

Globetrotting U of L sex researchers making a name for themselves

If the student researchers in Dr. Paul Vasey's lab aren't out in the field collecting data in far-flung places, they're presenting at international conferences and publishing articles.

In early July, an article in *Playboy* called Scott Semenyina and Lanna Petterson, both doctoral students in Vasey's lab, "rising stars" of sex research in Canada and termed the University of Lethbridge a "hotspot" for this type of research.

"It feels so unearned to be called a rising star," says Semenyina. "I am the beneficiary of a lot of people who have come before me. I don't think I'm doing anything particularly great. These other people who have come before me and who help and support me, they're the people who really deserve the credit."

Semenyina studies competition for mates in cultures that recognize a third gender — same-sex-attracted males — such as the *muxes* in the Istmo region of Oaxaca, Mexico and the *fa'afafine* in Samoa. The *fa'afafine* and *muxes* are same-sex attracted feminine males, what North Americans might refer to as transgender.

His work in this area has led to attendance at international conferences and he recently returned from the International Academy of Sex Research conference in Madrid. While there, he was part of a symposium of people conducting cross-cultural research on gender and sexual orientation. Semenyina has served as the academy's student representative for the past three years and that has enabled him to attend the conference when it was held in Malmö, Sweden, Charleston, South Carolina and, next year, Mexico City.

"They're very cool opportunities," he says.

Semenyina was also a student presenter at a recent Heterodox Psychology Conference inspired by the Heterodox Academy, an association of politically diverse professors and graduate students dedicated to increasing viewpoint diversity, mutual understanding and constructive disagreement.

Sex research typically draws a range of opinions, from those who say gender is a result of socialization to those who say biology influences gender. The topics Semenyina addressed included the origins of male sexual orientation, how culture modifies gender expression, and the consequences of more male bisexuality in third-gender cultures.

In Western cultures, same-sex attracted males are typically gay men who have relationships with other gay men. In third-gender cultures like Samoa, *fa'afafine*—biological males who are attracted to masculine men—tend to be feminine in their gender presentation.

“We would argue, based on evidence gathered over the past 15 years, that gay men and *fa’afafine* share a lot in common,” says Semenyna. “There are a lot of biodemographic and biological markers that are really similar between the two groups. For example, they tend to come from bigger families, they have more older brothers, and it tends to cluster in families. About two to four per cent of the male population in the West is same-sex attracted and, in Samoa, the same exact proportion is *fa’afafine*. For all of those reasons, we argue that this is just what same-sex attraction looks like in males in these cultures. The biological root is the same and the cultural expression is slightly different.”

Semenyna also talked about how third-gender males don’t tend to engage in sexual interactions with one another because they’re not attracted to femininity, rather they’re attracted to masculinity.

“*Fa’afafine* engage in sexual interactions with masculine men in Samoa who otherwise prefer women as partners,” he says. “There’s a lot more male bisexual behaviour in these cultures. Because these third-gender males engage in sexual interactions with men, that means that women not only have to compete with other women, but also with *fa’afafine*, in order to attract the attention of men.”

The cutting-edge work that Semenyna, and other students studying under Vasey, have been doing is adding to the body of knowledge on sexual orientation and is garnering attention from afar.

Originally from Evansburg, Alberta, Semenyna heard Vasey give a talk when he was an undergraduate student studying at MacEwan University. Vasey’s research and knowledge of evolutionary psychology piqued Semenyna’s interest and he made the move to the U of L to pursue further studies with Vasey.

“It’s been great,” he says.