

**Ruth Candler** 00:15

Welcome to W&L After Class, the lifelong learning podcast. I'm your host, Ruth Candler. Every episode we'll have engaging conversations with W&L's expert faculty, bringing you again to the Colonnade even if you're hundreds of miles away--just like the conversations that happen every day after class here at W&L. You'll hear from your favorite faculty on fascinating topics and meet professors who can introduce you to new worlds, and continue your journey of lifelong learning. Today we're talking with Howard Pickett about the study of poverty in America. Howard is an associate professor of ethics and poverty studies and the director of the Shepherd Program for the Interdisciplinary Study of Poverty and Human Capability. As director of the Shepherd Program, Howard works with affiliated faculty, staff, community partners and alumni to provide students with the understanding and skills needed to address the pressing moral and social problems associated with poverty. As a scholar, Howard has written on subjects ranging from identity and sincerity in "Mad Men" to the works of Soren Kierkegaard and Immanuel Kant. In addition to directing the Shepherd Program's co-curricular offerings, he teaches the introductory and capstone courses in Poverty and Human Capability Studies. He also teaches courses in ethics, including a Spring Term course on justice and forgiveness at the regional state prison. Howard, thanks for joining us today.

**Howard Pickett** 01:39

Thanks for having me.

**Ruth Candler** 01:40

So the Shepherd Program began in 1997, through the financial support of W&L alumnus Tom Shepherd and his wife Nancy. You became its director in 2013 following the retirement of the program's first director, Harlan Beckley. Would you explain what the Shepherd Program is and what its purpose and functions are at Washington and Lee?

**Howard Pickett** 02:02

Sure, happy to. So the mission of the Shepherd Program is now what it always has been, namely to prepare every student who participates with us, whatever their backgrounds, political perspectives, majors or career paths, to understand and address the causes and consequences of poverty. And here's the key, I think: And to do so in ways that respect the dignity of every person. Now, the way that we do that is by combining interdisciplinary coursework and direct community engagement. So affiliated faculty from a dozen departments across campus--that's in the College, Williams School, School of Law--offer courses each year in poverty related issues, and my colleagues in Shepherd office oversee a host of community engagement opportunities, local, national and international. That includes our campus kitchen, our Shepherd internship program, the Bonner Program, Neighbor Service League. We even have a one-week pre orientation program. called volunteer venture. A lot of times people aren't quite sure what the outcome is we're looking for. But to be perfectly clear, we're not really trying to drive students towards any particular field. We want to make sure that whatever they do, they understand how a better understanding of poverty and a greater, more informed commitment to working respectfully with all folks can actually help them do that work better.

**Ruth Candler** 03:24

So this may seem very basic, but I want to talk a little bit about how poverty is generally defined. What exactly is poverty, and who among Americans are considered financially poor?

**Howard Pickett** 03:38

Okay, so my students from my introductory Poverty 101 class, if they're listening, they're laughing right now, because you essentially asked me the first question for their first main assignment in the course, and they're wondering how I'm going to answer it. So let me tell you that there are lots of ways of defining and measuring poverty, and at the end of this answer, I want to tell you the ways that we mainly talk about it. But generally speaking, if you're listening to the TV, and they mention the poverty rate in the U.S., they're essentially talking about a U.S. Census Bureau measurement that essentially takes a gross annual pretax income of a household and asks, does that fall beneath a certain line, a certain threshold. Now, that threshold was set in the 1960s. And it's updated each year based on increases in cost of living. It's also adjusted based on household composition--how many people are living in the household--because obviously, you know, you need more resources to feed more mouths. And there's a lot of debate about whether that measurement is a good measure. But essentially, we're talking about whether a household has the income necessary to purchase food, clothing, shelter and utilities. Right now the Census Bureau defines the poverty threshold for a family of four right about \$26,000. Again, that's pretax income. If you're a single individual, no dependents, nobody else living in the house, you would need \$13,000. If you have \$13,000, or less than that, then you're considered, according to the Census Bureau, living in poverty. That's about 40 million people in the U.S. last count.

**Ruth Candler** 05:14

That's what I was just about to ask.

**Howard Pickett** 05:16

And we have no idea what it's going to look like on the other side of the pandemic.

**Ruth Candler** 05:20

Yeah, that's a frightening thought, isn't it? When we talked before the podcast, you were careful to describe yourself as an ethicist rather than a social scientist. Why does that distinction matter in our discussion of your role in the Shepherd Poverty Program?

**Howard Pickett** 05:36

It's good question. First of all, it's just true, right? I'm spouting out a lot of numbers here already and probably will spout out more later. And you need to understand: As a scholar, I don't really do a lot with numbers, right. Or at least I don't do the quantitative research to generate and analyze them. And to be clear, I also don't do qualitative research, which I know can cause a lot of my colleagues to wonder, well what is it that you do do? Right? The point is... the poverty studies program, and poverty studies more generally, is an interdisciplinary project. We need everybody from all the different disciplines, and frankly, all the different perspectives in society in order to wrap our heads around what is going on with poverty related issues. So I need my colleagues in social sciences, natural sciences, humanities and more, including community partners, right, community members, for me to understand what is actually going on when it comes to any poverty related issue. In fact, I also need those social scientists, natural

scientists, humanities and community partners to know what will be going on, or what they think will be going on, if we do something--if we adopt a certain public policy. All of that, for me, is fodder to then think about what ought we to do? Right? That's the question an ethicist is interested in. Not what is going on, but what ought to be going on.

**Ruth Candler** 06:54

So that's the link, right?

**Howard Pickett** 06:55

That's the link, and for me, the question ultimately is not how many people happen to be living beneath the federal poverty line. The question is a question about dignity for each human being. It's about justice. And for me, a lot of that translates into a question about whether people have real opportunities.

**Ruth Candler** 07:15

Let's talk about poverty and its relation to wealth, particularly across generations. I've heard you share some surprising information about poverty and affluence both being... Well, as you put it, "sticky." That is, once a family is wealthy or poor, it tends to remain so for generations. Why? Why is this the case?

**Howard Pickett** 07:38

So, slight modification, right? That's one way of putting it. It's a common way to think about it. It's actually not true that once a family becomes poor, they're very likely to stay poor. Actually, most households in this country who fall into poverty fall into poverty for very short periods of time, for instance due to the loss of income, for instance, due to the pandemic, right? Or you got laid off and you haven't yet found a new job, or for that matter, you lost a family member who was an earner for a time, right? Somebody's divorce, death, etc. It is, however, true that a child born into, say, the bottom 20% income households in this country is going to have a harder time getting up out of that bottom quintile, that bottom fifth of households.

So let me give you some figures to help think about this. So let's take all the kids born in the bottom 20% of households in the United States. And let's think of the period in which I was a child, right, so we have the research on that. We take all the kids born in the 1970s and, specifically, we look at all the kids born into the bottom 20% of households in terms of their income. And this is in the U.S. And we ask what percentage of them by middle age--late 30s, early 40s--what percentage of them were still in the bottom quintile, bottom fifth. It's about 40 to 45%. So almost half of them born in that bottom 20% in middle age are in that bottom 20%. Now, to be a little more precise, I said, how many of them are still there. Technically it's in all likelihood the case that many of them moved out of poverty and back in, in a variety of oscillations. Am I making sense?

**Ruth Candler** 09:37

Yeah, yeah.

**Howard Pickett** 09:39

However, if we asked, then, well, what percentage of that group, right, what percentage of the bottom fifth kids in the 1970s by today is in the top fifth? It's only about 8 to 9%. So it's about one out of 12 of them made it to the top 20% income households.

If we flip it around and ask, "Well, what about those who are born at the top end of the income distribution?" the numbers are about the same. So we take all the kids, again, in my cohort, born in the top 20%. And ask, Well, what percentage of those folks fell down to the bottom by the time they were middle aged? About 10%, 9 to 10%. What percentage stayed in that top 20%? Or at least what percent of those folks are in the top 20% now? It's about the same as on the flip side, it's about 40%. So about half of them are staying there. So what this means is there is movement, there is mobility, but it's not a random distribution. Right? If it were totally random, we might expect to see, well, 20% plus or minus in every one of those categories. Right? If where you were born didn't affect where you were going to end up, then you would expect some sort of random distribution. So my students sometimes are shocked when they read that it's easier to predict the future income of a child based on parental income than it is to predict the future height of a child based on how tall Mom and Dad are.

**Ruth Candler** 11:16

That's unbelievable.

**Howard Pickett** 11:17

So it doesn't mean we can totally predict it. But it does mean that your income status is somewhat predictive. It's sticky, not deterministic.

**Ruth Candler** 11:27

So are there other ways to make poverty less sticky then?

**Howard Pickett** 11:31

So, that is essentially the main question of almost everything that folks do in this field: understanding what is going on in order to figure out where are the places where something might be changed in order to generate more mobility. And so almost all of the work in poverty and health is trying to make sense of that. What kind of modifications could we make to improve the health of a child? In order to improve their education? In order to improve their economic prospects? Or for that matter, what modifications might we make to the education system in order to improve those economic prospects? Or for that matter, what might we do within the labor market to improve those economic prospects, so that those who are born in the bottom 20% have a greater chance of climbing.

**Ruth Candler** 12:21

You also teach your students about the relationship between poverty and physical health, and how certain environmental conditions affecting the poor lead to that stickiness. How does poverty affect physical health, and vice versa?

**Howard Pickett** 12:36

There are essentially two directions, roughly, that we could think about this. First, we could imagine ways in which health impacts poverty. So if you have chronic back pain, it's going to be really tough to

get to work. It's going to be really tough to get a certain kind of work. If you're growing up with chronic asthma, it's going to be tough to get to school. You might miss long periods of school, you might as a result of that fall behind, you might even drop out. And so with the ways in which health can impact educational achievement and employment prospects, it's pretty clearly going to impact your income, either right now or at some point down the line, not to mention all the costs associated with poor health.

On the flip side, right, we can imagine ways in which experiencing poverty might cause negative health outcomes, right? So lack of insurance, that's going to be a problem. Inability to pay a copay, even if you do have insurance, that's going to be a problem. But a lot of the work on the relationship between poverty and health doesn't actually focus on health care, right. It focuses on ways in which people are susceptible to poor health even before you get to the doctor's office.

**Ruth Candler** 13:48

Yeah, that reminds me of a case study that you once mentioned about a toll plaza, which I think illustrates this point so well. It is mind-boggling to me. Would you share this study with our listeners?

**Howard Pickett** 14:01

Sure. So if we're thinking about the ways in which low-income kids in particular may have diminished opportunities as a result of compromised health, a lot of folks might turn their mind towards nutritional issues or health care issues. They might turn to issues related to stress and mental health, or even violence in the neighborhood, which is clearly bad for one's health.

And all that's true, but I think you're talking about a Janet Curry study in which she was looking at the impact of toxins in the environment on birth weight. And so we know that toxins in the environment, in particular carbon monoxide, right, but not only carbon monoxide, can negatively impact the birth weight of the baby. And birth weight is correlated or associated in all sorts of ways with other later outcomes, health outcomes, educational outcomes, even wages, decades later.

And so we think to ourselves, well, we want to make sure that kids are not exposed to these toxins. And so, right, it's pretty important for folks not to smoke during pregnancy, right? Um, I'm not getting judgmental on that. It's just a fact. Smoking 10 cigarettes a day is not very good, though, for the well-being a child. Again, not pointing fingers, just stating a fact. And so a lot of folks would say, Well, then, you know, if I'm if I'm pregnant, right, or if my wife is pregnant, and she happens to be smoking at the time of pregnancy, she should probably cut it out. It's a matter of personal responsibility to the baby and the baby's future opportunities. I don't disagree with that.

But I think a lot of people would be shocked to find out that if that baby--in utero, right, prior to birth--is living in a traffic-congested area, for instance near a busy toll plaza, a traditional toll plaza, with cars idling and accelerating as they wait to pay their fees and after they pay their fees, I think a lot of people would be shocked to learn that the carbon monoxide in that environment as a result of that toll plaza is also comparable to smoking 10 cigarettes a day.

Which raises the question, what then should we as a society do, right, to improve the opportunities of that child? Somebody might want to tell the parent, "You need to stop smoking." Okay, that's fine. What

do we say to society? Should society stop, so to speak, cars from smoking? But that raises really tricky questions, like what are you supposed to do? Are you supposed to suddenly create new housing for everybody away from the toll plaza, supposed to give everybody an electric car?

To, at first glance, to my students in particular, right, the problem looks insurmountable. Well, what Curry and her colleagues found was that actually the introduction of an automated toll plaza--so think EZ Pass, right, you just drive right through and you basically get billed for it later, there's no idling, there's no accelerating, just zooming on through--it actually has a more positive health outcome or impact on those children than if the mother stopped smoking 10 cigarettes a day.

What's interesting about that, right, is, among other things, is that's actually a change in the way that we live that can really impact the child. It's practically effective. It's morally permissible, right? You're not overriding anybody's autonomy or agency. You're not disrespecting anybody by driving quicker through the EZ Pass. I suppose somebody might lose a tollbooth job, but you hope that maybe they're now monitoring the EZ Pass system or something even better. And it's politically feasible, right? It looks like a win-win, largely.

I don't mean to suggest in any way that if suddenly we put EZ Pass in everywhere, then there's not going to be any more child poverty in the U.S., right? We're... About 12 million kids live in poverty right now. EZ Pass is not the solution. I'm simply saying a lot of stuff that we normally don't even think about can be impacting opportunity. And more than that, I'm saying that we as a society have an obligation, I think, to provide real opportunity to folks, which means that we need to care. And we also need to get creative.

**Ruth Candler** 18:12

So is the takeaway here that environmental factors can be just as important as behavioral ones in the relation between health and poverty?

**Howard Pickett** 18:23

So that's a complicated question. I would say that I'm not sure in the end, it's all that helpful to distinguish between environmental factors and behavioral factors. I think the big takeaway is that there are lots of things negatively impacting opportunity that most folks don't even realize are there. I think there are good reasons why we as a society have responsibility not to impede people's opportunities, if there's the ability to actually do something. And then the last takeaway, that, again, I think a lot of my students take away is that there really are possibilities and sometimes government efforts so jobs, private efforts, sometimes a hybrid combination of the two that actually can seemingly make greater opportunities for kids.

**Ruth Candler** 19:08

If poverty affects health in such drastic ways, then what effect does it have on overall life expectancy?

**Howard Pickett** 19:15

There's a lot to say there. But the most recent research related to life expectancy and poverty that maybe folks listening to the podcast have heard about is some research, among others, by Anne Case

and Angus Deaton. And what they have looked at is the fact that life expectancy for a group in the United States is actually on the decline, a particular group.

Now this is really disturbing and really puzzling. The whole history of the modern world is essentially the history of increasing life expectancies, right, whether we're talking, like, from Shakespeare's day to today—heck, go back further, like essentially right from the earliest days of humanity to today, we're seeing roughly life expectancies increase. What they found is there's a group in the United States that's actually seeing its life expectancy as a group decrease. It's a very complicated story, but essentially what they're finding is that white Americans without college education are seeing their life expectancy decrease by a month to two months each year that we look at it, right. So moving from somewhere in the high 70s or mid-70s down to the lower 70s over a certain span of time.

What's happening? What's causing that? Well, a lot of it seems to be what they call deaths of despair. So these white Americans without college education are dying disproportionately from opioid overdose, alcohol related diseases like alcohol poisoning, and also from suicide. And that's... that's a complex question, but it's tied to everything. From the evaporation of meaningful job opportunities for that group compared with the previous generation, who could have gotten, say, a good, stable factory job, right, even with just a high school diploma, and it also seems to be related in complex ways to the evaporation of social connections, that people are essentially feeling incredibly isolated and lonely.

Now, that's gotten a lot of the buzz. And it's an important topic, I don't mean to call it buzz in a disrespectful way, it deserves our attention. It is notable, however, that it's getting a lot of attention. And even with that downward trend, that population still has life expectancies that are substantially higher than their Black counterparts. So Black life expectancy in the United States is trending in the right direction. This white college educated, or non-college-educated group, which is also a shrinking group, is actually trending down.

**Ruth Candler** 22:01

Poverty studies is the most popular minor at W&L, which I find so surprising. Poverty is not only an unusual curriculum, it can be a heavy, emotionally charged topic. Does the popularity of the program at W&L surprise you?

**Howard Pickett** 22:21

Well, it doesn't now. You know, it's been the most popular minor at W&L since long before I was here. And a lot of that has to do with the faculty who are involved. And certainly with Harlan Beckley, my predecessor. I can understand what you mean, right? It's tricky. A lot of times, people put it a little bit different and they ask me, you know, "How do you convince folks to study these really complex and sometimes frustrating or even depressing systems? Especially if one of the big takeaways is there's not a simple answer?"

So depends on who's asking me and what day of the week it is, but one thing I would say is, right, sticking our fingers in our ears, right, pretending that these realities don't exist doesn't make them go away. So it's not as if we can somehow make ourselves feel better by just acting as if there aren't real limits on the opportunities of some folks in this world. Secondly, I don't know about you, but I find it very

inspiring to actually meet people who want to spend a good chunk of their lives, whether that's a community partner, whether that's a faculty member, whether that's a student who wants to spend four years minoring in poverty studies or, heck, take a job after graduation that relates to it. I can't think of many things more inspiring than waking up each morning and going to work in order to interact with people who care so much about creating a more just, more equitable world that they're willing to devote most of their time to it. That's exciting to me.

And I don't mean that the only reason we do it is somehow to feel good ourselves. I just mean, I think what people ultimately want, and this is a pretty bold assertion I'm making here, is a meaningful place in a good society. And so I think to a large extent, that's what Shepherd provides. I also think it's really important to realize it's not all doom and gloom all the time, right. Not only are there just really vibrant folks in the Shepherd Program, including in the Shepherd office, but our students are partnering with community members and community organizations, with people who are super talented and passionate about what they do. They have a lot to share. They have a lot to teach.

And this is both the folks who work at these organizations and it's also the clients of the organizations, right? Students are making connections, human connections, are building relationships through Shepherd. They're not simply sitting in a room and discussing, sort of, what are the worst things happening to kids. Right? That's a very deficit-based approach that sees a certain group of people as nothing other than an absence. I want to be clear, it's wrong that some people actually don't have the same opportunities or don't have the same access to well-being as others. But it would be equally wrong, perhaps worse even, if I talked about people experiencing poverty, communities experiencing poverty, as if that was somehow all they were.

**Ruth Candler** 25:27

You mentioned that there are moments in your Poverty 101 class that seem to really blow students' minds, and that one of the shocking revelations students discover involves data that connects poverty and educational achievement. How does poverty affect educational achievement?

**Howard Pickett** 25:46

Yeah, so we have, again, as with health, we have a complex relationship. Right? At the very least, we can imagine ways in which low educational achievement, low educational attainment, right, reduced test scores, not as many years of schooling, can actually compromise somebody's job prospects. When I was talking before about the deaths of despair, that Case and Deaton study that seems to have something to do with the fact that that population doesn't have the same job prospects that they might if they had higher levels of education, right. So reduced levels of education clearly can relate, at least years later, to poverty.

Flip it around. Low-income households may also have fewer resources to spend on the educational achievement and outcomes of their kids. That's everything from affording college after they graduate high school, to affording enrichment opportunities along the way. I think what's surprising to students is some research done in particular by Sean Reardon that looks at the achievement gap, that's to say, roughly speaking, the test score gap, the skills gap between kids in the highest 10% of household

incomes, and the kids in the bottom 10% of household incomes. There's a really substantial gap between those groups and that gap is growing.

And so you look at that gap and you say, "Well, what the heck's happening?" A lot of times students want to immediately assume that what's happening is that low-income kids are somehow getting worse. Over the last couple of decades, that's not the case. Those kids are either holding steady or actually improving compared with their counterparts at the same income levels in previous generations, say, my generation. However, they're not keeping pace, in terms of achievement, with the kids at the upper end, right? The inequality is being driven by kids at that high end outpacing, whether that's additional enrichment opportunities, whether that's, right, cello lessons or space camp or really robust pre-K programs, or for that matter SAT tutoring, right?

But what's really fascinating to students is when we look at that gap, we see that according to Sean Readon, almost all of that gap can be accounted for on the very first day of kindergarten. What do you mean by that? I mean that the difference between the skill set of the high-income kid and the low-income kid, the amount of gap between those groups is essentially the same on the first day that those kids walk into kindergarten as it is on the last day of 12th grade.

So it looks as if, right, there is inequality there. But the inequality is not being produced mainly or certainly not exclusively by what's going on in the schools. Often students come in and think, "Well, I know what the problem is. The problem is differentials in school quality." Whether this school has smart boards and this school doesn't, whether it has to do with teacher quality, whether it has to do with, for that matter, who cares about education, which kinds of families value education. Okay, that's all hypothetical out there. You can look into that. I'm just saying I think we ought to turn our attention to what's happening even before the public school system starts. That raises a lot of questions, right? If the high-income kids are showing up on the first day of kindergarten with skills that the low-income kids don't, what does that mean? Right?

So we ask a number of questions. So why does school, why does publicly funded, universally available school, start in kindergarten? Right? Students are somewhat surprised. They sort of think to themselves, "Well, that's just where school starts," and I say, "Well, why do they call the first grade kindergarten?" Right? They say, "Well, because there's first grade after that." "But like, why wouldn't the first grade be called first grade?" They realize, it dawns on them, they're like, "Oh, my gosh, first grade must have been first grade once upon a time." And then there was a decision made by society that we actually need to start a little earlier for some reason. So we backed it up. So there was a kindergarten movement.

Well, if there was a kindergarten movement, because at some point in time, we realized that kids needed a little bit more of a head start, why not even more of a head start? And of course the program that has grown out of LBJ's War on Poverty is called Head Start, right? But that's not an entitlement program right now, not every kid who qualifies for that program can get into that program. And oftentimes those programs are insufficiently funded to provide the high-quality education that we actually know correlates not just with educational achievement, right, improvements or educational attainment improvements, but even with all sorts of long-term positive social outcomes.

So that I think is surprising to students, that if you want to address some of the inequality in educational achievement, you may have to actually look outside the school system, or at least outside our current school system.

**Ruth Candler** 30:32

So why do you think that students react so strongly to the relation between poverty and education?

**Howard Pickett** 30:39

That's a good question. I certainly think a lot of it is that they've just spent their last 10-15 years in school. That's the world they know. I think it's also not just them. I think that we all, as a society, think of school, and I think rightly so, as the engine of opportunity, right? It's there in order to prepare people for membership in society, and we actually think it's supposed to be, as, right, Horace Mann, I think it was who said, it's supposed to be the great equalizer. It's supposed to provide real opportunities so that the differences in our life outcomes are a result of differences in effort, or maybe talent and effort, but not lottery of birth.

So I think they're really incensed if they see that the differences in opportunity are essentially entrenched prior to the first day of kindergarten. And they want to ask, "Well, what might we do about that?" Now that's a really hard question, right? Because the fact that we want to promote equality of opportunity for folks, or at least sufficient opportunity for folks, doesn't mean we can do anything in order to generate it, right? So if my kids happen to be showing up on the first day of kindergarten with certain skills that their lower-income counterparts don't have, what are you going to do? Right? What are we going to do? Tell Holly and Howard, like, don't read to your kids? Don't teach them about Renaissance art when you go to the museum with them? Right? No, right? What we need to ask is why are some households not having the same opportunities to share that time together. Right? To have the resources in the house that are enriching. And if we can't provide those entirely within the household, why don't we look at expanding everything from pre-K programs to home health visits?

**Ruth Candler** 32:29

And let's discuss the ability of the poor to escape poverty through better employment. You've mentioned that poverty influences access to employment opportunities, and you referred specifically to a study conducted in Milwaukee that measured biases in hiring. Can you tell us a little more about that study?

**Howard Pickett** 32:48

Sure. I'll try to make sense of this. Let me say, as was the case with what I said about environmental toxins, and in particular with EZ Pass, I'm not talking about this particular study, or for that matter labor market discrimination, as if that's the silver bullet, right? As if that's the one thing that if we were somehow to address that, right, all these limitations on well-being and opportunity would go away. I think, again, I hope it's coming through, the thing that I'm really interested in, and I think that we ought to be committed to, is opportunity for folks, right? Fair equality of opportunity. And so this study is really important because--it was done by Devah Pager--and what it's trying to do is to figure out, what is the impact of racial identity, and also criminal history or felony record, on employment prospects?

Now that's really important, first of all, on the level of racial discrimination, if we want to be a society that's just, and we think justice requires fair equality of opportunity, and yet, people have all the skills that their white counterparts have, but they're less likely to get a callback or get hired because of their racial identity, well, that runs afoul of a commitment to equality and justice. Similarly, I think we ought to be not only concerned about opportunity and first chances, I think we ought to be concerned about second chances. And we have about 2 million people who are incarcerated in this country at this point in time. About 500,000, right, come out or reenter society each year. And they face diminished job prospects.

So what Pager did was essentially paid, you know, hired a few actors, some white men and some Black men, and created fictional applications, where the credentials in those applications were essentially the same across all the applicants. They applied to a bunch of jobs. They essentially identified themselves randomly, at times, as either having a felony record or not, for instance checking the little box on the application that says "Have you ever been arrested? Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" and they shipped them around and then saw who got callbacks or even who got job offers. And when they came back, the results were pretty fascinating.

This, again, was in Milwaukee. So we're not saying how this applies to every place and every time, but at this time in Milwaukee, the prospects of the applicants were different based both on felony record and on race. So the white actor, the white applicant, with no felony record, was called back about a third of the time, 34%. When that white actor, or the counterpart, when the white actors identified themselves in one way or another as having felony record, they saw their prospects of getting that job fall, as you might expect, and it fell to about 17%. So they were about half as likely to get a callback.

And I'm not saying that that's entirely unreasonable. There are a variety of reasons why a number of jobs might be really hesitant to hire somebody with a felony record. Okay. But what's interesting, right, is we not only are establishing at this point that there is a difference between applicants based on criminal record or felony record, but then we shifted over to the Black participants in the study, the Black actors in the study. The Black applicant without a criminal record, got a callback of 17, I'm sorry, callback of about 14%.

**Ruth Candler** 36:19

So 3% less.

**Howard Pickett** 36:21

Three percent less than the white applicant with the felony record. And then the Black applicant with the felony record was only called back about 5% of the time, right. So it's not just the case that there's lingering racial discrimination in the labor market, Pager would say, it's not only the case that there is lingering, what some people would call felonism, or at least, you know, harder chances for those with felony records in a time of mass incarceration, for that matter at a time of mass Black incarceration, it's also the case that that felony record affects different racial groups differently. Suggesting, right, that there's not sufficient opportunity for some folks, or at least in the case of folks with felony records, not a sufficient second opportunity for folks.

**Ruth Candler** 37:13

So you mentioned that box. I understand now that it's illegal in some places to ask about felony history on job applications. But this change in job application forms, has it had some unexpected effects?

**Howard Pickett** 37:33

Yes. So it's pretty early to say, but a little bit of research--this was done by Sonja Starr and Amanda Agan--they looked at the effects of banning the box in certain areas, and they found good news and bad news. On the good news side, it did increase the chances that individuals with felony records--and these were fictional applicants, right, they sent about 15,000 fictional resumes around—but, right, when they were not required to identify whether they had a criminal record or not, they were much more likely to get a callback than they were back when they had to, as you said, sort of check that box. That's good news, right?

On the bad news side, in places that banned the box, whether for government employment, or even across the whole state in all areas, including the private sector, Black male applicants were less likely to get a callback. Now, it's not clear exactly what's happening there. But one hypothesis, right, that seems pretty reasonable is that employers were assuming that there was a felony record, that there was a criminal history in Black male applicants, even when there wasn't.

So we run against, right, we run up against a bit of a wall here, right? You want to improve second chances for those with felony records. And to be clear, we're not talking about banning an employer's ability to run a background check. We're just talking about banning the box at this early stage so that your resume is not thrown out, right? Before you have a chance to sort of tell your story and make a good impression. But if it's also going to aggravate or exacerbate racial inequalities in the labor market, then what do you do?

Well, I'm not here to say I know exactly what we should do. But, right, what some folks think we should do is scrub both the felony record from the early stages of the application and the racial identifiers, right. So for instance, right, why does an employer need to know that my name is Howard, if they're going to try to decide what kind of job I would do? Why would they need to know if my name is Emily? Greg? Tyrone, Jamal, Lakisha, right? There's other studies done by Bertrand and Mullainathan, Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, that looks at the impacts of names on job prospects.

So some people say, "Hey, let's ban the box and let's scrub the name." Some people think "Well, no," right? "Why should we do that?" Well, think about it. It's a win-win all around, my students would sometimes say. I'm not sure it is, but let's just say that it is for a second, right? I, as an employer, don't want to throw somebody's resume out because somebody in HR happened to be implicitly or explicitly biased for racial reasons, for reasons of sex, gender, etc.

Now that's not the full story. That's not a simple solution. But that's what I think we need to do, as with EZ Pass, sort of ask ourselves, right, what ought we to do in order to improve opportunities for folks, and what would actually be practically effective and, as you said, not have those negative unintended consequences? But to figure that out, you have to have not only good intentions, right? When you're,

for instance, designing a policy or practice, you have to track it over time and see what happened, and then make adjustments as necessary.

**Ruth Candler** 40:49

So one question I think our listeners will have as they try to digest all this is how is this information about poverty collected? How do you access it?

**Howard Pickett** 41:03

So as my examples are showing, I mean, the vast majority of it is academic research, right, done by professors at universities, including this one. A lot of that academic research is subsidized by the government, right. There are various grants that governmental organizations and also that private foundations can provide folks in order to do that research. It's not all collected in one place. I mean, one of the things that students quickly realize is, on some level, there's not really such a thing as poverty, there's not this one thing. There's all this information about health prospects, educational achievement and attainment, these other issues about the labor market, and one brings them all together if one's interested in poverty and opportunity. How do you access it? I mean, certainly the Census Bureau is a good site. W&L library website is a good site.

**Ruth Candler** 41:55

So your students come from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Does a class on poverty help them, regardless of their economic, social or racial background, to reinterpret experiences that they've had growing up, do you think?

**Howard Pickett** 42:11

Well, I think so. And I certainly hope so. I mean, right, for any class that you're teaching, what you want to do is both introduce students to an aspect of the world they may not have realized was there before, but also to be able to better understand or even to, as you said, reinterpret sometimes what they have seen and experienced. And I think this is true regardless of background.

I know sometimes people wonder, "Why are you teaching poverty studies at an affluent college like W&L?" Well, first of all, affluent people care about people too, right? A lot of my students who come from affluence care deeply about human dignity and justice, right? Similarly, on the flip side, right, folks who are coming from experiences of growing up in a low-income household, they've had that experience that's really important. It certainly informs the questions they're asking and the reasons they may be taking the class. They may be really committed to trying to address some of the issues that they themselves saw or experienced growing up. And that's a very good thing. That's true for pretty much all majors and minors across campus. However, sometimes people will say, "Well, you know, if somebody grew up in poverty, why should they study poverty studies?" Well, first of all, I'm not telling everybody they need to study poverty studies, but, right, it's not as if my experience of something is sufficient to understand the complex processes involved in it, right? I digest food every day. Doesn't mean I should never take a biology class, right? Because there's a big difference between eating and digesting something and actually understanding the complex chemical processes of digestion.

So same thing, right? In Shepherd, we're not studying people. We're certainly not simulating the experience of growing up or living in poverty, right? We're trying to understand complex social, economic and political processes that give rise to poverty, that give rise to differences in opportunity for different groups. That takes careful study, careful reflection, and it also takes more than academic study. As I've said before, it takes direct community engagement, takes working alongside partners in the community, whether those be right here in Rockbridge, or somewhere else around the world.

**Ruth Candler** 44:26

So you've observed that some of your students want to run out and fix some of the problems they learn about in your class. Can you speak to that? Is, do you consider your goal as a teacher to fix the system? Or what is the deeper message here?

**Howard Pickett** 44:42

So that's a... That's a really complicated question. Let me take a shot at it. So just to be clear, while I would cringe a little bit at the fixing language that a student might bring to something, mainly ... not because I don't think that certain systems can be improved or need to be fixed, I would be really worried about talking about fixing people. Okay, so fixing a family, and a lot of our language related to poverty can imply that an individual or their family is somehow broken, or needing to be fixed rather than focusing on all sorts of complex arrangements and processes that may be leading to impediments to opportunity, and well-being. So I don't... I certainly want to be clear, I don't think that we ought to be committed to fixing people or families. Nor do I think that it's my job in the program to tell students exactly what their vision of a just society ought to be. It's not my job suddenly to create a bunch of foot soldiers to go out and implement the policies that I think would be best for the country or the world.

What I hope, however, is that they retain a passion for a more just, more equitable world, but that they also, along the way, develop a lot of humility, right. In fact, I hope that we're all developing a lot of humility in these things. I hope we have humility about what we don't know. There's a lot that I don't know. I'm spouting off these studies, but, right, for every one of these studies, there are a bunch of other studies I haven't looked at, including studies that are sometimes critical of the findings of these studies. I'm not dismissing that. I don't want to seem as if, like, we've got it all figured out, now it's just a matter of passing it on to students. I also want them to have humility when they encounter people who disagree with them. In particular when they disagree about, sort of, priorities, or what's morally permissible. Smart, good people really get to disagree about a lot. Not everything, right. They don't get to disagree about basic facts, but even a lot of facts are legitimately contestable.

And they certainly get to disagree about values. That is to say, not whether or not people should be respected. But what does it look like to actually respect folks? Right? And what does it look like to balance respect across different folks? Right? So smart, good people get to disagree. And so if a student wants to address a poverty-related issue, I want to make sure that they can come and talk to somebody who disagrees with their way of doing it, right, somebody who shares an equal commitment to dignity and opportunity for everyone, but thinks, I got some real reservations about that particular approach. I'd prefer this approach, right? You want a public approach, I want a private approach. Somebody comes along, says, "I want a hybrid approach." I want them to be able to have the humility

to listen to one another, and not just make an immediate judgment of, “Well, you disagree with me, so you're bad, or you're stupid.”

And then last, and most importantly, I hope that we're all developing a humility that keeps us from thinking that we need to be the heroes of the story, right, that the goal is to swoop in on my white horse and save people. But instead have the humility to work alongside communities, alongside community organizations, but also community members, in order to empower those who are most impacted by these issues of poverty and opportunity. It's a lot to think about.

**Ruth Candler** 48:10

So our discussion about poverty and education, wealth, employment and criminal history gave us really all a lot to think about. I'd like to take a few minutes and move to a lighter and more personal conversation, so our listeners can learn a little more about you. And we sometimes call this our W&L After Class lightning round. So picture yourself driving in the car with your kids, and you see someone on the side of the road panhandling for money. And one of your children asks you about this. What do you say?

**Howard Pickett** 48:46

So that's... that's the lighter question? That's a pretty important existential question.

**Ruth Candler** 48:54

Okay, I'm asking for all parents out there because we've all had that experience. How do you explain that to young children?

**Howard Pickett** 49:00

Oh, well. Well, asking me what I say is a different question from asking what you should do. But let me tell you what would probably happen in the car. So it's worth noting, right, that this doesn't happen a lot in Rockbridge. I'm not saying there's not a need in Rockbridge. I'm not saying there's not poverty. I'm not saying there's not homelessness, right. But it's going to appear differently here than it would, say, if my kids and I were walking along and driving along the streets of, you know, Los Angeles and Chicago where we once lived.

That said, if my nine-year-old son asked me that question... It would depend on what the question was, right? We could imagine that he's asking me something as basic as, “What's that person doing?” Right? Or “Why is that person there?” And at that point, and I think a lot of my students who may be listening would laugh and think this actually sounds about right, I would ask him a series of questions to basically give him the nine-year-old version of POV 101, right. We would be thinking at a nine-year-old level about what are the various reasons why an individual may not have enough money to take care of their needs? What are the various reasons why that person may not have a job? Right? Or what are the various reasons that person may be experiencing homelessness? And in fact, right, to be perfectly honest, most of the folks in my family would acknowledge that the questions that I would be asking wouldn't really be pitched at a nine-year-old level, they would just essentially be the real conversation because that's what we do in our house. We just have real conversations, and we adjust the vocabulary as necessary.

If, however, he was asking, "What should we do?" I know for sure what I would do in one way or another, I would essentially ask him, "What would you want done if the situation was reversed?" I mean, on some level, right, I spend a lot of time thinking about ethics, but I come back again and again, essentially, to the Golden Rule, right? Foster and Clara, do to others as you'd have them do unto you. Now that needs to be fleshed out a little bit...pretty complex question, but that's what I would want to know.

And then after that, I can fully imagine that... Well, not just imagine, I can remember times when this has happened, in particular when we're in larger cities. We would decide what it made sense to give to the person. Right? And sometimes that's money. Sometimes that's food. Sometimes that's a kind word, depending on what the person's asking for and what we're comfortable with and what we're capable of. If you asked what my response would be to my 15-year-old daughter, well, it just wouldn't have happened. She would not have asked that question. And there are two main reasons for that.

First of all, she would know better, right? That is to say she would know that if she's going to ask that question, she better have the next several hours or maybe next several days open to basically get a refresher in POV 101, and she'd probably rather be texting her friends, and secondly, and more important, right, at this point, at age 15... I don't mean to suggest that, right, she has it all figured out. But she would be quite capable of formulating a variety of ways of thinking about the situation, as well as making recommendations to me about how she thinks we ought to do it differently.

**Ruth Candler** 52:19

Going back to that open conversation.

**Howard Pickett** 52:22

Well, I call it open conversation. If the kids are listening, whether now or in the future, they may be laughing because it's open, but as you can tell, I'm often doing a lot of the talking.

**Ruth Candler** 52:33

So what do you enjoy doing when you're not on campus?

**Howard Pickett** 52:35

Talking? So, you know, you laugh, but it's actually true. I mean, if I could have my dream day, it would involve waking up at the crack of dawn and beginning deep, important, philosophical conversations often related to issues of justice with my wife, maybe on an early morning dawn walk. She doesn't like dawn walks, but we get out there, just as early as we could and we'd start that conversation, then we go back and we pick up the kids, we'd go for another loop in the neighborhood, talk about what they want to talk about. I'm not only interested in my work or these issues, but I want to have... I want to have conversations with folks.

Now that said, sometimes people get tired or they've got to go to work, or they've got to go to school. And so what I do beyond then? Well, I do the second-best thing, which is I read this type of

conversation, or I write, trying to create a conversation with some future listener, I listen to podcasts. And then I also run, I walk, but I love to run and walk while talking,

**Ruth Candler** 53:42

Or listening to podcasts?

**Howard Pickett** 53:44

Or listening to a podcast. And the only other thing, really, that I think my family would say that I spend any time doing is listening to music and occasionally playing music, playing guitar very, very badly. I listen to a lot of music through the day.

**Ruth Candler** 54:03

So what are you reading?

**Howard Pickett** 54:05

Right now? I'm reading a book called "Epistemic Injustice." And that's related to a new research project I'm writing about how we ought to treat incarcerated individuals as knowers and communicators, right. In other words, how do we overcome a tendency to disbelieve that group? I'm also rereading Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse Five," because I guess the pandemic's not depressing enough. Those are the first two I'd say come to mind.

**Ruth Candler** 54:37

Do you have a favorite place to eat in Lexington or Rockbridge County? And what is your go-to order?

**Howard Pickett** 54:44

So, honest answer, and again, folks who know me who are listening to this are probably giggling. I have very strange eating habits. So I'm a very strict vegetarian and I pretty much eat the same foods every day. I have pretty much the same thing for breakfast, lunch and dinner almost every day.

**Ruth Candler** 55:02

You would get along great with my husband.

**Howard Pickett** 55:03

So I don't eat out a lot in town. When we do eat out, I actually... My favorite type of food is Indian food. So we end up in Staunton, Roanoke, Charlottesville. If, however, I were to go out to eat in Lexington, no doubt about it, it would be Napa Thai. And there it would probably be either soup or the, what are they called, garden rolls or summer rolls? The ones with the soft rice paper.

**Ruth Candler** 55:33

Yeah, delicious. So for our alumni who have recently graduated, what do you wish that you had known when you'd just started out?

**Howard Pickett** 55:45

And you... You mean that I would not have the ability to predict the future, right? I wouldn't have been able to tell the future, just like what do I wish I had realized? Well, this is... this is advice for me, kind of like the driving in the car. This is advice for my past self, and I don't know how applicable it is to others. I had a pretty tough time, straight out of college, tough time finding a good job, tough time making ends meet. I eventually got into teaching. I taught middle school and high school for a number of years, but that wasn't easy to do. I did that in Los Angeles.

But initially I was living on very little income in L.A. And I guess I wish I had known to have more patience than I did. I lived about a mile from the Pacific Ocean, lived in Venice Beach, teeny tiny place, Holly and I lived there. And I spent a lot of time worrying, like, is this going to work out? Am I going to get a job? Hating the job that I did have. I won't get into that. And I guess I just wish that sometimes I could have compartmentalized that and had a little more patience, a little more faith, and just taken a run to the beach. But I'm not laid-back like that.

**Ruth Candler 56:58**

Good message. So we began by talking about ethics, and I'd like to return to that as we wrap up by posing a question you ask your students, and that you brought up earlier. What does it mean to respect the dignity of every single person?

**Howard Pickett 57:17**

So, perfectly honestly, I don't know. I mean, that, I think, is what we're trying to figure out. I'll tell you a few thoughts about it. When I talk about the dignity of every person, whether I'm talking to my kids, talking to myself, talking to a class, what I mean is, each person is irreplaceable. Right? Each human being has incalculable worth. Now, what does it mean to respect that worth? I think, partly, right, everything that I've said up to this point means... it means we're committed to making sure that people have their basic well-being.

But it's not only that, right? The human being is different from, say, an oak tree, right? Humans and oak trees both have well-being interests. There are things that make life go. Well, they're different for oak trees and human beings. But people need certain things in order to live well, in order to flourish. What's interesting about the human being, right, is that the human being also has agency, right, also has autonomy or liberty or self-determination, right? The human not only has needs, but also preferences.

And so what it means to respect the dignity of every person, I think, is trying to figure out how to balance respecting what a person needs, and what that person wants, and then doing that, not only within one individual, right, because I don't know about you, but sometimes what I want is in conflict with what I need, but I'm not sure that I want you to decide for me what is best for me, right? So that raises a really complicated question. It gets even more complicated when we realize there's always more than one person in the room. Right? There's always more than one person whose well-being might need support or whose agency might need to be empowered. And it's just the case, right? Doing something to improve well-being for this person might come at the expense of the preferences, or for that matter the well-being, of this other person. I think that, right, what we need to balance that out or to figure out how to negotiate that is a pretty well developed understanding of what justice requires of us.

**Ruth Candler** 59:34

You have given us so much to think about. I really appreciate you joining us today. Thanks for helping us better understand poverty in America.

**Howard Pickett** 59:45

Thanks for inviting me.

**Ruth Candler** 59:48

Thank you for listening. We hope you discovered something new. To read more about today's podcast and check out other ways to continue your lifelong learning with W&L, you can head to our website [wlu.edu/lifelong](http://wlu.edu/lifelong). You'll also find W&L's faculty reading list, "Sheltering in Place with a Few Good Books," and information on how to join the W&L virtual book club.

We hope you'll join us back here soon. Thanks again, and until then, let's remain together not unmindful of the future.