Sociology Majors Awarded Prizes in Midwest Sociological Society Paper Competitions

St. Paul, Minn. - Senior sociology majors Laura Levinson (Denver, Colo.) and Mara Aussendorf (Bainbridge Island, Wash.) have been awarded first and third prizes, respectively, in the 51st Annual Midwest Sociological Society Student Paper Competition.

In her first-prize paper “Jezebels and White Girl Twerk Teams: Race, Sex, and the Twerking Body,” Levinson examined the popular dance move known as “twerking” which has recently drawn the attention of mass media, despite its existence within African-descent communities for decades. Levinson used systematic in-depth content analysis of online media to uncover what twerking tells us about intersections of race and gender in America. By examining portrayals of race, gender, intent, implied audience, and elicited reactions, the she found key differences between the receptions of Black and White female sexualities as expressed and perceived through twerking. White women were more likely to receive positive feedback for twerking because their movements may be seen as edgy, unexpected, and interesting; Black females, in contrast, were typically rendered faceless and dismissed as objectifiable and promiscuous. Similarly, examining men’s position in twerking in online media, Levinson found stereotypical representations of Black men as lascivious.

Aussendorf’s paper “The Birdhouse and the Bee Hive: Parents’ Navigation of Successful Sexual Socialization” was awarded third prize. She addressed parents’ navigation of a culture filled with mixed messages about sex, which is seen both as a liberating experience of self-actualization and as a source of danger. Drawing on interviews with parents about how they understood successful socialization of their children, the Aussendorf showed parents both cultivating personal hopes for their children’s sexualities and protecting them from potential sexual abuse. The tension between these activities became apparent in how parents both seek to use the home as a socializing environment to encourage bodily pleasures on a personal level, and yet must construct the home environment in relation to societal expectations. To this end, social aspects of children’s sexualities were constructed in line with the normative perspective that children should be discouraged from bodily pleasures deemed sexual, mitigating parents’ promotion of confident expressions of their sexuality.

Levinson and Aussendorf will receive their prizes and present their papers at the Annual Meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society in Omaha in April.

The Midwest Sociological Society, founded in 1936, is a professional organization of academic and applied sociologists as well as students of the discipline. While the MSS membership area formally includes nine
states - Illinois, Missouri, Wisconsin, Iowa, Nebraska, Minnesota, Kansas, South Dakota and North Dakota - more than one-third of the members are from other parts of the nation and the world.

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