked mailbox with someone else, as well as the mountains of backpacks that sit outside the cafeteria, safely untouched. Tour guides also point out the friendly atmosphere: because it is such a small, tight knit campus, it is easy for students to see someone they know from class or a student organization.

Student involvement in the St. Olaf community is a huge characteristic of students here. Everyone participates in something, whether it is sports, music, student government, or community projects. A fair amount of the participants in our study are on the football team. It is one of the largest teams on campus, and considered by the players to be "one big family." It is also the most diverse team on campus. Many students are from as far as Florida and California, as well as Minnesota, bringing a high concentration of regional diversity. In

addition, the football team is the most ethnically diverse varsity team with students of African-American, Hispanic, and Asian descent. Interviewing these particular students gave us distinct perspectives of their perceived community on campus and gave us a good comparative model when researching the family lives of other students.

In contrast, we interviewed students who may think of community and family differently because they do not belong to a tight knit group similar to the football team. Some students came to St. Olaf originally unattached to a specific group. They independently created their own group based on their interests, academic majors, classes, dorm halls, or student organizations. We interviewed students that live in honor houses dedicated to a community project, which are mostly comprised of friends from their freshman year. We also talked to students in the intensive music programs and ensembles St. Olaf offers. We found that the international students we spoke to tend to foster their own sense of community with each other because they don't necessarily identify with the Norwegian-Lutheran model of the typical student. St. Olaf tries to facilitate a separate community for international students, and as a result, students may feel alienated from the rest of the student body.

Speaking with students from various backgrounds opened up a wide array of opinions and conversations about "community" life at St. Olaf. These findings prompted us to ask questions about their "family" relationships and dynamics at home along with their family-like community on campus. We were curious to see how students' family relationships compare or contrast to their relationships on campus. We also wanted to explore how family backgrounds affect various aspects of on campus relationships such as closeness and types of conflict. Overall our research demonstrates how "community" and sense of family are not always collective across the student body: each student had a different upbringing and different sense of family, each had their own idea of community, and not all felt a part of the larger St. Olaf community.

Methodology

We chose to conduct our research by interviewing students who, based on their individual backgrounds, could provide us with different perspectives of “family.” We sought out these diverse perspectives primarily so that we could analyze and compare each story to the collective sense of “community” St. Olaf fosters and search for commonalities between participants. It was also imperative that we conduct interviews with students who we knew to belong to certain different “groups” at St. Olaf, such as international students and football players. In addition to our interviews, we used outside resources. We gained significant insight by speaking to Ryan Sheppard, a Sociology and Anthropology professor who teaches Quantitative Research Methods and Marriage and Family at St. Olaf. Additionally, we explored written sources such as Karen Pyke’s “Normal American Family” piece in *The Journal of Marriage and Family* in order to gain insight into what people perceive to be the “normal” in families and compare our findings to this family model.

Interviewing peers based on what we knew or assumed of their family lives proved to have both strengths and weaknesses. A major strength of this method of research was that it was much easier to find participants who not only were willing to interview but who we also knew to be from the specific backgrounds we were looking for. This also proved to be a weakness--students we knew to come from certain backgrounds did not always yield the answers we had anticipated. We also experienced a few complications concerning our presumptuous expectations about what we would learn from participants. For example, we expected one participant who is adopted to have a different relationship or connection to her parents than students with biological parents. However, she described her relationship with her adoptive parents as no different than relationships between biological parents and children. She was the only participant who seemed uncomfortable during the interview and

rather hesitant in her answers, which is not surprising, given the sensitive and personal nature of our research topic.

Problem & Literature Review

We wanted to study the different ways culture influences family upbringings. We framed our research to focus on how one's upbringing affects relationships on a college campus, and more specifically, at St. Olaf College. St. Olaf promotes a warm, welcoming, community atmosphere in which all students have a place, and, in a sense, attempts to recreate a sense of "home." We interviewed students about their definition of family and home, and if they feel at home at college with the friends they have made here. We read articles about the dynamics of immigrant families, articles about how people connect with others and build lasting relationships, as well as articles about the changing relationships between students and their families as they go away to college.

Many of these articles helped shape what we were looking for in our interviews. Some articles emphasized that it was important to analyze the ways people connected to each other and used their social relationships as a support system. Some of the published research also discussed the ways the language of families often extends to other social relationships -- such as in fraternities, sororities and religious organizations -- and how sometimes linguistics prescribe certain roles to be filled in these social relationships.

In *Public and Private Families: An Introduction*, Andrew Cherlin explores both the public and private family while highlighting cross-cultural contexts and citing the research methods used by family sociologists. Cherlin expands on the concept of kinship and how important it is to families. "Created kinship" is the kinship ties that people must construct actively. It is especially valuable to people who can't find adequate support among "blood-based" or "first-marriage-based kin" (Cherlin 15). In essence, the idea of created kinship is

building family ties to people who are supportive for a person, but have no legitimate familial relations. A more inclusive way of describing the term would be “personal community.” The basis of our research was to find out what groups students consider their “personal community” or “created kinship,” and how they construct these relationships. Our expectations for students from farther away (out-of-state or international) were different from those of students who live in Minnesota or surrounding areas. Considering those far from home have fewer opportunities to see their families, we expected they might have more established personal communities here at St. Olaf.

“Mama’s Family”: Fictive Kinship and Undocumented Immigrant Restaurant

Workers is an ethnography written by E.C. Kim that highlights the importance of created kinship within groups that are marginalized by the dominant society. Kim describes the experience of undocumented workers that create social cohesion, “which serves as a source of solidarity and identification for individuals who are otherwise pushed to the periphery” (Kim, 2009) of the larger society. The fictive kin with their employers and fellow co-workers allows the group of undocumented workers to “maintain their dignity, find ways of bringing joy to their lives, and attain a new sense of belonging” (Kim, 2009), despite their illegal status, low wages, and alienation from American citizens. We felt this article was particularly relevant in relation to students who feel they don’t belong to the larger community at St. Olaf, and explain how they feel at home despite their sense of alienation.

College Student’s Adjustment: The Role of Parent-College Student Expectation

Discrepancies and Communication Reciprocity, “examines the parent and college student expectation discrepancies and communication reciprocity as predictors of college students’ adjustment” (Agliata et al., 2008: 967). The study reveals that college students report having lower levels of self-worth and adjustment when high expectation discrepancies are present between themselves and their parents (Aliata et. al, 2008). The article touches on how while

college students are attempting to create their new “adult” identity, they still see their parents as authoritative figures that can limit their decisions and make rules. Some of the theoretical studies included in this article stress how parental expectations are one of the largest stressors in the college adjustment, and that some expectations may be skewed or unrealistic on the parents part. We ask our participants questions about parenting styles in our interviews. As found in the study, some of our interviewees describe that rules from their parental figures are absent while high expectations are very present in household dynamics. This study allowed us to create questions about parental expectations and how they may affect a college student’s adjustment into a new community. We were curious to see if these high expectations isolate students or bring them closer to a group with similar parental expectations.

The article *The Positive Significance of Studying the College Campus Sub-culture* explains the “roots” and development of subcultures with an emphasis on college campus groups. This helped us understand how certain subcultures either complement or compete with the dominating or mainstream culture. The article depicts how individuals within a subculture form a sense of identity and also construct a unique atmosphere of campus (Mou, 2010). This allowed us to be aware of how subcultures within the St. Olaf culture heavily influence one’s opinion of community on campus.

The article from the Journal of Prevention and Intervention in the Community titled *First Generation College Students and U.S. Citizens: Is the University Perceived as Family or Strangers?* explores the differences between groups of students at a Roman Catholic University campus. It highlights the difficulties that first generation and immigrant college students face in comparison to their non-first-generation classmates. For instance, it is difficult for immigrant students to obtain a college degree because they have to embody the new college culture, as well as the new country’s culture (Tseng, 2004). This research is

helpful because it proves that there are cultural differences between the amounts of independence that is distributed to the youth. For instance, Latin American and Pacific Asian families emphasize family responsibilities and believe they should be carried on after childhood. This research also tells us that socioeconomic status, parental education, and financial aid may have a negative impact on the college student experience (Ishitani, 2006). Although we did not specify the college generation identity of the students, this study demonstrates how first-generation students are less aware of the occupational gains of obtaining good grades in college and college dynamics in general.

Considering all of these sources, we framed our project in such a way that allowed us to focus on the concepts of created kinship, subcultures, and various cultural expectations and norms within a family structure, and how they all contribute to dynamics of college communities.

Findings: Descriptive Data

Lauren

Lauren's first inclination about the word family is biological. She considers some of her friends her created family but in "reality they are not technically family." She was raised by both of her parents in Northfield, Minnesota, and has two older sisters, one of whom is married. Most family on her dad's side lives nearby; four out of five of her fathers' siblings live in Northfield. She laughs that it's hard not to talk about her extended families because she's very close with them and includes them in her definition of family.

She shared that her parents have a joint effort with household duties and finances. Lauren describes her parents as relaxed because she is the youngest. She rarely had rules or restrictions just because she tended to stay out of "trouble." She elaborates, "I knew my freedom was a privilege so I tried even harder not to disappoint them." Her parents have

always held high expectations of her. Her family is relatively affectionate but not “overly affectionate like some families.” Her open and honest relationship with her parents allows her to ask questions about most topics without feeling uncomfortable. In turn, her parents often ask her questions and like to engage in her life. It appears that she holds a high respect for her parents, yet shares a special friendship with them as well. She admires the way her parents raised her and her sisters. She says, “It’s hard to criticize them for parenting and (now that I’m in college) I have realized how well they handled situations. They are my number one influence of how I’d raise my kids in the future.”

Lauren describes how she lives in a house with ten girls, each of whom she has a friendship with. She decided to live with her current roommate based on the fact that they both were studying abroad first semester. In comparison to her other housemates, she and her roommate share more personal conversations before they wind down for bed.

She identifies the most with three groups on campus including: a sports team, her housemates, and students she went abroad with. She tells me that the students she traveled with got to know everything about one another like family does at some point because it was such a small group.

She has a lot to say about the fishbowl culture here on campus. She loves certain aspects. She states that, “I think transparency is really good. I grew up in a small community and its cool to know things about one another.” Lauren describes how it has its downsides too: “I went through a few breakups last year and a lot of drama came with it. Shortly after one of the breakups, he immediately started seeing another girl. People I didn’t even know would come up to me and say things about it. That was a very challenging time for me. It is difficult if you want to keep things private.” She concludes with a reluctant smile, “I guess you take the good with the bad.”

She agrees that there are certain social expectations on campus. She explains that, “the stereotypical Ole is extroverted, social, involved in a lot...and I think a lot are that way. People who are more reserved or introverted don’t necessarily fit the norm at first glance. This environment makes it difficult for those personality types. I’ve learned as I’ve gotten older to respect those who don’t follow the status quo. Like, those who don’t go out every weekend, or eat in groups 24-7. I started to realize it’s a good thing.” It seems that she began to admire the sense of confidence and security students who go against the norm embody.

Lauren tells me that going home is a rare occurrence: she only goes home on breaks, birthdays, or when family is visiting from out-of-town. “I email them with a necessity in mind, not to ask about their days.” However, this slightly contradicts her description of herself as a “homebody.” She later admits, “I’m in a lot of contact with them when it boils down to it.” Freshman year she got slightly, “homesick for [her] old life and friends but [she] was okay with being in a different location because I knew that was right for the time being. I knew if I needed my family they were in close in distance. [She laughs] I guess it was kind of a security blanket.”

Lastly, we discuss her personal relation and her family’s relation to religion. She identifies as a Lutheran and used to go to church up to two times per week. Her parents pray every night and are very involved in the church, yet don’t pressure her to pursue her faith during school. Her faith and religion was a very prominent and influential part of her upbringing. She explains that, “I’m still religious but I don’t practice as much ...as I get older I know I’ll find a church once I enter a new job and community. Basically I’ll revert back to being involved in a church.” She doesn’t usually attend church during the school year because it’s not as convenient. She says cheerfully that church is such a great place to meet people but, when you’re on campus community is already established with your

teammates or people you meet in dorms. “I have one friend in my house who is very set in her ways (religiously). Most of my friends are religious, but in the same boat, where it’s not a top priority at this point in our lives.” This last discussion of faith and religion reveals some insights to community life on campus. Lauren highlights that there are a subculture of “believers” who do not prioritize attending church due to schoolwork and having an already-established community and network.

Maria

Maria is a senior this year at Olaf. In our interview, she wore leggings, tall boots, a designer tank top, a Patagonia jacket and bright pink lipstick; the quintessential trendy European. We sat down in a meeting room so it would be quiet enough to hear each other, and after some small talk, I started the interview.

She told me her idea of family: “Family is where you grow, develop your personality, and share your ideas with people that surround you. It’s a small community that makes you who you are.” When Maria was young, she, her parents, and her brother lived with her grandparents and then they moved to their own house in southern Europe. Maria then went away to high school in Norway when she was 16 and a half. She told me that even though there’s been a lot of distance between her and her family, the notion of respecting the family, listening to them, missing them, becomes more crucial because “you don’t have that immediate nurturing attention, like other kids have when they are with their families all the time.”

Maria and her parents usually talk once a week via Skype. When she was in Norway, they talked every two days, but now with the time difference, they can only talk during the weekends. She told me they usually talk about the future: “What I’m planning to do with my life, my goals, their expectations. They worry more since they can’t see me. Their concerns

have increased more because they are not close to me and they do not see me do what I do, how I study or how I live.”

Growing up, her family was fairly strict. “My mom and I are very good friends, but at the same time, she is the strictest mom. She is very understanding but there are rules and expectations she has and when you don’t fulfill them she gets extremely mad at you and will always bring it up. It’s very hard to get my dad mad. He is not very talkative; he is the observer of the family and the one that calms the situation down.” Maria described the family as especially firm when they moved from their home country to a neighboring country. They didn’t know the environment as well, so her mother was very strict about Maria going out, especially wherever there would be boys. When kids were going to birthday parties that lasted until 6:00pm, Maria had to be home at 4:30pm. “So they were strict in that sense, but I don’t regret it. I will probably do the same with my future children.” She used to complain about it to her parents when she was little, but she said it kept her on a good track. “I didn’t have much time to fall in love and be crazy about guys because my mom would always keep me in check. When I moved to the U.S. and I saw the mistakes that young people here make, I knew I would never want that to happen to my family or my children. I would definitely follow the model my parents set for me.”

Maria comes from what she described as an extremely affectionate family. They give hugs and kisses, but Maria said it is more of a European thing to not say, “I love you,” but to express it through gestures. “My dad will never say ‘Oh, I love you, honey,’ but he will hug us and play with my hair, and I know it means a lot when it is coming from a very serious man that sits around and doesn’t say much.” When I asked whom she seeks emotional support from, Maria quickly and confidently responded, “My mom.”

Maria said her family on campus is comprised of three people. They are the people she hangs out with the most and can relate to her life story and background. “I feel like it has

to do a lot with being from another country because at the end of the day, I know I'm not like the other students here. There are no similarities in how we grew up; we didn't watch the same cartoon shows, we didn't play at the same places." Although her housemate is American, he lived abroad for part of his life and has foreign parents. "The way his parents talk to him is very similar to the way my parents talk to me so there's an immediate correlation." Her other close friend is from Turkey, so they understand each other well. Maria emphasized that family becomes the people that you spend the most time with. She spoke affectionately of her close friends, referring to her housemate as "a kind, compassionate little boy," and laughing about the way she met her friend, both of them lost and waiting for the St. Olaf van to pick them up from the airport on their first day in America.

I asked her about her daily routine and if she feels as though St. Olaf is the kind of place that makes it strange to be alone. She responded, "I spend about 50% of my day alone. I'm more of a loner, but it also has to do the fact that I don't feel comfortable talking to everyone. A lot of American students do that, and find comfort in each other's company, but I don't do that. I'd rather decompress by myself and internalize my problems." She told me if her five closest friends aren't around, she would rather be alone. "I'd rather be alone than in boring company," she laughed, "or with people who don't genuinely care about my day. People here always know what you do, but they don't care *how* your life is and what you really do."

Maria told me she doesn't get as homesick as she used to. "I am so close to being done that I have to be practical and remind myself that I only have a few months here. It sounds robotic, but it helps me cope to think practically and not emotionally." When she does feel homesick, she cooks, plays music, and paints. Painting seems to be what helps the most. "I get nostalgic and images of home flood my brain, and painting has helped a lot."

Maria told me she misses hanging out with her mother the most. “Sure, my friends get me, but my mom more than gets me. I’m her child; she would do anything to help me and make me feel better about something. Even if she couldn’t help she would give me 10 extra advices because she is so sympathetic to me. I miss sitting around laughing or watching movies all together. It’s sad,” she said softly, turning her head away. I shifted the conversation to family meals. “It’s hard to get us together all the time but we have at least one meal a day, and it begins with us talking about our days or the tensions, but then it becomes ridiculous and we start laughing,” and she laughed herself. “Actually, we go on picnics a lot, and I love that,” Maria beamed as she went into detail about their routine. “So everyone wakes up, my dad is cooking in the kitchen; my mom is doing other stuff to avoid tension and fighting. My brother and I go swimming. It’s fun. It’s an excuse to be in nature, laugh around, and play games. I miss that a lot.” Maria smiled, but seemed close to tears at the end.

I asked more about the relationship between her parents, and Maria told me, “My parents keep it real.” They wake up and have morning coffee together every day, and Maria can hear their conversations from her bedroom. “It usually starts out with a little fight, it goes on for two minutes then it’s over and my mom is hugging him and making plans for them for the day. I like that because I’ve never been exposed to the type of arguments that makes couples not speak for two weeks. My parents get extremely mad at each other and then it’s over in 2 minutes.” Maria said it is something that has positively affected her own personality traits. “People here used to think I was so strange for saying how I felt about things, and saying something is stupid or I didn’t like it, but that’s all I am used to, and getting into little arguments is completely, completely normal because my parents always say how they feel.”

Finally, I asked Maria to elaborate on the sense of belonging she has here at St Olaf. She took a long time to answer, and ultimately answered rather carefully. “I make the place myself; I’m not given a place,” she said slowly. “I feel like however welcoming they say they are, at the end of the day, they’re not. For example, for the holidays they say they will assign us host families to stay with, but during the semester we never meet these families. I don’t feel comfortable staying with people I don’t know for the holidays, so I’m not going to do that. It feels like they could care less about ten international children that can’t go home for holidays. So for me, you’re not really being a family; just making sure we’re alive.” She paused and shrugged, “But you make a place for yourself. You make sure not to be dismissed, to make sure they hear you. You don’t really find warmth in the school, but I find it in my friends, of course,” she ended, smiling.

Charles

Charles is a 21-year-old from the South that studies Economics and plays football here at St. Olaf. He describes his personal idea of what “family” is in a more nuclear construct, although he is close to his nieces and nephews as well. To him, family is an emotional support system that he can fall back on. He describes his own family: his parents are divorced - his mother lives in a western state with his younger sister and older brother, and his father lives in the south with his oldest sister. His oldest sister and brother were born out of a different marriage and haven’t met their father. Until Charles was in second grade, his parents lived together and raised the three children together. Before the divorce, he describes his parents’ parenting as very strict. He even remembers being spanked occasionally when he was growing up. He referred to his family as previously a very Christian household with Christian values, although they attended non-denominational church services. This all changed once the divorce occurred. He says that following the

separation, he gained more independence and autonomy while living with his father.

Although neither parents ever explained why they parented the way they did and he didn't question it, Charlie says he understands their initial authoritarian methods. On the topic of affection, Charlie says that his family was fairly consistent in saying, "I love you," although doesn't remember much about hugging or other forms of affection. He feels comfortable saying, "I love you" to his parents but finds himself saying it less to his father. As far as emotional support, it seems he turns more often to his father than mother.

When his parents were still married, Charlie remembers they ate dinner together almost every night and got along very well- everyone talked and laughed. After the divorce, meals were more sporadic and unscheduled. He describes his family dynamic very positively; everyone gets along well and they don't really argue often. He feels he doesn't have the right to criticize his parents. Naturally, he fought often with his siblings growing up, and sometimes with his father when he wasn't allowing Charlie his independence. When his parents divorced and he began to live with his father, Charlie describes housework and budget decisions as fairly even between his father and his sisters, who did all the housekeeping and cooking.

Charlie describes his relationship with his family members now: he keeps in touch very well with his brother, who he texts frequently on a daily basis. He speaks on the phone with his father about once a week just to keep in touch. His mother is more involved in his plans and checks in with him quite frequently about school and money. He says that while at school, what he misses most about his family is simply spending time together. Now, when he sees them, he engages in different activities with each member: for example, when he sees his father, they generally barbecue together and drink beer. When he's with his mother, they tend to watch movies together, and with his brother he just hangs out and visit their mutual friends.

Charlie expresses that he isn't sure he would raise his kids the same way as his parents. Although having a lot of freedom as a teenager didn't backfire for Charlie, he believes his children may not turn out quite as well given that much autonomy. His ideas about raising kids, however, have been influenced by his friends and peers on the sports team. He has observed that most of his more open-minded, independent friends were raised similarly to him.

Charlie never really feels homesick while at school, although in order to feel more at home at St. Olaf he usually cooks meals that his parents make--he says it relaxes him. He misses spending time with his family more than anything, although finds himself returning home less often in his third year. Charlie describes his "family" at St. Olaf as being his football network. He lives off-campus with three previous roommates he met through football and describes the team as his support system at school. He tells me he would feel completely comfortable asking anyone on the team for a ride to the airport--however, he would not feel comfortable asking them for money, "let alone anyone." He says that, of course, he has a particular group within the football team that he feels closest to and finds himself confiding in them more than others. He says that he has three or four friends at school that he feels comfortable really arguing with, generally about personal issues. He says the people he is closest to have similar tendencies and values as him, as well as interests. He finds himself alone an average of two to three hours a day, usually studying or decompressing at home. He sometimes eats alone, but when he does eat in the cafeteria he is surrounded by friends from his sports team. He notices that other people pay attention to his social relationships as a result of the social life at Olaf.

Larson

Compared to our other interviews, this particular participant gave a rather different view of how people see family, and how a community should be viewed. He is a male African-American from the southern U.S. When I asked him to define family, he was so hesitant and unsure that I had to remind him there were no right or wrong answers; his answer is his own and it's fine. After that, he seemed reassured and told me that a family should consist of father and a mother with grandparents that were around. When I asked him to tell me a little about his family, he said that his father was not involved within his life. He lived with his mother, along with his three sisters. His mother was the one who raised him, so there was no father figure present. He told me he had to pretty much take up the father role since he was the oldest, and help out with the family, even to the extent of getting a job while still in school to help with the bills.

He stated that even though he had to take on adult roles at a young age, he was also given privileges unlike other families. For example, there was no set “bedtime” or curfew during the weekday, unlike other participants in our study. He was rarely punished, but his younger sisters were often punished. When his mother was not present, he would take on the role as punishment giver, but tended to not to because he didn't know how.

Being very affectionate was common in his family, especially because he was in a household full of females. His mother was very supportive of him. She wanted the best for him so that he could succeed in life. He then stated that his mother often said she did not want him to be like his father. When he said this, I could tell he did not want anything to do with his father. I did not probe further and ask why because I could tell the thought bothered him.

I changed the subject to his life at St. Olaf. I asked him whether he has found a close-knit group here at St. Olaf that reminds him of his own family. He smiled and said, “Yes,” very quickly. Since he is on the football team, he has built a close relationship with his

teammates. He didn't have any brothers so this was the closest he has come to experiencing that kind of bond. He said the sports team he belongs to reminded him so much of his family. From arguing, joking, and to just laughing with one another over past weekends and other shared experiences. They could trust one another with anything. "If I needed to use a car, they would hand the keys over, no question. It's not any other team. We really are a family."

Diane

Diane is another junior at St. Olaf. She is from the Twin Cities area and is adopted. Her adoptive parents divorced when she was 9; she is in contact with her biological mother through letters, and does not know her biological father. She has four siblings from her adoptive parents (who are their blood-related children) and three half siblings from her biological parents. Diane spoke matter-of-factly about her family, explaining to me that her adoptive parents divorced when she was nine years old. "[My siblings and I] kind of expected it to happen. We weren't shocked. We moved in with our mom, and our dad moved to another town." Diane and her siblings' relationship with their parents was always a bit rocky. "Both of my parents are very dramatic and their behavior is erratic. My siblings and I have grown up with it, so we've learned to deal with it." But overall, Diane portrayed her relationship with her parents as unstable.

Diane switched schools seven times before high school. Her mother was very involved with her education, and would pull her out of schools simply because she did not like the teacher, or the school's particular rendition of the spring musical. Diane attended a Quaker school for the first years of elementary school, then was home-schooled for half of second grade. Next, it was public school until halfway through the 3rd grade. She skipped the rest of 3rd grade, then did 4th grade online with what Diane calls an educational co-op. "Local

parents taught us whatever they knew. We spent a lot of time walking outside.” This continued through Diane’s 5th grade, which “somehow extended into two years because [my mom] didn’t want me to skip ahead two years in school.” Then started 6th grade at a small catholic school (89 students altogether) then skipped half of 6th grade again. In 7th grade, Diane and her family moved to a suburb outside of the Twin Cities area, so she switched to a middle school there. She finished her middle school education there, then attended high school at a Catholic prep school. Diane explained that her siblings did some jumping around, but not quite as much as Diane, and spent most of their time in public schools and did not skip any grades. “I was the oldest, and things just happened that way. My mom also hated my 3rd grade teacher. It was always for weird, specific reasons that she would pull me out.”

Her mother was the same way with religions. “My mom has been Wiccan, she’s been Lutheran, and Unitarian. She’s dragged us with her to all these different kinds of churches, but she never forced us to believe any one thing.” While Diane rather dismissed her mother’s eccentricity, she seemed appreciative of her diverse experiences. “I was exposed to all different kinds of learning and ideas, and I don’t regret it at all.”

But when I asked her if she would raise her children similarly, Diane said, “No, not at all. I mean, I might expose them to different things and let them decide for themselves what they want to do, but I’d like to provide them with more stability.” Diane and her siblings were never severely disciplined. “Sometimes they’d do things like take away our phone privileges, but we always knew it wouldn’t last. We saw the forms of discipline as irrational, and we never pushed for things to be retracted -- they just were.” Luckily for Diane’s parents, she was never a problem child. “I didn’t take my parents seriously, but I just didn’t do bad things. I liked school and getting good grades, so they never had to worry about that. I didn’t drink or smoke, or even hang out with people that did. I just didn’t,” she said matter-of-factly.

In Diane's descriptions of her upbringing, she seemed to imply that who she became as a young adult was not much influenced by her parents. "I'm not anything like them," she said, and described herself as much more of a practical, emotionally stable person than either of her parents. Her mother is affectionate, if only because she is emotional. "Sometimes she'll say things like, 'Oh, I just love you all so much, I would do anything for you,' and hug and kiss us, but the rest of us aren't very affectionate toward one another." Diane then went on to say that she doesn't like going home very much. "It's always a pretty tense environment, with a lot of negative emotions, so I try to avoid going home when I can."

Diane's "home" is actually at school. "I have a bed here," she said, "and I feel like I have more of a place for myself here." She lives in an honor house with eleven other girls, most of whom she has known since freshman year. "We all lived in the same dorm, but we've stayed friends because we have things in common, and we can talk about serious things." Diane emphasized the importance of conversation when describing the bond she has with her friends. "We talk about things like politics -- the Race Matters campaign has been a major point of discussion lately -- and also religion." Diane's roommate is her best friend, and she told me their relationship has gotten stronger since living together because of all of their late night conversations. "We were in the same religion class first semester, and it totally changed our lives," she said very seriously. "I wasn't a particularly religious person before -- you could even say I was agnostic -- but the class we took, and the conversations we had together and with the professor totally changed our viewpoint. And it brought my roommate and I closer as friends."

Perhaps I should now mention that Diane is biracial: half-white and half-black. The Race Matters campaign that surfaced this semester at St. Olaf relates to her directly. It was a campaign that suggested there was a community at St. Olaf that excluded international students and students of color. But Diane insisted that despite this, she felt very much a part

of the St. Olaf community. “I have always been the only person of color in all of my classes growing up. It’s not a new thing for me. I didn’t expect anything different when I decided to come here.” Diane provided her own definition of community at St. Olaf: “I think St. Olaf’s community extends beyond just being Norwegian and Lutheran -- it’s rooted in those traditions, but it also strives to look toward the future. I think people choose St. Olaf because that’s something we can all relate to: we all have traditions, even if they’re not all the same ones, and we all want to be progressive and future-minded people.” While Diane may not represent the typical demographic of a white, Lutheran Ole, she certainly seems to identify with St. Olaf’s mission.

Penny

Penny is a junior at St. Olaf, originally from the South. When she thinks of family, she thinks of her home and the people in her family, as well as the feelings of love, and community. “Community, especially,” she emphasized. She has an older sister that is 25 and a younger brother that is 17. Her parents work together as music ministers at her home church, and she and her siblings all play instruments. “We’re a very musical family, and we’ve pretty much grown up at church. It’s an interesting dynamic because my parents work together and sometimes bring work home, and bring home to work.” Penny described her parents as big believers in equality of man and wife and work well as a team.

Penny comes from a very affectionate family: “There’s not a day that goes by that my parents don’t tell us they love us.” But they were also strict – the three kids were expected to be in constant communication about what they were doing, who they were with, and where they were. If they did not comply with these rules, they were grounded and had things taken away, but there were also hour-long discussions about the mistakes they made. “They really emphasized the importance of respect,” which Penny said is something she will be sure to

instill in her own kids when the time comes. “I think it’s more of a Southern thing to show respect to your parents, like saying ‘Yes ma’am,’ because whenever I say it here, I get funny looks. But I’m going to keep the respect aspect in the way I raise my kids. I think that’s something that’s dwindling in modern families.”

Unsurprisingly, religion has played a major role in her family, and has provided a way for them to bond with each other. Many conversations around the dinner table are about God, and since they are all musicians, relating music to God, faith, and the church are a big focal point of their discussions. “Family meals happen every day,” Penny told me, nodding her head. “We’ve never been the type of family that lets everyone get their own food on their own time – we always sit down together and talk about our days, about faith, and about anything. It’s our community time.”

As with any family, Penny gets into arguments with hers. “Sure, we bicker and yell from time to time, things get stressful, and I’m the loud one so everyone gets annoyed with me,” she laughed. “But for the most part, we do get along very well. We’re very open and honest with each other.” When she’s here at school, Penny misses her family just as much as she did the first day she got here. “I get just as homesick now as I did freshman year. But I talk them almost every day, whether it’s texting or on Skype.” They usually talk about everything: their days, future plans, what’s going on at home with her siblings, and what’s happening at church. “I really miss my church when I’m at school,” she confessed, “I often watch the service streams online when I’m feeling especially homesick.”

But Penny has found great friends here at St. Olaf. “I met my roommate freshman year. We were both in a music ensemble and we were in the same English class. We hit it off right away because we have a lot of things in common. Our family situations are very similar, and we’re both very into music, and our faith.” She told me they’ve gotten closer since living

together, and said the same thing about her roommate that she told me about her family:

“We’re very upfront with each other, and honest.”

While Penny and her roommate are both in the music program here, Penny makes sure to have friends in different groups. “I like meeting new people and being friends with people in all kinds of groups, like, I have my music friends, my athlete friends, my friends from freshman year, as well as some friends I’ve met randomly.” She usually eats with other students in the music program because that’s what their schedules allow, but she makes a point of eating with people she might not ordinarily see on a day-to-day basis, as well. She spends about four to five hours a day alone, and values this time, but admitted she would rather be with other people when she’s studying and eating.

“When I’m home, I’m homesick for my St. Olaf family,” Penny told me. “We’re just as affectionate, honest, and open with each other as I am with my actual family. They mean a lot to me.” When I asked her if she feels as though she belongs in the St. Olaf community, she replied, “I definitely feel like I am part of the community, and everyone here is so willing to make others part of the community as well. I think the St. Olaf community definitely establishes a sense of family.”

Camille

Camille is a sophomore who embodies the “typical” student at St. Olaf: blonde, slender and intelligent. She arrived at the interview wearing a blouse and cardigan, her hair tied back in a ponytail. Camille calls Europe home, where she was raised. Her parents are originally American and currently live in Europe, although they plan to retire and live in Maine. Despite being far from home, Camille explains that she has many relatives in the states and nearby in Minnesota whom she sees on certain weekends and school breaks. She describes her family as fun, supportive, and inquisitive-- the people she goes to for

conversation, debate but also to joke and have fun with. Camille describes her parents as very levelheaded, well-rounded individuals with good values. She remembers her father's parenting as being fairly lenient, while her mother was stricter due to her own stern upbringing and growing up with ten siblings. When she thinks about the way she was raised, Camille states that she would want to emulate her parents' parenting style, rather than her cousin's parents, who she says are strict, conservative Christians. Growing up, Camille remembers arguing a lot with her siblings, and less with her parents. She remembers her sister and jokes about her as being a "problem child," who was pretty rough on their parents during puberty. Her brother also had his period of rebellion, when he would smoke marijuana a lot. All in all, her parents were fairly patient with all of it and the family usually got along fine.

Both of Camille's parents work as pastors, although she has never grown up in a very religious household. She describes her parents' method of raising her and her siblings as simply instilling morals in them. Their religion was what they believed in and built their foundation of morals on, but Camille and her siblings weren't forced to believe what their parents did and were free to make their own decisions about religion: "It's not like, 'you need to read the Bible,' more, 'you need to be a good person.'" She explains that she and her siblings learned through their own experiences. Now that she and her siblings are older, the family participates in religious debates and conversations. For example, Camille tells me that over spring break, she and her mother engaged in a debate on whether or not Jesus was a man. "We question traditional values together."

Growing up in Europe, her family was adamant about eating dinner together every night. The household would wait until everyone was seated to eat, and until everyone was finished eating to leave. It was part of her parent's foundation of values. To them, it was a valuable time to talk-- as previously mentioned, her family is prone to serious debates and

discussions. Camille says when she does miss home, which is seldom, she mostly misses taking time during the day to drink coffee with her family. When she is home, her parents usually take her and her siblings on walks, hikes, canoe trips, and other outdoor activities because they are generally very active people.

Camille believes her family to be very affectionate, and she's much closer with her brother than she is with her older sister, who travels a lot. Her brother currently goes to school at a small private Minnesota college and she says it isn't hard to see him every once in awhile. She generally keeps in touch with her family via Skype at least once a week, but sometimes they talk everyday. When she keeps in touch with her brother, they do a lot of catching up and joking. When she's in touch with her parents, they usually talk about school, finances, and her dog. Camille explains that the thing she misses most about home is good conversations and food (which is all cooked by her father). She says that she doesn't really get homesick. She tells me she has always moved around a lot and been in transition, and that she feels she is, "home wherever I am."

Camille's current roommate, whom she had only met once or twice before becoming roommates, is now one of her close friends. She says that in this aspect, their relationship has changed a lot and she sees herself becoming closer with her roommate as she somewhat drifts apart from her other friends, who she knows from her freshman dorm, Kildahl. Camille comments on the "fishbowl" culture of St. Olaf: "I live in an octet, and everyone always sees each other and knows each other's business. It's a little much." Although she doesn't mind being alone, she finds that it seldom happens at St Olaf simply because of the school's tight-knit culture. She personally doesn't have social expectations about being alone, but she knows other people at St. Olaf do. She believes our campus is very judgmental, and it's hard for people to be alone. She describes one friend of hers who can't be alone and is very dependent on other people because she is insecure about being alone. She didn't notice this

as much her freshman year, when everything was fairly new and exciting. She says that now she doesn't really care. Although she and her friend group have changed and grown apart a little, she says that she still considers them her best friends because they're like her: goofy people who aren't judgmental. She considers these friends her Olaf support system--the people she feels comfortable with. Despite this created friend group, she finds they are growing apart for a wide range of reasons.

Analysis of Descriptive Data

Created kinship was an important concept we found in our literature research, as well as our interviews. To reiterate Andrew Cherlin in *Public and Private Families: An Introduction*, created kinship, or a “personal community,” are the kinship ties people construct actively, and is especially valuable to those who do not find adequate support among “blood-based” kin. This is especially relevant on a college campus where students are living away from their families, usually for the first time in their lives.

The notion of created kinship and personal community surfaced in every interview we conducted. When we asked students about their feelings about the broader community of St. Olaf, some responded positively and others negatively; not everyone agreed on St. Olaf as a supportive and warm community. However, every single participant found a “personal community” and support system within his or her constructed friend groups. Some of our participants did not have typical family structures: some were adopted, some raised by single parents, and one described her family as “unstable” and “erratic.” All of our participants did not see their families on a daily basis, even the students from Northfield. In lieu of these ties with their blood-related family, participants actively created their own community and support system within their friend groups here.

Few participants felt that the St. Olaf community is just as warm and welcoming as anticipated. For Penny, who came to Olaf from the South, St. Olaf is her second home and feels that it effectively fosters this sense of a welcoming community. “I definitely feel like I am part of the community, and everyone here is so willing to make others part of the community as well. I think the St. Olaf community definitely establishes a sense of family.” Living far away from her family means constantly feeling homesick, yet Penny still managed to create her own kinship ties here at St. Olaf. Through being a part of the music program and living in the dorms, Penny has established her created kinship and describes her personal community here as being just as affectionate, honest and supportive as her actual family.

Similar to Penny, Diane feels that St. Olaf’s broader community is what she expected. She describes the community as progressive and inclusive which allows something for everyone to relate to. For Diane, St. Olaf has become her home because it provides a much more stable environment than her real home. Unlike Penny, Diane does not describe her adoptive family as affectionate or open, however, she, too, feels that she has created a new home and family here at St. Olaf. She created her personal community with the friends she has lived with since freshman year and considers them to be her support system.

An ethnography written by E.C. Kim described the kinship of undocumented restaurant workers. She argued that, “undocumented workers create social cohesion, which serves as a source of solidarity and identification for individuals who are otherwise pushed to the periphery by the dominant society” (Kim, 2009). Our participant Maria explained that she did not feel like “St. Olaf really care[d] about [her],” and did not feel like she fits in with many of the American students. However, she created her own kin on campus. Kim asserts that, “integration into a pseudo-family averts feelings of frustration and loneliness that are often consequences of marginalization.” Kim also argued that by creating fictive kinship, people attain a new sense of belonging. Maria, despite feeling marginalized by the larger

community of St. Olaf, avoided feelings of frustration and loneliness by connecting with a smaller group of students that were similar to her, and with this smaller, like-minded family, she felt at home at St. Olaf.

In continuation with E.C. Kim's theories on solidarity and social cohesion, we also examined anthropological theories on subcultures within a college context. In anthropology, a subculture is defined as a group of people within a culture that differentiates them from the larger culture in which they belong to. Subcultures exist in many organizations and either complement or compete with the dominating culture they belong to (Anheier et al., 2010). Additionally, this article contends that these college campus subcultures tend to significantly shape the members attitudes on life and values (Mou, 2010). It appears that student subcultures may influence one's social climate towards the St. Olaf dominating community. For instance, Maria affectionately describes her friendships with a few international students. On the other hand, she stresses how she has little anything in common with students outside of her friends because they share such opposite backgrounds and upbringings. She depicts how her friends provide the warmth that the dominating St. Olaf community fails to do for her. This account illustrates how her friend group, or subculture of St. Olaf, seems disconnected from the St. Olaf culture, and competes with Olaf's sense of community.

Much of our theoretical research stated that people have less reason to create kinship ties if they have access to and stable support from their blood-related family. However, we found that even the students who did have access to their families, whether they were nearby or spoke often with them and had positive experiences whenever home, still created smaller personal communities at college. Because college is a unique experience, and often the first time these students leave their families, it is just as important for them to create bonds with

people around them in order to feel supported. Students create these support systems within personal communities, subcultures, and fictive kin to fill the absence of their actual familial relations and blood-kin.

Summary + Conclusion

Perhaps our most interesting finding was that whether or not students felt part of the larger community at St. Olaf, everyone managed to create their own personal communities and senses of belonging with the friend groups they made from their sports teams, on-campus organizations, and freshman year dorms. While St. Olaf offers itself to prospective students as a warm, welcoming, all-inclusive environment, it is apparent that each student creates their own smaller community. It is within these personal communities that students feel “at home,” “supported,” and “loved” – not within the institution as a whole.

Our research could prove to be valuable for future research. It would be useful in differentiating St. Olaf from other colleges that do not necessarily claim to foster the same type of tight-knit atmospheres. We could continue to explore the idea at Carleton College to see if “community” is fostered in other small colleges. We could compare this to colleges in larger cities – like Macalester in St. Paul – to see if it is actually the town that has the impact on the sense of community; perhaps smaller towns foster a better sense of community than larger cities.

It would prove more useful to interview more students and gain a broader understanding of their personal communities at St. Olaf. We hand-picked students we knew to have different backgrounds and experiences, so this may have affected our results. Interviewing more students might have given us a better sense of what students truly feel about the St. Olaf community and their place in it. However, hand-picking participants we knew was helpful in the sense that they were more honest with us than they might have been

if they were not familiar with us. Family and childhood upbringing can be a sensitive, personal topic, and having an established relationship with our participants allowed us more insight into their stories and thoughts.

Bibliography

Agliata, Allison K., and Kimberly Renk. "College Student's Adjustment: The Role of Parent-College Student Expectation, Discrepancies and Communication Reciprocity." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* (2008)

Anheier, Helmut K., Stefan Toepler and Regina List (eds) (2010). *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*, Springer

Boushey, H. (n.d.). Will Economic Trends Change Family Dynamics? | Center for American Progress. *Center for American Progress*. Retrieved March 12, 2013, from <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/labor/news/2009/04/22/5962/will-economic-trends-change-family-dynamics/>

Brannan, D., Biswas-Diener, R., Mohr, C. D., Mortazavi, S., & Stein, N. (2013). Friends and family: A cross-cultural investigation of social support and subjective well-being among college students.

Chatterjee, P. (1972). Familingual and filialinear relationships: two patterns of control by the invoking of family roles. *American Anthropologist*, 72(1), 231-241. Retrieved March 12, 2013, from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/aa.1972.74.1-2.02a01740/abstract>

Cherlin, Andrew J. *Public & Private Families: An Introduction*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2008. Print.

Crouter, A. C., & Booth, A. (2003). *Children's influence on family dynamics the neglected side of family relationships*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Goldberg, W.A., Kelly, E., Matthews, N. L., Kang, H., Li, W., & Sumaroka, M. (2012). The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: Gender, Culture, and

College Students' Views about Work and Family. *Journal Of Social Issues*, 68(4), 814-837. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.2012.01777.x

Grusky, D.B. (1994). *Social stratification: class, race, and gender in sociological perspective*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Hammer, M., & Schaffer, A. (1975). Interconnectedness and the duration of connections in several small networks. *American Ethnologist*, 2(2), 297-308. Retrieved March 12, 2013, from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/ae.1975.2.2.02a00070/abstract>

Kim, E.C.. ""Mama's Family": Fictive Kin and Undocumented Restaurant Workers." *Ethnography* 10.4 (2009): 497-513. *Abstracts in Anthropology*. Web. 18 Apr. 2013.

McCarty, P. M. (1981). *Parent-child relationships in single parent families*. The Ohio State University. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 210-210 p. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/303025098?accountid=351>. (303025098).

Mou, G. (2010). The Positive Significance of Studying the College Campus Sub-culture. *Asian Social Science*, 6(5), 106-109.

Pyke, Karen. (2000) "The Normal American Family' as an Interpretive Structure of Family Life among Grown Children of Korean and Vietnamese Immigrants" from *Journal of Marriage and Family* , Vol. 62, No. 1. pp. 240-255

Szalay, L. B., & Maday, B. C. (1983). Implicit culture and psychocultural distance. *American Anthropologist*, 85(1), 110-118. Retrieved March 12, 2013, from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/store/10.1525/aa.1983.85.1.02a00070/asset/aa.1983.85.1.02a00070.pdf?v=1&t=hegfkcy7&s=22ae0e0f44d3b1528e6c>

Qin, D. B. (2006). "Our child doesn't talk to us anymore": alienation in immigrant Chinese families:. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 37(2), 162-179. Retrieved March 10, 2013, from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/store/10.1525/aeq.2006.37.2.162/asset/aeq.2006.37.2.162.pdf?v=1&t=hegg21dx&s=54f171f4ed3b0ed3abcb3a922657230a0319a54d>

Williams, S.M., Karahalios, V. S., & Ferrari, J. R. (2013). First-Generation College Students and U.S. Citizens: Is the University Perceived Like Family or Strangers?. *Journal Of Prevention & Intervention In The Community*, 41(1), 45-54. doi:10.1080/10852352.2012.719798