

MONDAY October 11th
BLUMER ROOM – 402 BARROWS HALL
2:00-3:30pm

The Berkeley Sociology Colloquium Series
FALL 2010 Presents:

Aggregation Problems

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Quetelet's concept of the "average man" was an attempt to relate the characteristics of the individual to the properties of the population through simple aggregation. In the 150 years since Quetelet's book, we have come to take his position for granted--newspapers regularly report on the experience of the average individual and policy is often aimed at improving the lot of the average person. But aggregates have meaningful characteristics that differ from the average of those who make up the aggregate. We all know that averages ignore variation and lack nuance, and that they miss much of ethnographic interest. Through four examples, this chapter goes further to demonstrate that the average experience can be systematically different from the experience of the aggregate. As a result, when people reason about the aggregate by averaging the experiences of individuals--whether of individuals that they know, or individuals as measured in a survey--they will make systematic kinds of errors. For many topics, we have to reason across different scales of aggregation, each of which has its own, distinct dynamics.

Jenna Johnson-Hanks is Associate Professor of Sociology and Demography at UC Berkeley, where she has taught since 2000. She earned her BA at Berkeley and her PhD at Northwestern, both in Anthropology. Most of her work explores the relationships between cultural practice, intentional action, and demographic rates, particularly regarding sex, marriage, and childbearing in West Africa and the US. Her first book, *Uncertain Honor: Modern Motherhood in an African Crisis*, was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2006. A co-authored book entitled *Understanding Family Change and Variation* is forthcoming with Springer. She is currently working on a book tentatively titled *Sex in Public: Population and the Paradox of Personal Choice*.