

Death and Dying with Dr. Donley

An interview by [Jay Clark](#)

All right, first question, who are you?

Okay, I'm Dr. Sarah Donley. I've been at JSU since 2014 and am an associate professor of sociology. My areas of specialty are gender, work in organizations, and I teach Death and Dying class if you're interested.

Could you please specify what Death and Dying class is about?

It is just looking at everything surrounding with death and dying rituals and American culture. So, we do everything from how do you deal with the remains of a body; do you cremate it? Do you bury it? All these different kinds of things. The class has good cross-cultural variations. In funeral rituals, we look at what it is like for doctors to work with people who have terminal illness. We also look at patients with terminal illness and what it is like making those decisions around the end of life. The class looks at anything involved with death and dying, and how it changes over time.

What do you do outside of office hours that not many people know about?

I play video games, a lot of folks think I don't really like to play video games. I was a late bloomer with them, meaning I did not start till I was in my 30s. The reason I did not start until my then is because I was like, 'I can't play video games while I'm in grad school, because it will suck my time away.' So, I started playing video games when I got a job.

What was the first game that you got?

Oh, Skyrim. That game totally sucked me in.

I've heard about Skyrim, and that it was a great game. It is also like Elden Ring.

Yes, yes. But Elden Ring is way more hardcore.

How long have you been in a teaching position?

I have been in my teaching position here at JSU since 2014, so its been about eight and a half. Before JSU, I taught graduate school at Kansas State University for two or three years.

Where was it that you knew you wanted to be a professor?

I have always been interested in learning about other cultures and groups of people my entire life, ever since I was very young. I wanted to become a professor when I started graduate school and began developing relationships with professors. It was the kind of working mentorship I had with them, I wanted to be able to do that for other students too. So, I would say, in my master's to PhD program it was around that time that I figured out that I wanted to be a professor. I love learning, I am deeply passionate about learning, and I love research. I get to pursue those passions as a professor. I don't think an eight to five or nine to five ever fit me. I think that all of those realizations got me to view, I want to be a professor.

Diving into your research interests and topics, how did you figure out what your interests were?

I have always been interested in gender and equality, and understanding how masculinity and femininity have shaped our opportunities and lives. Specifically in workplaces, and then looking at how occupations become gendered. That was my general interest. One day when I was looking for a topic to study for my dissertation, I was out having dinner with some friends, and we were just talking about different occupations. We were talking about how people do gender work, right? Somehow, we came across the conversation of 'how do funeral directors do gender? How do they perform masculinity and femininity? And why is that funeral directing is considered a form of care work, right?' We know it's because you're dealing with grieving families, but why is that a mostly male dominated occupation? How do you reconcile that kind of mismatch there?

And so, it all started. That whole question was just so interesting to me. I have no background experience in funeral directing or death and dying at all, but it was just so interesting to me. I started doing research on it, and found out that women had started to move into funeral directing. It was becoming increasingly female dominated. From a sociological perspective, we know that there's like gender typing and sex segregation in occupations in our society. I was fascinated with 'Okay, so how is this shifting?' You know, the way in which funeral work and death work is done, right? How is it shifting our cultural understanding of death and dying? Because we are considered a death fearing society. We have a lot of anxiety around death, and we don't like to talk about it, it's a taboo. So, like, all those things informed my general curiosity. That's what I ended up doing my dissertation on.

How have you maintained those interests for your focus on conducting research?

One way I've done that is through writing, like taking my dissertation research and turning it into publications. Also, I've done that through teaching it. I teach a gender class, and I also teach a death and dying class. With those, I'm able to delve into the literature and share what's going on. I get to share what literature says is going on the status of gender and work in the US. Also the status of death and dying and the ritual surrounding that in the United States, and how things have changed and all that kind of stuff. What I'd like to do for my next project, and hopefully start soon, is Doulas. If you've never heard of a birth doula, it's like a midwife a little bit. There are folks known as death doulas, and they are just like people who help others at the end of life. Part of the reason that they're there is because of the death fearing society, and death anxiety that we have in American culture. Death Doulas are there to be support, to help people, make decisions, prepare, all that kind of stuff. I had just recently found out about this because someone I went to graduate school with started doing this. They reached out to me, and said, 'hey, what kind of resources do you have? Because I know that you've studied this, and you've taught this, what kind of resources can you provide?' My next research project would essentially be to talk to those folks and look at this kind of new death care worker, what they're doing, what shift they are seeing in the death and dying rituals, and that kind of stuff.

That's amazing. Has there been a particular topic or paper that was most memorable to you?

One of the first texts that I ever read as a sociology major in undergraduate was *The Sociological Imagination* by C. Wright Mills. I have a quote on my door because I think it's so profound, "The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society, this is the task and its promise." The whole idea of that is the promise of sociology as being able to widen your worldview. Being able to as an individual, see how you're connected into this wider social structure of society, and then seeing how that influences you and how you influence that.

In an American culture, we're very individualistic, right? It's focused on the individual and what we can or can't do. We often forget, or neglect how we're connected to everybody else, and how similar and different we are to one another. We often forget that, and sociology is the reminder that we're embedded within a system. All of the things that I do have impacts on other people, and vice versa, right? I think that sociology in that regard, gets back to that collective responsibility, and that it's not just about me, but about all of us. That was something very profound. If I were to share something that I wrote and am proud of, I don't know... I had a paper coming out last year, and it was looking at Covid-19.

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The COVID pandemic really changed the way in which folks were dealing with death and dying, because a lot of people could not have funerals immediately after due to social distancing requirements. And so, what happened, is this movement of people doing things online. A former student and I looked at COVID 19 memorials online, and looked at duplicate content analysis of them about what they were talking about and what they said. One of the major things that we found in that paper was the overall frustration that people were expressing with some of the loss of life. Whether it be their relative or friend, it could have been prevented if folks would have followed through with stay-at-home procedures, masking, and all that kind of stuff. It was like the unnecessary loss of life, the anguish, grief, frustration, and the sadness associated with that. I really liked that paper because it just kind of touches on how much of a significant impact the COVID 19 pandemic has had on us, and will continue to for years to come.

Is there anything that you wish you knew before becoming a professor?

I would have to say, impostor syndrome, I think that's a big one. After all this training and experience that I have, and even after being tenured, I still have impostor syndrome. It's such a common thing, and this isn't just being a professor, this is any kind of job or role that you're going to go into, right? People are afraid to talk about it or are ashamed of feeling that way, feeling inadequate, or feeling like you are not qualified enough for something. I think having more open conversations about that kind of stuff would be beneficial to everybody. I think the shift in academia and higher education is going that way by having those more open conversations. I wish I had been more informed on what that was and how to deal with it, and how to overcome these things too.

How have you dealt with the impostor syndrome?

Honestly, just by getting more experience and realizing how capable I was. Also, having positive feedback from students. I had students who were like, 'I really learned a lot from this class', or 'I really enjoyed this class.' 'I really like sociology now.' After that was like, 'Okay, I'm doing something right.' Right? Those things helped me, and also being realistic, because it's normal to have self-doubt. I realized that as time progressed, and I had gotten more experience with teaching and being in a Professor role, it got easier. The anxiety associated with that went away, or got less, it never fully goes away. Also, sharing my experience with other Junior Professors who are in a similar role, and talking about what helps and does not help. Even being honest with my students, and being like, 'Hey, guys, I had impostor syndrome, too.' Being real with folks and sharing that is a way to acknowledge it, and then simultaneously deal with it too.

Were the courses you are teaching now the ones you created, and if so, why did you create them?

The only course that I am teaching now, that I created, would be the Death and Dying. I like teaching that class because death is like, not to sound like super cheesy, but you know, strapped from Star Trek, like the final frontier kind of deal, and I think it's such a facet of our everyday life, right. Peter Berger, a symbolic interactionist sociologist said, "if we really want to understand human behavior, and social interaction, you study how we handle death." That's how you can truly learn about human culture and societies, by studying death. I really think that is because of how taboo it is; but it's an everyday feature of our lives. It is important to learn why we handle it the way we do now, right? What are ways that you can improve and get over the death anxiety, right? How do you, even within your own life, confront that kind of stuff that is impending doom and the existential crises often surrounding that? I just think it's fascinating, and as a sociologist, it just makes sense that I would take something that was interesting to me, and teach it. I have found that a lot of times, the students who take this class have the same kinds of questions or curiosities about it.

So, for our last few questions, do you have any events coming up or new research that you're working on that you'd like to share?

Actually, I have two things right now. I'm working on a game simulation called Intersectional Monopoly. In sociology there's this historic teaching practice of using monopoly to illustrate social inequality. Like social stratification or social class, or like stratification along racial lines or gender. But, what we've not seen is a game that kind of takes all of that together and makes it more intersectional rather than focusing on just one of these identities or statuses. Dr. Turgeon (Bri Turgeon is another sociologist here) and I developed this game. You play characters, and the community chest and chance card are replaced by Context Cards, and then character cards. In the game you meet different situations, those situations affect how much money you get paid at GO, how you're able to move across the board, and many other variations. For example, one of them is you get into a car accident and can't afford to pay for your repairs, so you must move half speed around the board (whatever half of the roll your dice roll.)

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The game is sort of like that, and we developed actual characters that you play. There are 10 characters, and they all have varying backgrounds. We have middle aged Asian woman, nonbinary folks, trans folks, LGBT, black, white, Hispanic, Native American, along with different religious identities. We also have very wealthy people and poor people. Based off all those kinds of intersections of identities, the way you can interact and play around the board changes. We play tested in our intro classes and have been collecting data on it as a learning experience right now. The other research I am doing is the Death Doula mentioned earlier. I'm doing some interviews with that occupational group and learning about how death and dying practices are shifting and changing, and also the emergence and role of this occupation within that whole part of life.

Is there anything else that you'd like to share?

No, I think that's it.

If you have any questions for Dr. Donley about Death and Dying, any of Dr. Donley's class, or Intersectional Monopoly, you can email her at sdonley@jsu.edu