**Down to the Struts**

Season 5, Episode 3: Disability and the Federal Judiciary

Host: Qudsiya Naqui

Guest: Mamadi Corra

Transcript by Qudsiya Naqui

For more information:[www.downtothestruts.com](http://www.downtothestruts.com)

**Introduction**

“My biggest advice to any person with disability whether that's in the social scientists or whatever, is to persist. At the end of the day if you if you leave your your life situation in the hands of other people, your life outcomes are going to be very limited. You have to be at the forefront of pushing for your life.”

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui and welcome to another episode of down to the struts. The podcast about disability design and intersectionality. Today will listen in on my conversation with Mamadi Corra, professor of sociology at East Carolina University. Professor Corra and I discussed his research on access for people with disabilities in the US federal judicial system, his approach to disability and scholarship and his advice for disabled people of color pursuing an academic path. If you want to learn even more about disability and the legal system, you should check out Season 4, Episode 4, Disabled in Court and my interview with Erika Rickard of The Pew Charitable Trusts about our report, “How courts Embraced Technology, Met the Pandemic Challenge, and Revolutionize Their Operations.” Okay, let's get down to it.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Welcome, Professor Corra, thank you for joining me on the podcast today. I'm delighted to have you here.

Mamadi Corra:

Thank you, I'm happy to be here.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Wonderful. I would love it if you could start off by telling us a little bit about yourself and your personal story and what brought you to your scholarship on Sociology and Social Psychology.

Mamadi Corra:

As I mentioned in that introduction, I'm a professor of sociology here at East Carolina University. I'm also an immigrant, I'm visually impaired, but I'm also an immigrant from Gambia, West Africa, gave me to go to school as a high school student, and then I went on to get my different degrees. So I would think that my ending up in sociology is probably just a natural thing. Right? I came from a society, relatively poor, society, relatively marginalized society. So I'm interested in issues of social inequality, issues of power, and privilege, and so on. Those are key topics in sociology. And so I think it just it became a match. I did not intentionally go to sociology, just like we were talking about earlier, how did I end up in my scholarship and disability? My interest? If I were going to say, what kind of area would I have picked? I think it would have been an attorney arguing in court. When I was a kid, I used to sit around in these courtrooms in Gambia if I'm not in school, just just listening to individuals argue cases. And I used to find that really fascinating. Just these lawyers arguing their points, and then someone wins and another one doesn't, and so on. So, if I were, if I were to say then if my ideal, my love, what would I want to be when I grew up, it would have been being an attorney. But that never happened. For a variety of reasons. So I ended up in majoring in business and sociology in undergraduate, and then I did an MBA as a master's degree. Then I went, got a PhD in sociology. That's how I ended up there. And my interest in my specific special area in social psychology was also I guess, also happened. Maybe all of these I call them accidents, but maybe they just meant to be but because I ended up in a department that specializes in social psychology, and I was interested in micro inequalities and so there I am,

Qudsiya Naqui:

and up until recently, and we will talk about this in a second, when you developed an interest in the legal system, what has the focus of your scholarship primarily been?

Mamadi Corra:

Yeah, like I said, I'm a social psychologist. So I study, my area of study is in experimental social psychology actually looking at micro processes. Like if you bring people into small groups, what happens between them like questions of who gets to talk more, or doesn't get to talk? What characteristics influence that if you put people in bargaining situations, how is it that some get more than others and what qualities influence that so that at the micro level, that's, that's one interest, right issues of inequality in small groups, that is actually my main area of psychology. But then at the macro level, the bigger picture level, I am interested in inequality in general social inequality. And so I look at gender inequality, racial inequality, reflect inequality, and look at beliefs about race in the United States, beliefs about gender, the role of women in society. I've written in on those kinds of topics, and I've written on in some areas like marital happiness, and how race and gender influence those. So I mean, I have invested a wide area of topics, but I, I think if I wanted to just specifically say I would say it is inequality, categorical inequality, gender, race, ethnic inequality, you add the immigration dimension to that as well.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's fascinating. And I've had the pleasure of reading some of your work and really found it illuminating on so many levels about all of the issues that you described. But the reason that we were brought together was we were introduced by Judy Heumann because of our mutual interest in access to justice and the legal system. In 2018, you published your article about access for people with disabilities to the federal courts? What, what led you to that work?

Mamadi Corra:

The way it ended up there was I got this fellowship. And the fellowship was at the Federal Judicial Center in Washington, DC, the Federal Judicial Center, of course, it's the research wing of the federal judiciary, they basically do research on courts, the federal courts. And so I ended up there doing my fellowship there. And then an interest began to develop as to how accessible I US courts. And I was tasked at, looking at that, that question. And I looked at it in a variety of ways. So that's how I ended up in that, in that, looking at that particular topic,

Qudsiya Naqui:

and I was stunned as I read your work on this topic that the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act actually does not apply to the federal courts. Can you explain why that is?

Mamadi Corra:

I think I can explain it in the sense that what I've heard, so it's still through the grapevine it's not written, at least I haven't found that written what I what I understand it from someone there, and other people that are adopted is that when Congress passes laws, frequently is trying to pass laws that apply to the executive wing, perhaps, and other areas of society. It tries to leave the judiciary there in deference to the judiciary as a co equal branch. And so the the federal judiciary actually has a policymaking body called the Judicial Conference of the United States. And they make a part they make policy for that courts, and those policies are basically legally binding on courts. So they make their own rules. But what I what I again, what I what I understand it to be is that a lot of those laws are in deference, to separation to maintain the separation of powers.

Qudsiya Naqui:

The Judicial Conference may not have to conform or comply with the provisions, the antidiscrimination and accommodation provisions of the ADEA or the Rehab Act. But did you find that the the conference itself developed its own framework for advancing access for people with disabilities in the federal courts?

Mamadi Corra:

What I found that it was limited to employment and communication, accessibility in terms of communication and communication there is more specific to hearing impairment, communications. And so they do have policy towards those two areas where it turns out that Congress actually did As a couple of laws that that apply to all courts, and those two laws are in that area. And then if so the interesting thing is that the Judicial Conference modeled, it's what applies to it. It's rules around those two laws that are actually applicable to them.

Qudsiya Naqui:

And you also did an assessment of the federal court websites to examine their level of accessibility, what did you find in your, in your research there?

Mamadi Corra:

A couple of things. First of all, what I did was first for run these automated tests of websites, that gives you their assessment tools that you can use that that allows you to say, to identify, you know, generic accessibility issues, and then add it to that I did a content analysis, I went to different all the website, Federal Court websites, 100 plus, or so websites to look at, to play with their sites, first of all, to look at which sites have accessibility links on them, or not direct links, where if you go to the website, and it says, here's the direct link, it says, accessibility accommodations, or whatever. And ones that have indirect links, indirect links, meaning if you really look around and click on some link, inside that link, will take you to a statement about accessibility and so on. So I did a content analysis, and then I look at some of their policy statements on that. And I think a few things I found was with the websites themselves, one of the key issues that they had was difficulties with forms. Right, they have they have, they have developed the forms where you fill them online. And sometimes it's difficult to fill those forms. Online, they're not some of them are particularly accessible, to allow you to fill it out and complete it by yourself. So that that was one of the issues. And one of the other issues was when graphs are present. on websites, some of the graphs do not have any text associated with them. So So me as a visually impaired person, if I go there, I really wouldn't know what what I'm dealing with, because it doesn't have alternative texts. So those are a couple of things. The The other thing that I found was how limited number of websites, I think, if I recall correctly was like 15% or so that that had direct or indirect links to accessibility issues. That's quite a low number.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah. And that doesn't seem surprising considering that the judicial conferences focus when it came to people with disabilities was inward. Right. It was focused on employment, it was focused on access for staff and judges, not so much accessibility for the general public. Is that Is that right?

Mamadi Corra:

Yeah, I think is correct. For the most part, courts have actually just focused on physical access for the most part, because that has been the most important issue. And in that area, there is actually a law that applies to all courts that says the buildings have to access be accessible. A lot of courts have tried to do that. Part of the problem there is that some courts are also historical, some courts are also historical buildings. And they want to maintain that and some of those historical buildings do not allow for accessibility. So So in general, yes, you are. But I think part of the problem with that is that they are internal, because federal courts seldom, I should say seldom have federal courts have a limited number of Publix individuals coming through them. A lot of the the nitty gritty of, of laws and arguments and this all happen at the state level. Right. So federal courts are dealing with federal issues. And so in that sense, then that that really limits the type of actions that are done in them. And it also I guess, limits the amount of people that come in there,

Qudsiya Naqui:

especially the number of Yeah, especially in the number of people who are not represented. I would imagine in a federal case, it's more likely that there's there are two lawyers on either side.

Mamadi Corra:

Yeah. So from so for example, the Supreme Court, I mean, generally, it's just the lawyers that are arguing the case when parties might show up, but they don't have to show up. I mean, the Supreme Court doesn't go around, you know, people arguing and questioning people, right? You just go there and make your argument. So it's usually the two sides that that are represented there.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Right. But then there is also the then there tends to be this opacity right for members of the public spaces. Basically members of the public with disabilities who want to understand what's going on in in court proceedings in the federal court.

Mamadi Corra:

Yeah.

Qudsiya Naqui:

And you also interviewed judges and court staff as well to get their perspectives about access for people with disabilities. And what did you find in those interviews?

Mamadi Corra:

Yeah, those were for the most part, individuals, several of them themselves were also with a disability. So visually impaired, hearing impaired, and there were some specific issues as to, you know, document access to documents and access to captioning was one of the one of the some of the issues that that came up in some of those discussions. But more broadly, I think what came up out of them is people's sense of, of the fact that there are very limited number of persons with disabilities in federal courts,

Qudsiya Naqui:

just in terms of judges, court judges, and so on.

Mamadi Corra:

So for example, when I, when I looked at how many judges, federal judges that that are there in the federal courts, I think I was able to locate two visually impaired judges, at the federal level only two in the whole federal court system. And I wasn't able to find any that's hearing impaired, or deaf,

Qudsiya Naqui:

and what about other disabilities?

Mamadi Corra:

There are, there are some with physical disabilities that, you know, mobility impaired individuals that are that are present with these are the these two are the ones that are notably absent.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's really striking, considering as we were discussing earlier, it's such a significant and growing portion of our population. Do I wonder, though, is it that very few actually openly identify that perhaps there are judges with different types of visual impairments or hearing impairments that they simply don't identify as such?

Mamadi Corra:

That might be an issue? I think someone pointed out in one of those interviews that in some, in some instances that might be someone, for example, might be hearing impaired, but their hearing impaired isn't considerably notable that they don't identify themselves as such.

Qudsiya Naqui:

So between your review of essentially policy and rules related to disability access, the review of the websites and these interviews that you conducted, what were some of your key takeaways from this research?

Mamadi Corra:

Yeah, one of them I already mentioned, that is the app, the limited number of individuals in court personnel, because what a lot of those individuals Express was, one of the ways you can you can dispel attitudes about persons with disability is to have individuals present. If you have visually impaired or hearing impaired or physically impaired individuals that are judges, then he would, it wouldn't be a novelty anymore, you have a significant amount of time, it wouldn't be a novelty anymore. So a lot of individuals raise that issue of the absence of persons with disabilities in the federal judiciary. And that, that that's one of the key things that that needs work done to improve. The other part of it is the the second aspect that I found was second takeaway was how unaware a lot of people are about existing technology that's out there to help individuals with disabilities do their work. Frankly, it's usually the individual that's working that knows some about his or her technology, and the rest of the people around them have very limited knowledge about the technology that's available there. And the point there being, there's a significant amount of technology that's out there right now that allows persons with disabilities to do their job, I think quite effectively, right? When I was going to school, most of my stuff was read on cassettes. Now, I sit on my computer, and I can just I can just go online and download a book, or download an article and I could just read it, I don't need anyone else anymore. Right? Technology has made that available. I mean, possible. And so you want to wonder, you wonder, how is that 70 to 80% of persons with visual impairment are not working because the technology suddenly allows them to do so.

Qudsiya Naqui:

And in the context of the federal judiciary, what based on what you found and some of the takeaways you just described. What do you think the institution can do to to make, make sure that there is access for disabled people and that disabled people are represented. I mean, one of the obvious ones is appoint more disabled judges. But is there anything else that you think can be done to make this this system more open for people.

Mamadi Corra:

One of the things commitment to the whole issue of access? As I mentioned, the federal courts tend to focus on the two laws that applies to them. And then their policies are developed around those laws, it would be nice if they would just generalize that just being more open to accessibility. And I'm not suggesting that they're not because I really have found them that federal courts, unlike many areas to be open to discussing accessibility issues, I think. If if they have problems, most of the problems are at the state level, as opposed to the federal level.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Yeah. And that's what we observed in our, in our earlier episode that folks can check out my interview with Erika Rickard, about state civil courts and their, how they have addressed access for people with disabilities..

Mamadi Corra:

it would be unfair, though, to the states to say what I just said, so I want to qualify it, because, again, they can walk of cases that the federal courts do not write a very limited percentage of cases find themselves at the at the federal level. So it's not surprising that they don't have to deal with a lot of accessibility issues that state state courts and local courts have to deal with. Or at least they do they do not whether they have to or not as different questions,

Qudsiya Naqui:

right. But the same, the same logic you described applies if you if you operate from a premise of your design principle is that we must build and create access, then then it's less, it feels less like you're just tacking on a solution. That's not integrated with the rest of the way the system works.

Mamadi Corra:

Yeah. So you just put out an important point, because one of the other things that a lot of people talked about is that people deal with disability issues on a case by case basis, rather than on a universal principle basis, I come along, and I need help, and I'm visually impaired and they figure out how to accommodate this individual. A better approach would be to have in place, accommodations that are more universal than anytime someone comes up, that needs something, and you come up with it with a plan to help that individual, but it's only specific to that individual.

Qudsiya Naqui:

And after completing this work, which as we talked about earlier, was a bit of a departure from your your true sort of original areas of scholarship. How do you think this experience of looking at an institution like the judiciary and access for disabilities might inform other your other areas of work that you do?

Mamadi Corra:

Wasn't one of the ways it as it has informed it is? A lot of times now, since I've done this work, I've been asked by people, different questions when they have issues when they have to, when they when questions come up that are having to deal with accessibility. People are asking me about what what would be my opinion would I think and so it's, it's it's informing it in that respect. But it's also informed that I've now made this particular topic as part of my scholarly interest. And so I plan on continuing doing work in this area, as well.

Qudsiya Naqui:

If you if you're able to share what sort of pieces of this are creeping up into your into your future, your future endeavors. What's next in this exploration of disability for you,

Mamadi Corra:

one of the things I want to I want to broaden that the interviews that I did just looked at internal individuals in the for the most part. I want to broaden that to persons with disabilities that are for example, in the public. I looked at a lot talked to a lot of people within the judiciary, right the federal judiciary, but I didn't look at public access, you and I. So I want to talk to individuals about that. The other area that I would want to look at is that I think that has less to do with access but perhaps more to do with employment of individuals disabilities, what makes their work what makes them be able to do their work more efficiently or not more efficiently. So, one of the things that I've that I've gathered in this investigation is the different types of technologies that people use, right to do their work. And now I want to do a survey, for example of those technologies so that I could put it out there to see if this is the kind of technology that has worked for visually impaired people who have succeeded in their areas of work, hearing impaired people who have succeeded in their work, these are the types of technologies that have worked for them.

Qudsiya Naqui:

I think that would be really useful and and sort of demystifying right for the non disabled employer? who probably has perceptions that technologies access technologies are expensive or complicated? Or sometimes it's often very simple things.

Mamadi Corra:

That's exactly right. Because the other day, I want to talk to a place where I was interviewing for something and the person was focusing on what what do we what do we need, what facility do we need? He kept, he keeps asking me, What facility do we need to accommodate you? And in reality, the is thinking about expensiveness of those facilities, but things have become so cheap, right? A scanner now is like 50 $50, you could get a good scanner, scanner. Sorry. Right? So the technology has become really, really cheap. And so it's important to let not only let people know what technology has worked, but how cheap that technology is today,

Qudsiya Naqui:

as we're wrapping up Professor Cora, I'd love for you to share what advice you have for disabled student who's interested in pursuing academia pursuing a degree in sociology what, what advice would you have for them?

Mamadi Corra:

Ah, my, my biggest advice to any person with a disability, whether that's in the social scientists, or whatever, is to persist. At the end of the day, if you if you leave your your life situation in the hands of other people, your life outcomes are going to be very limited. You have to be at the forefront of pushing for your life, right? I grew up in a society with persons of vision that are visually impaired are not meant to succeed. They're not meant to do anything, actually, in many instances, they just begging in the streets. Right? So grew up from that society to going all the way to the professorship. I think that requires some persistence requires ignoring when people tell you that you cannot do this. Right? Knowing what you can do and what you cannot do. Right. But if you know, you can do something insisting on being able to do that, as opposed to listening to someone telling you that you can't. So I think those would be my general advice to persist. If you're interested in academia to know that there are people out there who have succeeded, and that you can talk to folks like myself,

Qudsiya Naqui:

thank you for that advice. That's a very important piece of wisdom that you're leaving what swith and I will be delighted to share more information about you and your work on our website, so people can can read more of your scholarship. So, thank you so much, Professor Corra, I really appreciate your time.

Mamadi Corra:

Thank you. I'm happy that you invited me.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thanks for joining us for this episode of down to the struts. This podcast would not be possible without the energy and creativity of our audio producer Ilana Nevins and our social media manager, Avery Anapol. Special thanks to Claire Shanley for designing our logo, and Eiffel gangsta Beats for our theme music. You can become part of our Facebook group Down to the Struts podcast to join our growing community. You can also find us on Twitter and Instagram at Down to the Struts. And finally, don't forget to subscribe rate and review the podcast at Apple podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher or wherever you love to listen. Thank you again for your support. And stay tuned for our next episode so we can get back down to it

Transcribed by https://otter.ai