

Regional

Racism, sexism problems for women of color

Race and gender continue to be matters of great interest and study in the United States. This is particularly true when it comes to African-American women who oftentimes face both racism and sexism. While this topic is studied in many academic disciplines, sociologists seem to be at the forefront of these discussions. One of those sociologists is Kiana Cox, an assistant professor in the department of sociology and criminal justice studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

A native of Chicago, Cox received her bachelor's in psychology and her master's degree in sociology from SIUE and her doctorate in sociology from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Although the term sociology is well known, that does not mean that everybody understands what sociologists actually do.

"First and foremost sociology is the study of human social life. In that regard it makes it different from other social sciences," Cox explained. "Psychology is the study of human mental life, anthropology is the study of human physical life and artifacts, but sociology is about how human beings exist and interact with one another in groups.

"We don't just pontificate about what people do in groups, we study it. Human beings and the social world are our laboratory," she added. "We take as our subjects people and how they interact with one another." Although she started out studying psychology, she said that she found her true calling in sociology.

"I got interested in sociology because psychology didn't give me enough of the picture that I needed to explain the world," she said. "Psychology taught me a lot about human behavior from the mental aspect. Sociology allowed me to incorporate understandings about law, history, and politics so that you have layers of analysis on top of human behavior. Human behavior always exists in a broader social context."

Some have argued that there are many people who believe in racial equality and many people who believe in gender equality, but that does not mean that everybody believes in both at the same time.

"Within the study of gender and sexuality we call it intersectionality, the idea that our identities sit not just as race or as gender but as both at the same time and as the host of other social identities at the same time."



Dr. Kiana Cox lecturing.

Cox said that historically in anti-racist movements, particularly black anti-racist movements, there were efforts to shore up black unity at the expense of black complexity.

"So they wouldn't deal with gender or sexuality," she said. "For them it was blackness first. Historically that has been sort of the sticking point for black women who were in those movements."

Black women saw similar trends within the feminist movement. Their issues as black women and the effect that race had on their status as women was not addressed in those movements either.

"I don't know that I would say suffered the most," said Cox about black women in these movements. "I would say that all people of color who exist at sort of the combination or

intersection of lots of marginalized identities have suffered. So black women being an example of that, but also queer people of color. And not just black people but Latino people, Asian people, those from the Caribbean and people from the continent of Africa or what we call the 'global south.'"

She believes that people who sit at the bottom of societies are people who most often

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inhabit multiple marginalized identities. "You would see that among people of color who have multiple marginalized identities that those people tend to be worse off," she said.

Another area she has studied is how the media have portrayed African-American women. One common stereotype that she has found in her research is the "angry black woman." Cox said that she sees these representations as media exploiting stereotypes for the sake of ratings.

"In cable music channels specifically there is a whole new reality genre out there that I would argue is built upon the stereotype of angry black women: 'Love & Hip Hop,' 'Love & Hip Hop: Atlanta,' 'Love & Hip Hop: Hollywood,' 'The Real Housewives of Atlanta.'" She uses these programs as examples, but they are not the only ones resorting to the stereotype. "There are several shows across several cable networks – 'Basketball Wives,' 'Basketball Wives: L.A.' – and all the spinoffs that thrive on the idea that black women are angry, vicious and violent towards one another. So yes, I think there is certainly an industry and a market for that."

Both black and white students attend Cox's classes, and one has to wonder if there are differences in the way that they respond to the images of black women.

"In general when we talk about black women and gender and racial equality, for both black and white students, a lot of this history they don't know," Cox said. "So to expose them to the idea that Rosa Parks was not the first woman to be asked to move from her seat, it's not that the black students knew that history and the white students didn't. Neither knew. I've been finding that in that class in general that there is a lot of American history that is missing. And particularly black American history is missing."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. 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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