

Kelly Brownell:

Greetings. I'm Kelly Brownell, the Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. And I would like to welcome you to Policy 360. I'm talking with Jay Pearson. Jay is early in his career in academia. He's an assistant professor at the Sanford School of Public Policy but he's been doing some intriguing work around health disparities and ethnicity. In addition to his work at Sanford, Jay is an assistant research professor in Global Health at Duke University, and he is a faculty research scholar at Duke's Population Research Institute. Welcome to Policy 360 Jay.

Jay Pearson:

Thank you for having me again.

Kelly Brownell:

You grew up in rural North Carolina, describe your hometown. And the reason I'm asking these questions is, I think more than a lot of people, your personal life experiences have become very important in the development of your research agenda and your teaching and mentoring that go on. So it's interesting to hear what that life story is. So tell us about your hometown in rural North Carolina.

Jay Pearson:

Yeah. I'm originally from Murfreesboro, North Carolina, which is a small farming community in the Northeast corner of the state. And because I was born in the 60s, I actually caught the tail end of the Jim Crow South. And it had a profound influence on my early development and perceptions of the world that I lived in. And it also influenced the degree to which formal education mattered to me because pretty early on, it became clear to me that I did not want to continue living the rest of my life in Murfreesboro and that it was most likely, if social mobility were to be had for someone like me, that formal education might be the most viable mechanism for me to engage that process.

Kelly Brownell:

What was life like for you, or your family, or your friends?

Jay Pearson:

Well, for the first seven years of my life when we lived out on a farm, I lived in a home where we didn't have electricity or running water. And we got electricity when I was seven and we got running water when I was 11. And we moved off of the farm into a trailer park on the outskirts of the actual city. And typically when I tell people that story, I joke that you come from a fairly challenging background, when moving into a trailer park is vertical social mobility, you're moving up, right? My grandparents, we lived all in one house, so it was my grandparents, one of my aunts, another aunt who had three kids, my mother, my father, my brother, and my sister and I, we all lived in a single home and my grandparents were tenant farmers there. And my grandfather actually farmed the land and got a small portion of the crops that came in that he could sell for profit himself. But the vast majority of it actually went to the land owners who were there.

Kelly Brownell:

So in your work you've talked about the issue of privilege that some people have, and in thinking about that concept applied to your own upbringing, what are the things that other people in different circumstances might've had access to, or their privileged to experience that you wouldn't have?

Jay Pearson:

Yeah. I can give you one example. When I was 12 I got a job working in a cucumber field and there were a bunch of kids who worked in the fields with me. It was probably 70% black, 20% white and an additional 10% or so who were Latino. There were few Latinos who'd started to make their way to the region where I was working, but without going into all of the specifics, I worked a full week and by my tally had earned \$92. And when I went to collect my pay, I was paid \$17. When I confronted the farm owner, his name is, I won't say his name, but anyway, I confronted the farm owner and what he said to me was that he had already decided how much I was going to get paid, that I had been compensated at that rate and that if I wanted to get paid more, I was going to have to work more.

Now, I have no insight into how much the white kids got paid but I have a sneaky suspicion that it was more than \$17 for the same amount of work. And I took two profound lessons from that. One was that this gentleman had already predetermined my relative value, and that regardless of how productive I actually was, nothing was going to result in him compensating me at the fair rate.

Kelly Brownell:

So you did some very interesting things in your life after those early years and before you ended up on the faculty at Duke University, could you explain some of those?

Jay Pearson:

Yeah. Absolutely. So I went off to college. I finished undergraduate training at North Carolina Central University with a degree in individual behavior change health education. And afterwards I went off to the Peace Corps and worked in Honduras. And there I worked in maternal and child health, I worked for the Honduran Ministry of Health in the Child Survival Program. And when I came back from the Peace Corps, I got a job working in migrant health, migrant farm worker health. And I worked for an organization called East Coast Migrant Health Project. And we followed migrant farm workers up and down the East Coast Migrant Stream. So every four to six months I would move to a different site. And so I started in Martinsburg, West Virginia. I went from Martinsburg to Winchester, Virginia, and down to Apopka, Florida. So I did that for a couple of seasons.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, through a number of those experiences was an interest in health that later became an interest in health policy. What generated the interest in the first place.

Jay Pearson:

This gets back to the value of social identity. And one of the lessons that I learned is that my identity varied depending on where I was and how folks perceived me and to be completely fair also how I perceived myself. For instance, my mother who self-identifies as black American tells me that my father who self identifies as black and native American arrived at the hospital late when I was born and got into an argument with an Italian gentleman who had mistakenly identified me as a son. During my childhood because my parents thought it was important I got to be both black and Indian native American, when I was a teenager we moved into an all black trailer park where the kids there told me in no uncertain terms that I was and could only be black.

And then when I moved to Honduras, I was told that I was not black but that I was triannual which is a different higher status description of my mixed heritage. And the folks there did that because the skin color gradations that determine social positioning in Honduras and indeed in other places that

I've traveled in Latin America, are more nuance than the ones that we have here in the US and they wanted to make sure that I was aspiring to my highest possible color status.

The lesson I learned from that experience was that there are important resources associated with those identities that can enhance health. And there are important risk associated with those identities that can compromise health. They vary across time and space, and they're not typically captured by conventional public health models that measure socioeconomic status, simple race, employment status, etc.

Kelly Brownell:

So you get a sense of how variable one status is and even self perception is depending on the social conditions that they're exposed to at the moment. And you can see how damaging it would be to be in a chronic set of social conditions where the one who's not revered or you're in a group that is marginalized and that could have a profound effect on people in so many ways. And I know you've studied the health impact of this. So the last time you were here we talked about your work that looks deep inside our chromosomes to measure how our bodies react to a combination of ethnicity, stress, and socioeconomic status. I understand your experiences in the rural south have shaped some of these interests, tell us where that's going now and what kind of work you see yourself doing in the future?

Jay Pearson:

Absolutely. I'm in the process right now doing two things. I'm running a conceptual paper that again, proposes to explore this idea of social privilege in addition to social discrimination. But I'm also in the process of putting together a grant application to do a primary data collection project in, and around both Durham City and Durham County where we will measure not just race, ethnicity, and immigration status and not just conventional socioeconomics, but social privilege, social discrimination and social cultural orientations. And by social cultural orientations, we have measures of co-ethnic social ties, the strength and magnitude of relationships that you share with others whose worldview is similar to yours with the idea that in the absence of legitimate access to conventional socioeconomic resources, or in the event that those resources do not translate reliably into positive health outcomes, some populations may rely on an alternative set of resources to assure their wellbeing. And I argue that those resources are probably located somewhere within those alternative social cultural orientations, those social networks.

Kelly Brownell:

Your own life experiences are so interesting to consider in light of where you've gone with your own research agenda and your academic career. And it's very interesting to think about how those two track one another, and it gets back to that concept of lived life experiences that you hear more and more people using that term. And I think you exemplify the importance of understanding those sort of things. How would the academic settings do things differently if we were taking lived life experiences into account better?

Jay Pearson:

Two things, Kelly, I think commitment to a diverse faculty and student body, and with that, a commitment to bring social equity measures to bear to make sure that that diverse faculty and student body is actually included in the decision-making processes would go a long way towards creating more fertile ground to explore these sorts of issues. And in addition to the empirical work that I'm doing, I

absolutely positively aspire to bring to bear a set of policy suggestions to get some action or to get some traction on those issues.

Kelly Brownell:

One thing I'm very grateful for as the Dean of the Sanford School is the critical role you've played in helping us make advances on the diversity front. And diversity has taken on a richer set of meanings than what used to be the case even a short number of years ago where people thought diversity was just counting the number of people you would have in different categories. And you're talking about a much different concept than that. Explain how we can think about this in a broader way?

Jay Pearson:

I think the value of an identity safe brought a social environment is absolutely essential. And for that to happen, the underlying normative values need to be challenged. I believe that the culture of an institution like Sanford needs to change and that's real work. That is real work. We all have underlying implicit biases that we're not aware of. That once again, favorsome to the detriment of others and the degree to which we can bring those to light, acknowledge them, and bring to bear significant meaningful actions to offset them and create safe space for everyone is the degree to which I believe we can enhance the educational experience for everyone involved.

Kelly Brownell:

I think I know the answer to this question in advance that I'm going to ask, but what I hear you saying is that it's very important for academic institutions but also business institutions, government institutions and the like to not only accept different life experiences and the people that they bring on board, be it as students, faculty, employees, whatever, but it's important to celebrate the importance of those life experiences, to learn from them and to make them a part of the way we think about the work that we do. So I'm assuming you would agree with that, but if you have anything to add I'd love to hear it because I know that's such an important way of thinking.

Jay Pearson:

The last thing that I would like to say is that humility in the face of ignorance, and we come to the table and again, if you have a diverse faculty, a diverse student body, frequently those of us who are in positions of relative power assume that our perspective accurately reflects the lives that live social experiences of everyone there. And that is at least as frequently, absolutely not the case. And so I feel like the most powerful thing that we can sometimes do is to create, again, a safe environment for those who have historically not been well-represented or whose positions have not been heard to tell their stories and to assume that most folks are experts in their own lives.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, thank you Jay. It's been really nice hearing more about your personal story and how it shaped your academic life and the research you're doing. And it's also very clear that you're passionate and care deeply about the work you do which is really very nice. And I know this is going to go very good places and you're contributing in a very important ways to what we know about the impact of shared life experiences on health outcomes. So thank you so much for joining us today.

Jay Pearson:

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Thank you again for having me.

Kelly Brownell:

So our guest was Jay Pearson, assistant professor at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. I am Kelly Brownell, the Dean of the Sanford School. Thank you again for listening.