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[SPEAKER_00]
I'm in the studio today with Heidi Erickson, an associate professor from the Department of Social Studies here at the University of Stavanger, and Cornel Nessler, a professor at the Department of Psychology, also from the University of Stavanger.
We are here to hear their take on the concept of discrimination.
In particular, we will hear about their recent article entitled, Is Welfare Support Distributed Evenly?
Assessments from a Field Experiment with Frontline Workers in the Norwegian Context.
So welcome, Heidi.Corell

[SPEAKER_02]
Hello.

[SPEAKER_00]
Thank you.
Welcome to Kafe MIRELLE and conversations about stigma, discrimination and recognition.
So both of you, I was really excited to hear that we shared a common interest here at Kafe MIRELLE on discrimination.
And as I was saying to you earlier, it's so typical in academia that we sit in our offices completely unaware that the people next door are studying exactly what we are interested in.
So maybe just to start off with, how did you both get into the subject?

[SPEAKER_04]
Let me maybe start here.
So I've been working on discrimination, but with a background in economics for a few years.
And I work at a department where most of the people focus on child protective services, social work.
And I know nothing about that.
But I wanted to do something in social work.
So I asked Heidi.
So it was a bit strange because I know nothing about the field.
And just to get into it, I needed someone

[SPEAKER_01]
who knows this stuff and who would be better than heidi who has worked together with now for i don't know how many years no quite some years yeah my background is as a social worker from different parts of the norwegian welfare system before entering into academia eight years ago so um
Yeah, I knew the Norwegian Welfare and Labour Administration quite well.
And we were also working on... You were contributing in a book about... Yeah, that's right.

[SPEAKER_04]
I remember.

[SPEAKER_01]

Yeah, about discrimination that will soon come out as well, where discrimination also is a topic.
But my whole background or interest for going into academia was trying to make a contribute when it comes to improving the services and the encounters between the service users or clients.
that often are in very difficult and vulnerable situations and need people to give them good help.
So that those meetings and that help should be good is actually the motivation of all the research that I'm doing.

[SPEAKER_00]
No, brilliant.
Thank you.
Because it's always interesting, like as you said, sometimes I think when I'm in the same situation, like I know nothing about child welfare or social work either.
And it is that need to try and be useful and then finding collaborations.
And this is why it's so great that social work and psychology are, that we're in that office next door, that you can have those lunchtime conversations that lead to exciting things like your recent article.
And
the book that's about to come out.
I sort of fell into the area of discrimination kind of naively and the more I read, the more I suppose overwhelmed I become about how big a field it is and how long people have been studying this particular area.
And there's so many definitions, there's so many disciplinary perspectives.
But what I always ask our guests right at the beginning of any podcast is, what are your perspectives on discrimination?
How do you view it?
Bearing in mind, you're talking, Cornell, about having an economics perspective, but how do you both see the concept?

[SPEAKER_04]
very good question so i think discrimination always differs with respect to where you measure it so and when you focus on it suppose for example you go to the labor market and you just try to get a job so then most of the time it's it's based on your name or maybe on your gender so that is something that directly influences you and maybe you can also see it yourself because you have sent out so many applications and you see that people
from some backgrounds are changing their names so that it fits more to this directive.
But in other cases, it might be somewhat silent.
So it's very difficult to detect and people might not even know about it.
And because of that, I think it differs from situation to situation and the context is super important.

[SPEAKER_01]
Yeah.
And what is something I've been curious on is that it seems like because I think all people that decide to become social workers want to do something good in the world.
It might be wrong, but I think that's the motivation for most people deciding to study a low-income profession.
But still, we see from research and also from my own experience, meeting

service users and people having...
the welfare services, they experience, even though we know that, or I think I have, what do you say?
I believe that people have good intentions, but still people get bad treatment.
It's something around that that is very strange, actually, that I've been curious about.
What we've been looking at is the welfare and labor administration.

[SPEAKER_00]
Ah, NAV, yeah.
Yeah, NAV.

[SPEAKER_01]
And what we see there is that, or what we found from previous research, is that people with a foreign or immigrant background are less happy with the services that they get from NAV than people with a majority population, in this case Norwegian, background.
Yeah.

[SPEAKER_04]
But let me focus one more time on the context.
I did a study a few years ago in Italy.
And in Italy, we use typical Italian sounding names and Jewish Italian sounding names.
But what was special about this experiment was that we contacted employers, landlords and football clubs.
So it was the same names, right?
So the only difference was the context.
But what you would expect if the context wouldn't play a role is that the difference with respect to the response rate would be the same.
But that's not what we found.
We found that in sports, you were the least likely to get a positive response if you had a Jewish Italian Sony name.
So that shows you that in some areas, maybe people do not discriminate.
Like in our case, maybe the labor market, if you have a Jewish Italian sounding name.
But in other cases, you do because for yourself,
is a different situation and that was what i found so intriguing in social work because you come to a situation where you have someone else sitting across the table that has to assess your situation which can be very important so the cases we have in our study for me at least many of them sounded like here's someone that needs help but how's the person on the other side of the table assessing that
So does the name sound a role here, or is it something that you would ignore?

[SPEAKER_00]
So I suppose that introduces the topic of the particular paper that you've just had published.
And I was really impressed by it.
And it was very clear cut and a very neat and tidy design.
And yeah, I was really impressed by it.
So I wonder if you could both say a little bit about and tell the listeners about the aim of the paper, the methods for those of us that are nerdy and like research methods, but also more importantly, the results and implications.

[SPEAKER_04]
Yeah, maybe.
So for me, if it would make sense, I would start with Heidi explaining the cases that we had.
Could you do that?
Yes.

[SPEAKER_01]
So Conan started asking me, can you describe some situations?
Five it was, if I remember correctly.
Five situations that people can describe and ask for help to solve from the Welfare and Labour Administration.
And I said, of course, no problem.
I've received many of those situations.
And yeah, we decided to focus on people that were in an urgent position of need.
That could be, for instance...
I don't have a place to sleep, but I needed somewhere to sleep that night.
Or a single mother didn't get the money from the other parent.
Was that one of them?
I'm trying to remember correctly.
I would have to check to remember all of that.
But normal cases that they need help here and now.
And then there were three alternatives that...

[SPEAKER_04]
But that's fine because the cases are the starting point.
So we had these cases that were like typical NAV cases and they were assigned with typical Norwegian or foreign sounding names.
So we had three different foreign groups, the largest one here in the area in Rogaland.
So I think we had Ukrainian, Polish and Lithuanian sounding names.
And so then people, we had NAV employees and students that wanted to work for NAV.

[SPEAKER_01]
Or probably some of them will be working for now.
They don't know that yet.
Right.
Both.
We had three different types of participants, students from the bachelor program in social work, students from the master program in social work, and also students from what you say, a post degree that we have.

[SPEAKER_00]
That's great.

[SPEAKER_01]
Yeah.
That welfare and labor administration pays for.

[SPEAKER_00]
Yeah.

[SPEAKER_01]
So they are working in now.
so that was uh yeah how many were oh that's a that's a good question so i think it was 130 so

[SPEAKER_04]
yes and then we just randomly selected names so for example if heidi would respond now the names that were on the cases would be different if you would respond now sarah so that it would be totally random which name you get with which case because that allows us to make a causal ex to have a causal explanation at the end so we would know okay is it the name or
Or is it not my name?
And in the end, we had four different choices for them to respond, which I basically for myself, I don't know if Heidi agrees or not, summarized in, yes, I can help you.
So your request, I, as a social worker, can help you with that.
Or I push it away from my desk.
So I said, no, I cannot help you.
So we had inside those categories, we had subcategories.
But if I say, let's say,

[SPEAKER_01]
completely in the nicest possible way this is how i would see these categories yeah and also yeah one of them where i can help you but i need more documentation a typical answer in the welfare services

[SPEAKER_04]
Yes, and then we found that it makes a difference if you have a Norwegian native sounding name or a foreign sounding name.
But that was highly dependent on the type of case that we had.
So in some cases, maybe if you have a Norwegian sounding name, the caseworker is more likely to say, yes, I can help you.
In other cases, again, depending on the content of that case, the social worker might be more likely to say, you know what, I guess you find the data on the NAV webpage, but I cannot help you with that.
So there was a tendency that we found in the data to, if once you're unsure, to prefer the Norwegian sounding names, if this is how you see it as well.

[SPEAKER_00]
Yes.
Do you think there's a particular, I don't know, culture du jour that there are certain foreign names that are preferred or perhaps experience less discrimination?
So you say you had Ukrainian, was it Polish?
Yeah, and Lithuanian.
Was there a difference between the way a favoured group and why do you think that might have been the case?

[SPEAKER_01]
Yeah, what we found is that, first of all, as Cornell said, you are less likely to get help if you have a foreign sounding name.
That's the first one.
And the second one is that if you have a Ukrainian sounding name, you are more

likely to get help.
than if you have a Lithuanian or a Polish sounding name.
And the Polish sounding names are the worst category, you could say, for receiving help.

[SPEAKER_00]
I'm quite impressed that social workers can differentiate between Ukrainian, Polish and Lithuanian.
Because I come from Southern Africa, they all sound exactly the same to me.
But it's interesting that

[SPEAKER_01]
Yeah, but that could also be, of course, a criticism, right?
We haven't investigated that.
Are they able to differentiate those three names?

[SPEAKER_04]
Yeah, I know that I'm talking to people who are probably not so keen on data, and I just want to mention that because we only got the data from around 130 social workers.
And our main focus was on foreign and native.
And that means we have two groups.
And we do focus on the foreign groups in our paper as well.
But I would say that, and also in our paper, we are very careful with that.
So I completely agree with Heidi's assessment.
But it would be too much for us to say, OK, the social workers go completely against one group.
I cannot say that.
So we find a tendency, but we have to be very careful.
So yes, maybe.
But again, we only have a small number of participants.
And we are glad to have this number already.
It took us a lot of time and work.
But we shouldn't overemphasize these results.

[SPEAKER_00]
Yeah.
But I still really like your paper.
So thank you for being humble, but you don't need to be because it was super interesting.
I think you also... Yeah, so there's so many questions to ask.
But one of them was...
I wonder if you had any, maybe this is for your next 500 papers that you will be writing on this subject, but nationality, culture, whatever surname represents is one thing.
Had you considered or had any thoughts maybe how other kind of identities or categories might feature like gender?
I mean, there's a lot of discussion about gender.
discrimination against fathers, for example, and child welfare, and perhaps less prevalent in Norway, but also issues around class, for example.
But had you had any ambitions of exploring other discriminations and

[SPEAKER_04]
So in our statistical models, we control for gender.

That means we look at gender as well.
We do not find an effect.
For me personally, we had one question in there.
I think Heidi already explained it a bit.
So you're in the parental situation and you ask for something about your child and you mentioned that you are divorced.
And in this case, we had a father and a mother.
And unfortunately, we only had 130 observations, but that was something that for me personally was super interesting.
We didn't find an effect, but I was really interested to see if maybe, you know, like, because in that case, I think the parent is asking for more money.
So I wanted to see if social workers are more likely to help this person, if it's a father or mother asking, but we didn't find anything here.
And also it was only one case.
So am I right?

[SPEAKER_01]
Yeah, one question is, hello, my children's father and I have split up.
I have the children with me 80% of the time, but he refuses to pay child support.
Can the Welfare and Labour Administration pay child support directly to me, as they sometimes can, I could add?
And then can you claim the money back from the children's father later?

[SPEAKER_04]
Yeah, that's exactly the one.
I mean, because we had it for both genders, from the father's perspective and from the mother's perspective.

[SPEAKER_00]
That is super interesting.
I love when you tell the story and you tell the narrative, because actually one of the things we were interested in was collecting narratives and just listening to you tell those very specific examples.
It suddenly makes everything a lot more concrete when you can hear the example of where discrimination might happen and where it might not happen.
So I really like that aspect of your study.
The next question is, and this is really unfair because, as you said, this is one paper.
I'm sure you have ambitions to do many more.
At least I hope you have ambitions to do many more.
But what can we do about it?
Like make everybody change their name to, I don't know, Ericsson maybe?
I hope not.

[SPEAKER_01]
I would not recommend that because what name you have is such an important part of who you are and your identity.
So I think it's actually very, very sad that some people decide that they or that's the solution they come up with.
But at the same time, it's, of course, possible to understand if you've applied for a lot of jobs or apartments without getting one.
But no, I don't think that's the solution.
I think we have to look at why is this happening?

And one interesting thing that we have been discussing in our paper is that Actually, it's a problem with the aims or the goals of how they measure the welfare and labour administration from above.
And of course, this is decided by politicians.
In this case, I think we...
You could, of course, say as well that probably people from outside Europe experience a lot more discrimination because of many reasons, religion, skin color.
Yeah, a lot of different reasons.
But at the same time, we see here when we are looking only at European immigrants, that
that they can actually experience discrimination because the organization itself is supposed to prioritize some service groups over others.
And in this case, people from Africa, Asia, maybe it was South America as well, I don't remember, but they are supposed to be prioritized.
So it's like differential treatment is in the guidelines.
of the frontline workers or the social workers working in the Norwegian Welfare and Labour Administration.
But it's not something I think that is being discussed.
How does, what you say, requirements from above affect how they practice discretion in their work?
Yeah.
In Norway, we actually we have laws for this.
Right.
So it's it's illegal if you treat somebody worse because of their name, which is the case.
Or it could be you could say religion, gender, sexual orientation or whatever.
But we have these categories that are.
that you're not supposed to give somebody differential treatment because of that.
But that is something that I see is some way in contrast with this requirements from above that you're supposed to treat somebody different because of their name.
And I actually think that this is something that needs to be discussed and worked more on within the organizations with the workers
Because they actually practice discretion and assess their cases with a lot of freedom too.
They have a lot of heavy workload.
Assess a lot of cases in a very short period of time.
Have a lot of contact only online digitally with the clients now.
Without even meeting them in person.
So...
there's also always a risk that their own biases they are people belonging to the society there are biases here they are affected by that as well so this it's of course it's good to to be able to practice discretion but maybe you need to create some more awareness or have some more discussions in the working environment to talk about these things how you do it really interesting thank you

[SPEAKER_00]
And just anecdotally, and this is not an intervention, but it just suddenly occurred to me.
My surname is Hean, and Hean is a Scottish name.
But our original name was Hand because we are Irish immigrants.

And we changed, or a grandfather, a great-great-grandfather, changed from Hand to Heen.
because he wasn't getting work in Scotland and changed it to a Scottish name so that he could.
I hadn't seen that connection.
It's just an interesting thing that this discrimination by surname, because you can identify a person's origin from the surname, has been around for centuries.
Right.
So maybe the final question I usually ask people as part of the origins of the Morel Consortium and of Café Morel was originally or is originally to try and develop capacity in this area of discrimination and
We have a long-term ambition of eventually trying to develop a PhD school that would support the study of discrimination.
So if the two of you were to develop a PhD project that would stand alone or be part of that, or if you are talking to the students that might be listening to this podcast, what PhD project would you, what theme of research would you encourage them to explore?

[SPEAKER_04]
So I would always advise the PhD student to find an organization or company to work together with.
So for example, NAV or Barnevern.
So you have a company that has an organization that has a real interest in it.
And also you might be able to change something.
So first, it is always important and interesting to measure discrimination.
But obviously, it is far nicer to find a method against it.
And if you work already together with an organization,
you have an incentive to change the situation and it's far easier and also it is easier to publish this work so i would always advise them to find a third party to work together with

[SPEAKER_01]
Yeah, and I would also be interested in looking more into maybe to be able to create more changes to work more directly with, for instance, frontline workers and observe the assessments that they do.
Also take into account their own background,
Who are they and how do they reflect upon who they are when they are making decisions?
Yeah.
Interviews and observations also into this, maybe combined with field experiments as we've done now.
Could be interesting.

[SPEAKER_00]
Okay, well, thank you very much for coming into the studio and taking the time to share with Café Morel your really interesting findings.
I look forward to your upcoming book.
From me, thank you very much for taking the time to come and talk to the listeners of Café Morel.
Thank you for inviting us.

[SPEAKER_02]
Thank you.
It's a great pleasure.

[SPEAKER_00]
Thank you for listening to an episode of Kafe MIRELLE