

Daniella Lake

Hello everyone, you're tuned into 90.7 FM KALX Berkeley. I'm your host, Daniella Lake and this is The Graduates, the interview talk show where we speak to UC Berkeley graduate students about their work here on campus and around the world. Today I'm joined by Jessica Law from the Department of Sociology. Welcome to the show, Jessica.

Jessica Law

Hello!

Daniella Lake

So tell us, what are you studying within sociology?

Jessica Law

Yeah, so, Hi, I'm a third year in the Department of Soc. So right now, my research focuses on racial classification and racial formation, the politics of statistics and state knowledge. In other words, I'm interested in how categories of race. So, how we identify ourselves to each other, how we identify ourselves to the government, how the government sees us how we understand the role of race in our society, how all these things are tied to the official like bureaucratic categories that we see on, for example, the census. So I think to zoom out a little bit, I think this is to take the social construction of race seriously, how both lay people like ordinary people, and state agents contribute to how we commonly understand what race is like, what are like the different racial groups? What does that mean about people? So the research project that I'm doing right now looks at a law that passed in Minnesota a few years ago, that mandates a disaggregation of student outcome data in the state. Rather than collect data on white, Black, Asian, Latino, and Native schools now have to collect data on different ethnicities. The like, exact language gets a little complicated, because like, Native is not a race, Latino is not federally considered a race, etc. But they had to disaggregate these like broad categories into like their smaller subgroups. So rather than just Asian, they collect data on like Chinese or Hmong, rather than just Black, they also collect data on Somali etc. So I've been interviewing folks about why they decided to pursue this law, what they think this will accomplish for their communities, as well as why other people actively oppose the laws. It was very contentious issue in the state, in some people actually try to get it repealed also.

Daniella Lake

Yeah, and so one of the things you mentioned is the social construction of race. So I think that would be a good place for us to start. Could you tell us more about what that is? Because I know a lot of people aren't really familiar with that. I've learned a little bit about it in sociology. But yeah, why don't you tell us about that?

Jessica Law

Yeah. So social constructionism, in general, it's usually attributed to Berger and Luckman, who were to sociologists, it's the idea that there aren't necessarily like real divisions, concepts, etc, that we've just given names to, rather, through the process of giving things names and describing them in having a shared idea of them as like a group or society, they become real. So one example I like to give is the example of time. So why do we have 60 seconds in a minute?

Why do we even have minutes? Is the universe naturally divided in these increments? And the answer is no, right? Because there are so many other ways of counting time. There's so many other forms of the calendar, like throughout history and different societies and cultures. So even something as natural feeling as like time is something that we can consider as socially constructed. So if we were to apply this to race, it's the idea that race isn't biological, which was and still is, to some extent, the dominant like understanding of race, for example, like that I am biologically Asian, it's my DNA, it's my genetics. And that says something about who I am like, what am I? Like, the things I'm prone to. Or like, how I like am in the world, or whatever. So to say that race is socially constructed is to say no, actually, our ideas and categories of race are things that people and institutions have come up with and have become concretized over time, and now feel real to us. And right, that actually has a lot of profound implications. Because in a lot of ways, historically, race was created and used to justify and legitimize for example, slavery, colonization, etc. That some groups of people are biologically are naturally inferior, and those who are like the oppressors are just naturally superior and therefore deserve to dominate others. There's so yeah, it's it's a it's a long, like tradition of thought, especially in the social sciences. And I think it's become more like commonplace for people to be like, race is, it's not like your destiny or anything like that.

Daniella Lake

Mm hmm. I think learning about this is really eye opening. And just learning about the social construction of reality is really eye opening. Because it makes you realize, like, we really have assigned all these meanings to things that have no inherent meaning. So I think it's really good for people to to learn about it. And on that note, I was just wondering, like, when did you first become interested in studying racial classification, formation, the politics of statistics? When did you get drawn to this subject?

Jessica Law

Yeah, so I think, if I were to give like an origin story, one version of it would be when I first read this book called *The Impossible Subjects* by Mae Ngai. So, Mae Ngai is a historian and it's, it's such an amazing book, I read it pretty early in my undergraduate career. And it really changed how I thought about history, about race, about the law, about immigration, etc. It talks about the history of quote, unquote, illegal, or undocumented immigration in the US and how, basically immigration policy didn't just like dictate, who could immigrate in what conditions etc, but also was central in shaping ideas of what it means to be a citizen in ideas of what race is and who are like the racial groups, etc. So, for example, before a certain point, in the US history, we didn't really have a category of Asian, so people don't really think of themselves as Asian, they weren't classified as Asian. They were Chinese, or Japanese, etc, things that are more based on like national origin. But in 1924, the Johnson Reed Act made it so that people from the continent of Asia, were excluded from immigrating to the US, because they were seen as racially unassimilable. So again, like there's this idea that this group of people are unfit to become citizens of the US. And so that, again, ties to ideas of like, yeah, of like, what racial groups are or can be, and also like, what it means to be a citizen. And so legally, and socially, Asian becomes a category in itself, whereas it wasn't before. So just not their ideas of like, who are the rightful citizens who's allowed to come and be in the US? And what does that say about, about these different groups? And so that I think was my like, first foray into like, the world of like, racial

formation, I think I would be remiss to not also mentioned the, like, fundamental, like foundational book that actually came from a professor at Berkeley. Omi, Michael Omi, who is slash was in the Ethnic Studies Department, and Howard Winant, they wrote, wow, actually blanking on the name. But they wrote this really foundational book about, like, racial formation. And it really advanced like the idea of social construction of race and like how you can actually use that in your research. And from there, yeah, I've just like, added other things other like topics to what my interests are, like statistics. Statistics, are usually thought of as like, very objective and like, just represent truth. Actually, people make statistics and people choose what statistics to collect, which ones to share, how do you interpret them? So again, it's just like a theme in everything that I do is like this, like people make these decisions are actually not real in the way that we think they are. Yeah.

Daniella Lake

Yeah. So I want to hear more about the Minnesota law and your research on that. So you already gave us a little bit of background. But yeah, I was just wondering if we could hear more about that, and how you're conducting your research, and just what you've learned about that situation?

Jessica Law

Yeah. So the law I'm looking at is called the All Kids Count Act. It was first passed in 2016. And like I said, it mandates that schools have to collect disaggregated data. And I think long story short, is that I think a lot of communities in Minnesota feel that like the the way that data is currently collected based on these like very broad racial categories, does a huge disservice to students and the general communities because, right if you have like the Asian category, and you have Chinese, which, in Minnesota at least, I believe, like the Chinese population is mostly like highly educated work like highly skilled jobs. They emigrated to the US like in fairly recently versus you have in Minnesota, there's a huge Hmong population. So among H-m-o-n-g is like an ethnic group that after like the Vietnam and in the Secret War in like, the 50s to 70s came to the US as refugees. And, obviously, I think the difference between like highly skilled immigrants who come here, willingly to seek jobs, or like education or whatever, versus like refugees who are escaping like a, like a horrible, like political situation in their home country, right. So like, though those communities are like facing different challenges. And so I think the, the intent behind the law is to be able to actually identify like the disparities that exist between communities that are otherwise obscured by these broad racial categories, right? That if we have, like, some Asian students are doing really well. And that pulls up like the average, or like the aggregate data, so that it looks like "Oh, Asians in Minnesota are doing great, like, they don't mean extra resources, they're fine." They're in some cases, they're even doing better than like their white peers. But if you disaggregate the data, then you could see that like, for example, Hmong students, maybe are not doing as well, and they need like specific services. This is true for like Somali students or Ethiopian students. And so it's this idea that like, these racial categories, however useful or important, they are, like, don't tell the full story of how students are doing or who they are, like what they need. And so that's why they fought for this law. And there's like a whole other part of the story of like, why people opposed it, but I'll just stop there.

Daniella Lake

I mean, it sounds like a really great way to figure out like, which people are affected, and how to help people more directly. So I guess I'm just interested in hearing about the direct effects that you've learned about from this law, like, have they actually been able to help some students? Like, what has come out of this?

Jessica Law

Yeah, um, it's a little hard to say, because, so it's been about like, four, five and a half years since it passed. But I think one thing that's come out in my research is that it's been hard to implement the law. So it's definitely stalled in a lot of ways. And those sort of data that advocates are hoping to gather this law like, just hasn't been reported or collected or anything yet. So it's, it's hard to say what like what the impact is, or can be, because it just like, isn't there yet. And that in itself is like a point of contention, like, why has it taken so long to implement this law? But one interview that I did, someone talked about how the knowledge that there is a larger population of Hmong students in their school allowed the school to be able to provide like particular resources like Hmong studies, or like Hmong language classes, or like Hmong culture classes, which otherwise, like, if you don't know that they're among students in your school, for whatever reason why you wouldn't know that. You probably wouldn't like, create those classes. Right? You wouldn't like think that those were programs or services that needed to be created for students.

Daniella Lake

And so you mentioned that you've conducted some interviews, right. So I was just wondering, like, what has been one of your biggest takeaways from one of the interviews you've done on this subject?

Jessica Law

On like, the process of interviewing or like in terms of the research?

Daniella Lake

The research.

Jessica Law

Yeah, so I'm in that process right now, like figuring out like, what the takeaways are. But some preliminary thoughts, I think, one like race is weird, like, people have such greatly different ideas of like who they are, who other people are, like whether we should look at race and whether we should collect data on race. That is something that has definitely come up on the side of the opponents to the law that like they I believe that to look at race to collect data on race, it's like a form of racism itself. Because we shouldn't like care about the skin color of someone, like that your race doesn't matter in terms— for your students achievement and stuff like that, which I think is interesting, because it's just like so fundamental. Like, if you don't even agree on the like premise, or the terms of the debate, like of what race is, and what place race should have in our society, then of course, like there are going to be disagreements, there's going to be conflict and tension about what you do to solve different social issues. So that's kind of like the big thing that I'm seeing and trying to work through.

Daniella Lake

And I was just wondering, what's something you wish the general public knew about the politics of statistics?

Jessica Law

I think one thing is just like a greater awareness of like, the history of statistics, the history of race, and immigration, etc. In the US, that is, like everything I've been saying before, like, all of these things aren't neutral. They have like a particular history that came out of particular, like, purposes, like you could have, probably have a whole other podcast episode on like the history statistics, and its relation to eugenics and stuff like that. And so I think that, at like a bare minimum, I think that's something that we should talk about more and learn and teach in classes, not just in college, but like in high school, just like fundamentals of like, our history as like a country and the history of the world. Because like I said before, like I think, if we don't even see eye to eye on like, again, the terms of the debate, then how can we have like fruitful conversations, or we'll always just be doomed to agree to disagree? And I think this shows up a lot. Now I'm thinking about like, the whole, like anti Critical Race Theory stuff that's been happening around the country that like, if you like, look at the people who oppose Critical Race Theory, there's just like a, it's clear that they don't actually know what Critical Race Theory is. And they kind of just think that anything that says the word race or talks about race in any way is critical race theory. And one not, understanding what Critical Race Theory is just, again, you're just like misunderstanding, like the purpose of it. But I think the second thing with that is like, if we can't even talk about why race matters in the US and around the world, like why it's an integral to our history of like, exploitation and oppression, then how can we ever like, I don't know, like, seek to address and redress the harms that have occurred. So yeah, I think just, yeah, general knowledge and like, greater, like public education and discussion of these topics.

Daniella Lake

And one of the other things you said you're studying is state knowledge. So what exactly is state knowledge?

Jessica Law

Yeah, um, so I think it's related to all of this. So where do I start with this? So let's just take the census, right. And the US Census happens every 10 years. And it's super important, because it's basically one of the biggest ways that the government is able to learn about the population in the US, right, it's so important for funding and for like, determining, like, redistricting, and like, like the representation and stuff like that. And so I think that is an example of state knowledge, right? That there are processes, there need to be processes for the state to be able to actually understand who are the people who live in their, in their territory. What are their needs, etc. And so, I mean, this is a whole body of literature also. But I think if we take the census as an example, we can also talk about how the census has its own history of how in like the 19th century, it was, like a primary way for Imperial countries to like control and manage their colonies. So If you're colonizing a place halfway across the world, you would implement the census so that you can understand like, who are the people here? Like, how should we divide up the land, like all of these things. And so I think that's something that is often like taken for granted. Or maybe we don't talk a lot about in like politics, or in academia that like, , these sorts

of knowledge is like, once you become president, you just don't like automatically know everything about your country, right? That there are like huge processes of like data collection and analysis to happen. And again, as I've been saying, like people are involved throughout these processes, like people are making decisions at every step. And I think these decisions have consequences for like how data collection, for example, happens. And at the end of it also, like how this sort of knowledge informs the decisions that people make, about like, what policies implement, like whether we should allow people to immigrate to the country, like all of these things come from the knowledge that the state is able to produce about the population.

Daniella Lake

Yeah, and yeah, you're totally right, it is important for us to realize that, like people are behind these things, you know, it's not like the computers come up with the questions and, you know, computers make the decisions, like, it's people and because it's people, it's biased or has an agenda. So yeah, I was wondering, how did you end up choosing Berkeley as your place of study? Did you do your undergrad here?

Jessica Law

No. So I did my undergrad at the University of Chicago. And how I ended up at Berkeley is, I think, looking just looking at, like the sociology departments across the US, I think Berkeley was like, one of my top choices, because of the faculty that we have here that there are so many really great faculty who do similar work as me, or what I was interested in. And also very, like kind faculty also. And so I think that was like one of the bigger, biggest draws, because I think, at my undergrad, like, I was a sociology in like race studies, double major. And it was very clear to me in my four years there that like race studies wasn't very supported, or wasn't very valued at the school, and even in the, in the, like sociology classes that I would take, or in other classes I would take there. So I really wanted an environment where people are thinking critically and seriously about the questions that I'm interested in, that it's from the get go, it's not about defending the fact that I want to, like research these things, and that these things are important, which is definitely the case with certain people in certain places. So I think that was like a big draw of Berkeley.

Daniella Lake

And what are your plans for after you complete your program?

Jessica Law

Um, that's a great question. I, my hope in my ambition is to become a professor, to be able to continue to do the research that I want to do and to teach. So I think, yeah, I think professor is like a great way to do both of those things and get paid to do it.

Daniella Lake

Yeah. Well, is there anything you think you haven't gotten the chance to share?

Jessica Law

One thing that I think is important to —since this episode is about me — I think that's important to talk about in terms of like my story, also, like, why I think like, why research is important, etc,

is like I came into doing research from like an organizing background. So in my undergrad, I was a student organizer. I worked on issues around like free higher ed on campus, like getting cops off campus, like a higher like minimum wage on campus, like all these things. So I didn't go into undergrad wanting to go to grad school. Definitely not. I thought I was gonna get my bachelor's and like be done with school forever. But I think, I don't think academia or going to grad school is like a good substitute for organizing. But I definitely see the value in doing research as a way of like getting clear on issues and understanding like where people are coming from, like I was talking about, like, how do people on the different sides of an issue stand and why do they come to those conclusions? I think it's important for, like politics in general and for trying to push issues and push for like social justice and stuff like that. So I thought that was important to mention too, because I think a lot of people who come to sociology are attracted to sociology because they want to make a difference in the world. I think that's what a lot of people when they go to college say that, like, that's what they're in college for, is to learn how to be someone who has an impact on the world. And I think sociology is a great, like, major to have, if that's what you're interested in if you're interested in social justice. But I also want to say for those people who, who are sociology majors or are interested in sociology, or are just like, posing sociological questions that like, study and research and reading is not always enough. It's never enough, I don't think. And so, yeah.

Daniella Lake

Yeah, maybe we could talk a little bit more about sociology itself, and maybe some of the misconceptions people have, because I feel like some people don't even know what sociology is. Um, so yeah, what are some, like misconceptions about sociology you think are out there? Or like, how have people reacted when you've said you're studying sociology?

Jessica Law

I think one thing that I've seen a lot is, and this is not specific to sociology, but like the university more generally, that like, universities and disciplines like sociology are just like, "echo chambers of like liberal and like progressive thought." But no, I don't think that's true. And I think it's a very, I think it's a very purposeful, like, portrayal of the university and of certain disciplines as a way of like, justifying their like defunding, or like to strip them of resources, and that there are like, better disciplines that are more objective, or more like, neutral, or whatever, like economics, which is very laughable, because the running theme of today's conversation is right, that like, everything has its own history. And economics definitely has a very interesting history. But right, that like stuff like history, or stuff like economics, or statistics, or like the hard sciences are all like, objective, and based in truth, and those are the things that matter and nobody should go into the humanities or the social sciences, because you just like, navel gaze all day. I think those are like very dangerous messages. In yeah, like I said, are often used to, to justify getting rid of these departments or not funding these departments or these classes. Because I think even people who aren't sociology majors, or aren't interested in social sciences, like have a lot to gain from these sorts of classes, like I know, like, you're not a sociology major, but you took two sociology classes. And I think, hopefully, you gained a lot from those that are applicable to whatever field that you want to go into. But also just being like a person in the world.

Daniella Lake

I feel like all of the, you know, non STEM classes, you know, from departments like sociology, or ethnic studies, or even media studies, the department that I'm in, you can apply it to your everyday life. I feel like that's why it's so helpful, and so important, and great if everyone could take, you know, at least one class from one of those departments. And yeah, so I wanted to ask you, is there anything you'd like to leave us with?

Jessica Law

As Miriam Kaba would say, "everything worthwhile is done with other people." So I think take advantage of your time in college and meet people and talk to people about the ideas that you learn in class, have healthy debates and discussions. Yeah.

Daniella Lake

Today we've been speaking to Jessica Law from the Department of Sociology. We've been speaking about her research on racial formation and classification and the politics of statistics. Thank you so much for being on this show.

Jessica Law

Thank you for having me.

Daniella Lake

Tune in in two weeks for the next episode of The Graduates.