

Regional

Davis studies gray areas of human sexuality

An oftentimes-difficult topic of discussion is sexuality. One problem is that most people have misconceptions rather than scientific information about the subject. Someone who tries to illuminate our understanding of this complex matter is Georgiann Davis.

Born in Chicago, she received her bachelor's degree in sociology from Northeastern Illinois University, her master's degree in sociology from the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and her doctorate also in sociology from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Today she is an assistant professor in the department of sociology and criminal justice at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. For Davis, her interest in the sociology of sex, gender and sexuality emerged from professional interest, as well as her own life story.

"My personal experience that brought me to this interest really was when I was 13 and was diagnosed with an intersex condition called complete androgen insensitivity syndrome," Davis said. This condition occurs when the body cannot use androgen hormones, which results in a person having the external sex characteristics of a female while being genetically male.

"I didn't talk much about it," Davis said. "Then I was sitting in a sociology doctoral program reading an article on this topic and it fascinated me because I had known at this point that I had this condition, so I contacted that professor who wrote that piece at a different university. I spoke with the professor who was teaching that course and decided to shift my research interests. So that is how I got onto the topic. It is very personal to me and now it is also professional as well."

Davis said that she believes that a

more scientific understanding of sexuality really started in the 1970s with the sexual revolution. Prior to this time many people with this condition were called hermaphrodites, now considered a derogatory term.

"In fact the new terminology is disorders of sex development," Davis explained. "But if I can look at a specific point in time and say well what happened, why did things change, I do think there has been increased attention on talking about things like sexuality which were perhaps historically forbidden or not something that we should talk about, or want to talk about, until after the sexual revolution."

Courses on sexuality were not taught at universities until the Kinsey Reports on human sexuality – released in 1947 and 1953 – spurred academic interest in the area. The work of the Kinsey Institute was brought to the attention of a new generation in the 2004 Hollywood film "Kinsey."

Lately discussions about sexuality have centered on issues such as gay marriage and the "don't ask, don't tell" policies, but Davis envisions that the upcoming topic of discussion will be on "sexing" the brain. "That is, the idea of trying to identify individuals as having either a male or female brain," Davis explained, adding that this line of research will certainly have legal implications.

"The main legal issue that intersex conditions bring up is an issue of children's rights," Davis said. "And that is consent for surgery, i.e., who is able to consent? Parents often offer doctors consent when they don't know much about the (intersex) condition."

Since these topics are rarely discussed in public, Davis said that most of her



A self portrait of Georgiann Davis.

students get really surprised to learn about research in this area. After learning about the science behind this topic

they become more understanding of this as a natural phenomenon.

"I think once we start asking 'Well

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really what is?' 'Who defines what?', a lot of the students I have taught over the years will wonder on, for example, 'When someone is having a baby the first question you ask is are you having a boy or a girl' and then you have baby showers and you go and you bring Barbie dolls or G.I. Joes or whatever the popular boy toy is today. But it is way more complicated than that."

Then, of course there are other legal issues such as what to check on driver's license applications, marriage certificates, and even job applications. Another lesson involves the stratification and inequalities that exist between men and women in society.

"One thing that my mentor told me, and that others have said as well, is that you can't possibly change something until you understand it," Davis said. "So regardless of what it is, you need to know how it works. And taking courses such as these in multiple disciplines and multiple studies, I think that it pushes us to understand these complexities – in this case, sexuality, sex, and gender. And that can help us move toward, I hope eventually, to a kind of dismantling of some of the inequalities that rest underneath these binary ideologies."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.

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