

Transcript: Interview with Prof. Danielle Slakoff

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Prof. Flores Victor: Hello and welcome to Building Justice, a podcast by Sacramento State University's Center on Race, Immigration, and Social Justice also called CRISJ for short

We are going to explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world.

0:20 Your hosts for today are myself, Professor Kristina Flores Victor from the Political Science Department at Sac State and Professor Danielle Slakoff off from the Criminal Justice Department at Sac State.

0:37 So thank you for joining us. We're going to have kind of a casual conversation, a little bit about teaching and research and what it means to be involved in the work of race, immigration and social justice.

So thank you for joining us today. So, Professor Slakoff or Danielle, I wanted to start with some questions about how you came to Sac State. Sometimes our students are very interested in our stories of how we came here and how we decided to become a professor and maybe why this campus or why this research.

1:13 So I'm curious if you could share with us a little bit about how you came to be here at Sac State.

Prof. Slakoff: Absolutely. Thank you so much. So I grew up in Los Angeles and I actually went to Cal State, Long Beach for my undergrad and my masters.

1:25 And I had an amazing experience there. Neither of my parents had a four-year degree. And so I really did not know what I was doing when I got to my Cal State Long Beach. But the support I got from the day I started was incredible. And I learned so much, not just about by coursework, but myself and the world during that time.

2:01 So in many ways, I should have seen it that I had I had big plans to come back to the Cal State. I should have known I was going to come back. But at the time I wasn't sure. But it was actually professors of the Cal State Long Beach that were the first ones to mention grad school to me. And then when I was in my master's program, the same thing. They were the first ones to mention APHC program.

2:20 So I just had such amazing mentorship at the undergrad and grad level there, and I felt like I just got a world class education there. And I was told that I came in very, very prepared. My APHC program. And that was such a huge compliment because I felt the Cal State really did a great job of that.

2:41 From there, I went to the University of Nebraska in Omaha. And I had never lived in a cold weather place before. So that was interesting and a challenge. But I, I went to work with somebody who was passionate about media criminology, which is what I focus on. And I really did go to work with her. And it was an amazing experience.

3:05 I worked with her the whole five years. And from there, I did a little detour to another university for my first job. But when I saw the job come up at Sac State, I knew I had to try to get back to the Cal State system. I felt very good to come back in whatever way that I could. So I am really happy to be here. I'm happy to be back at Cal State.

3:32 The very first time I stepped foot on campus at Sacramento State, I felt like I was back home. I just had all of the same feeling that I did when I first step onto Cal State, Long Beach campus. So I knew, like I knew it was the place for us. I was really excited to be back.

3:53 Prof. Flores Victor: That is fantastic. You know, you mentioned a lot of things that I feel like really resonate with other first gen professors. I'm also a first gen scholar. And I think the feeling I would say is very surreal, being in a classroom as the professor. And I think that I don't know, maybe you feel the same experience that it really resonates with students when they have a first gen professor in the classroom. Did you feel like students really kind of take to that?

4:22 Prof. Slakoff: Absolutely. I, I am known for being very, very detail oriented. And I will tell them, you know, as a first gen student, I did not know what a lot of these things meant. So the more detail, the better for me so that I could really get what the professor was asking me. So now as a professor, I realized that I am extremely detailed because I want everyone to be able to do a good job and not have to guess at what I'm asking for.

4:44 So I think it comes up in that way because sometimes I think the level of detail students are like, oh, wow, this is very big still. And I'll just tell them, you know, I remember as a student not knowing what. These things mean, the other thing is like with student hours. So I never went to office hours because I had no idea what they were. As a first student. And so now I've changed. As a professor and student hours and tried to tell them, you know, this is time I set aside for you. So I definitely think it impacts my teaching. And students definitely respond well to that.

5:23 I think that for a lot of first gen professors or first gen scholars, the hidden curriculum, as it's called, in higher academic kind of communities, you don't really realize how much of it there is until you have completed your journey, you know, until you've gone through undergrad or master's program or PhD. And it takes so much time and energy to kind of uncover all those things. I find myself to as a first gen professor, trying to for my students, show them all the pieces of this kind of hidden curriculum. And so I do think that that's something that adds to the diversity of the campus and kind of helps students, too.

6:11 Prof. Flores Victor: You mentioned office hours versus student hours. I feel the same way. I never went to office hours and didn't understand what they were for. And so, again, having a professor who understands that and reaches out, I think it's really to the benefit of Sac State. Now, I did want to ask you something you had mentioned when you went to Nebraska that you

worked with a particular mentor or your PhD advisor, I'm assuming, for five years. And so maybe we can transition a little bit into research in the things that you actually kind of study and work on while you're also here teaching. Did you know your advisor before you applied to Nebraska? So you applied to work with this particular person and this is the type of research that you were interested in and maybe tell us a little bit about what it was, criminology in the media.

6:57 Prof. Slakoff: Yes. So I actually saw this speaks back to Cal State, Long Beach and how amazing my experience was. I presented my master's thesis at a conference and it was very early stages of my master's thesis. And my professor at Long Beach helped me to present. It was my very first presentation at a conference. So my soon to be mentor, Dr. Pauline Brennan, she was in the audience. And so after after I presented, she came up to me and said, you know, I really loved your presentation. I want to do similar work, but have struggled to find a student who has this passion for media and criminology. And so she she handed me a folder and said, you should apply to our doctoral program.

7:38 So that was it, that she came up to me and she said, you know, you should apply to the doctoral program. I did apply to I only applied to three places, which, looking back, I maybe should have applied to you. But I felt strongly based on my interview there, that it was the right pick for me and that she was going to be a really strong resource for me as a mentor and friend and colleague. So I feel very grateful, but I wouldn't have even been in that room without my professors at Cal State, Long Beach, who really, you know, told me you can absolutely present this and it'll go great. So it really did open that door for me to get my future.

8:17 Prof. Flores Victor: That's amazing. I mean, this really shows the power of mentorship. Right. The importance of having opportunities for our students and even having just someone encourage you. Your work is good enough. And this is totally what the field is doing right now. And your work is appreciated. So the work that was your master's thesis, was that then part of your dissertation research or is that something you're still working on today? I know sometimes researchers, the things they work on, they evolve over time. So is this has it been kind of a linear progression or have you kind of changed fields at all?

9:01 Prof. Slakoff: So I've always really stuck with media criminology, and that has not changed. So my master's thesis was on the missing white woman syndrome in print media. And that's still very much is a huge part of my research. And what I look at so with Dr. Brennan at Nebraska, we really started focusing on an intersectional approach to crime and media and specifically looking at how black, white and Latino women are presented as both victims and offenders in the media. So that's what I worked on my entire five years, was really this intersectional focus. And women, specifically victims. But we did start looking into some offender stories as well, or people who perpetrate crime.

9:41 But now I'm actually transitioning a little bit into a true crime podcast, which is more entertainment media. Right. So it's I am definitely evolving a little bit. But I still see so many of the same issues, especially with, for example, you know, white women's victimization being held to the standard of the ideal victim, the ideal victim stereotype.

10:06 And actually, in my work on the podcast, all four of the seasons that I did a deep dove into are about white women who were victimized. So it's something I talk about, you know, in my in my discussion is that we don't really see full season long podcast about women of color. And why is that? So definitely all ties together. And it's it's moved in some ways. But in some ways I'm still doing the same work, which is focusing on gender, race and media and crime.

10:39 Prof. Flores Victor: I want to ask you a question I don't want to put you on the spot here, but is this kind of missing white woman syndrome? Is this also do you see in this research with children, too? Is it the same kind of it's not just with women, but it starts even at the younger ages and goes all the way up?

11:00 Prof. Slakoff: Yes so the missing white woman syndrome is sometimes called the missing lost girl events as well. And this idea that it's really missing white women and girls that really get the most attention. And so I actually do this thing in my classes where I ask students to come up with high profile missing persons cases or high profile murder cases and JonBenet Ramsey and Natalee Holloway. There's very Elizabeth Smart. There's very similar ones that come up every time.

11:33 And so what are those things all have in common? You know, they usually figure out before I even say anything that those are all white women that come to mind first. So it's definitely something that I I've been told by students that I ruined the media, which I don't want to ruin media for them. But I've been told by students that I have because I do challenge them to look at not just gender portrayals, but also racial portrayals and how different they are based on the person's race.

12:04 Prof. Flores Victor: So interesting what you just mentioned, kind of the movement as your research is evolving the movement into podcasts, because it kind of points at the larger issue that this maybe isn't simply a news media, you know, like your local news media framing stories, but rather it's kind of across different types of media even. And as it moves into kind of entertainment, then that kind of shows that this narrative is really persistent over time.

12:30 Prof. Slakoff: Absolutely. Interesting. That's something I realized, is that our entertainment media very much looks the same in many ways. And that is something that because I'm evolving now into some more entertainment media, I'm seeing really for the first time that actually a lot of these same stereotypical and downright racist portrayals are actually filtering into all of our entertainment as well. And so, of course, this is all very problematic because research shows that people who do not have direct and are not directly impacted by crime, they often learn from the media about crime and victims and perpetrators. And so if we have these really. Stereotypical and racist portrayals. That has a negative impact, of course, in the long run.

Prof. Flores Victor: Now, that's completely fascinating because you do start to wonder about kind of the causality, right, which is obviously we've gotten into probably a feedback loop by now.

13:37 Right. But whether the narratives do they come from kind of entertainment media? Do they begin there? And then they kind of filter into kind of the criminal justice system or does it work in the opposite direction? I mean, my guess is, as I said, we've probably in a situation now where they're mutually reinforcing, but have any kind of thoughts about was this something that was originally driven by. Kind of narratives in society that found their way into entertainment. Or do you think it's the other way around?

14:08 Prof. Slakoff: So there's this amazing columnists named Eugene Robinson, he's Pulitzer Prize winning columnist for The Washington Post, and he wrote about this phenomenon as being part part of the reason is because the ratings are there. So basically saying that as long as our media is for profit, that there's always going to be an incentive to put this story that people are going to click and listen to.

14:36 And so basically saying that as of right now, that is what is making the money, and that is what this is going to continue to happen.

14:44 And so I did a piece on the missing white woman syndrome with my my colleague, Hank Berdella about how do we fix this. And it was really challenging to talk about because, you know, we said we have to make it so that people care about stories about people who are in the minority groups. And that's just I mean, that's really daunting when you talk about it that way, because essentially the argument is, well, people aren't clicking on those stories, which is really, really unfortunate.

15:20 I will say, for example, with missing and murdered indigenous women, there are a lot of people that just don't even realize that there is this epidemic currently happening in the United States. So there's definitely this idea that we're not giving enough space to some of these major issues in my dissertation.

15:35 I looked at seven different newspapers, the front pages for an entire year, and only one Native American woman made the front page of the victim. And I was just blown away by that because statistics show that they might be as high as 10 times more likely to be murdered than other women in the United States. So there is a huge disconnect there. And you see that play along race lines for sure.

16:13 Prof. Flores Victor: Your research is so interesting to me. I feel like I could just ask you questions all day. I really think, though, that this gets kind of the bigger reason for this CRISJ Building Bridges podcast, too, is, you know, you're raising this issue of kind of awareness and engagement in society. And I think that this is part of CRISJ's mission. You know, this just for the listener. Again, it's the Center on Race, Immigration and Social Justice. And part of what this center is trying to do is really create these relationships between the university and the community, between professors and the students that we teach, between the people who work on our campus and kind of do all these things and raise awareness.

16:50 And so I'm kind of curious as to how you see kind of your approaches to teaching, your approaches to research, how you bring your research into the classroom. And because you're

relatively new to succeed in the area, how you maybe see this all fitting together in like possible opportunities for outreach in the community? I mean, I know that's a lot of questions all in one.

17:20 But however you feel like addressing how you feel like this research and your teaching kind of like fits in with CRISJ's mission.

17:31 Prof. Slakoff: Absolutely. So my research really is focused on this intersectional lens of how people are constantly impacted by their different parts of their themselves. And so all of my classes actually start with the day on intersectionality, no matter what class it is. Even research methods, you know, where they might say, why does this matter for research methods?

17:49 But this idea that we all have these lenses that we see the world through that are unique to us and that is really important in my research. But also it's important for my sake, for me that my students learn that we all have these unique lenses and that we're simultaneously impacted by, you know, for example, our gender or race or sexual orientation, religion, all of those different things. So I think in terms of CRISJ, my work, especially my work on media and race, you know, very closely aligns with their mission in terms of making sure that people know that this is an issue.

18:24 It's challenging. I have not yet had a great audience with journalists. But with that said, I have recently been interviewed by two journalists about this topic. So I do think that that would be a great next step is to really just talk about did you do you realize that, for example, the black women victims that you are talking about?

18:49 Do you realize that you're mentioning in a lot of these stories that they live in a bad neighborhood? They might not even realize that that is really painting the entire story as OK? Well, this is an about neighborhood, so it's expected in some way.

19:05 And actually, we found in our research that 73 percent of the stories about black and Latino women had a mention of the bad neighborhood that the woman lived in, which is just, you know, it's it's there. And yet so many journalists might not even realize how how much that can impact the reader and consumer of that media. I will say, too, that my research is starting to move more towards domestic violence, which I believe is a social justice issue.

19:31 It has huge economic impacts. It has huge criminal justice, mental health impacts. But we also know along race, race lines, poverty lines and disability and ability status that intimate partner violence can impact people. So, so much based on those things, especially along economic lines.

19:55 Research suggests that the inability to leave financially is one of the strongest, strongest indicators that someone will not be able to leave when they want to because they can't afford a new apartment or they can't afford the plane ticket. And so we know that that's another way in my mind. That we can really help people is by putting more resources into intimate partner violence programing and shelters.

20:21 So I'm hoping I am very new to Sacramento. I'm hoping once COVID-19, is over to start volunteering more and at intimate partner violence facilities and shelters. And right now I'm able to, you know, donate a little bit and help in that way. But I'd really like to, you know, maybe even become a board member at one of them at some point and try to help in whatever way that I can.

20:43 Prof. Flores Victor: I think it's a really great time for you to be a part of this day. The center is for people who are listening and who are new to hearing about CRISJ the center is relatively new. And so I think that it is also growing and evolving and adapting. And I think we're really well situated here being in the capital of California. You know, we have kind of geographic quick access to legislators and policymakers. So I think that the university itself, the center and the people who work with it are kind of uniquely situated to be able to kind of impact policy and to to make a push for evidence based policy recommendations on these areas of raising awareness about domestic violence or this kind of portrayals in the media.

21:32 And I think that would be really interesting to possibly think about. You know, could CRISJ sponsor something like workshops for media professionals? Right. And talking. How are these stories talked about and providing resources to people who kind of work on these issues? Like I said, I think the topic is super interesting. Your students are really lucky. Do you see possibly as your research evolves and thinking about. You know, we always are thinking about ways to be involved in our community, that there be opportunities for students to to kind of engage in research, whether it's through like the master's program or whether it would be through something like community engagement, involvement around this topic.

22:25: Prof. Slakoff: So I am currently chairing a master's thesis with a student named Erica Maya. She's amazing. And maybe one day we'll be back on the podcast together to talk about her thesis work. But she's actually focusing on how the media has portrayed COVID-19, an intimate partner, violence. And her interest is actually on whether or not minority women, impoverished women, trans women are even going to be mentioned in the news. So that's really what her focus was on, was is it going to be once again that the media is going to focus on white women, victims of intimate partner violence? So we'll see. She's in the data collection stage right now.

23:07 She's sorting through the articles about COVID-19 and intimate partner violence that she's really focus specifically on. How are women that are not white women going to be discussed in these stories? Because right now with COVID 19, we know that there are so many issues, of course, with socioeconomic status and right now women that are getting help. Are often doing so online and through their phones. Well, that's making an assumption that someone has Internet access and has a phone. Right. So we'll see. I'm looking forward to see what she finds.

23:43 I am pessimistic in that I don't necessarily know that there's going to be focused on those hardest hit by both COVID-19 and intimate partner violence. But we'll see. Well, we'll see where the research takes her.

23:58 Prof. Flores Victor: That's also really interesting, that kind of gets into a research area of mine with immigration. So my guess is that's another layer on top of that is immigration status probably impacts not only the ability to leave, like for the individuals in the situation, but the coverage. Right. So we've seen the coverage of the COVID -19 has not been very inclusive of kind of what's happening with people who are immigrants in the country, whether they be documented or undocumented.

24:29 Prof. Slakoff: Absolutely. And research does suggest that people who are undocumented, their abusers, will use that undocumented status as a threat against them if they try to leave. So we know that we are very likely missing an entire group of people that really need support and resources because they are being threatened in that very unique way. So that's something that I'm really excited to be helping and being part of this project with Erica because she really views that to be so important. This idea of how are the people that need the help the most? Are they even part of the discussion?

25:06 Prof. Flores Victor: Well, this has been very interesting. I wanted to thank you for coming on and talking about your kind of journey here and your teaching and your research. And I think you've just really done an excellent job of framing for us why this particular type of research is so important and kind of all of the potential impacts across society and in the community that this type of research can have. So for our listeners, we want to thank you for listening and we hope that these ongoing conversations either spark understandings or empathy's or motivation to join the struggle for a better future for all of us. So please turn in to additional CRISJ. Podcasts that are posted on our podcast channel, and we will see you later. Thank you so much.

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