Manoj Mohanan:

Welcome to Policy 360. I'm Manoj Mohanan. If you're a regular listener to this podcast, you'll know that we tend to focus more on policy issues than our guests' personal stories. But in this case, CJ Appleton's story is just so compelling, we simply have to start our conversation there today. CJ Appleton is a new faculty member at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. He says that his academic journey began 13 years ago, when he was 27 years old, living underneath a bridge. But somehow, he was able to turn his life around, and now he works at the intersection of the scholarship on criminology and public policy. Welcome to Policy 360, CJ.

CJ Appleton:

Thank you for having me.

Manoj Mohanan:

Wonderful. So you grew up in Portland, and you were an athlete, right?

CJ Appleton:

Yes, I did.

Manoj Mohanan:

Tell us what you were doing.

CJ Appleton:

Yeah, so I grew up in Portland, Oregon, in North Portland. It's now been changed a lot, so it's interesting. Just a side note on the topic of gentrification, when I go home now, I actually don't go to where I grew up. My family is now living in a different part of Portland, and when I go home, when you think of the stores and the places, it's all been completely over. So it's interesting to think of Portland and my home, because it's in my mind now, and it's no longer-

Manoj Mohanan:

The home you grew up in-

CJ Appleton:

The home I grew up in is only in our minds. It's only in our memories.

Manoj Mohanan:

And when did that happen, the gentrification?

CJ Appleton:

Over from the mid-2000s on, it began to change. And it's a very beautiful part of town now, but it's just, when you think of home and the places, "Oh, that was the corner that we played at. Oh, that was the store that I've been going to my whole life," all of those things are mainly gone. And so, it's just interesting thinking back. But yes, I grew up in North Portland. I loved sports from the beginning, I have a son now, and I'm wondering if he's going to have that eye. Because I knew when I was eligible to play soccer and I had it on my mom's radar, I knew that when I was eight in second grade, it was time for basketball, and I told my mom, I turned eight, now I get to play basketball. So from the beginning, it was something I was very intrinsically motivated to pursue.

Manoj Mohanan:

And you were a very successful athlete?

CJ Appleton:

Yes, and I was good. I have the benefit of being good at most things that I've tried to do, and sports, especially being so motivated to practice and practice and practice, I was very good. And I'm big, so I haven't grown any taller since I was in eighth grade. So I was really tall early. And when you're tall early, everybody says, "Oh, well, they could be good." So then, people around you begin to invest in you. Opportunities come your way because you are seen as somebody who has promise.

Manoj Mohanan:

Oh, wow. And you played Division I?

CJ Appleton:

Yes, I did. And so, I mean, I went through high school, I had a successful high school career, and then I ended up having the opportunity to play at Oregon State University for football.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah? That's a very good team.

CJ Appleton:

Especially back then. They were better than they are now. And that was a very difficult time for me, just in life, because late adolescence, early adulthood, being on your own for the first time, so you don't realize the structure that you're in and how that's guiding your decisions until the structure's gone. And so, just being on my own, I had some misconceptions about what college was really about.

I was thinking more, it was like the movies, where you just do what you want. And then the people who had nudged me back on line weren't there, and so I kind of got off line more than I'd ever been before and didn't know really how to bring myself back, just as far as going to class, showing up to my meetings, being responsible, and those types of things.

Manoj Mohanan:

So tell us a little bit more about that path. Because I remember you mentioned in past conversations as well about how you were able to get to where you are today. But it's almost like a U-shaped curve. You had a really impressive career track when you first came to college, and then you had difficult times, and then you were able to climb out. So I'd love to learn more about that. And what took you down that path in the first place?

CJ Appleton:

Well, it was really just going to parties. I wasn't prepared for the celebrity status that you have as a Division I athlete in a small college town. And so you just go everywhere, and everything's free, and everybody wants to talk to you. And I was the type of young man who I molded myself to the people I was around. So because I grew up in a particular type of environment and I went to a Catholic school, I learned how to do that at a young age.

So when I was home, I acted one way. When I was at school, I acted... I would always be molding myself. So when I got to college, I would mold myself as well. Whoever I was around, I would do whatever they were doing as well, which can get you into some trouble, depending on who you're around. And so, just partying too much, getting off track with people who had a better ability to do those things and then lock back in on Monday. I would do those things, and then Monday, I would maybe not be there. Tuesday, maybe I'll show up, but it's not the me. And so, I wasn't able to do things the way they did them, and it kind of got me-

Manoj Mohanan:

Off track.

CJ Appleton:

Off track, in a way.

Manoj Mohanan:

It can be really unforgiving.

CJ Appleton:

Yes. And it's unforgiving because when all of what you have is wrapped up in the athlete identity, if that goes left or right, then it's really heavy on you, because it's so much of a part of who you are. They probably have something similar here with the Duke students. If they don't get good grades, it causes them a great amount of anxiety, because that's what they've been good at their whole lives.

Manoj Mohanan:

Indeed.

CJ Appleton:

So when I began to have difficulty in that area, when I wasn't able to just go to football and have that be my release, it kind of compounded in that way.

Manoj Mohanan:

Well, I can tell you that at Duke, one of the things that our athletics department tries very hard to do is to make sure that the students get as much coaching and mentoring and support to help. But it's not easy, because these challenges you mentioned are very real. So just reflecting back on those days, how did you manage to make the turn? Because it's really hard.

CJ Appleton:

It's interesting. I was speaking to somebody who wrote an article about me, and we were talking about the criminal justice system. And he says, "Well, things are looking so bleak. What reason is there for hope?" And then, my response to him is, when things are looking that bad, the only thing you have is hope.

Manoj Mohanan:

The only way is up.

CJ Appleton:

The only way is for you to distance yourself from the past and the reality of the situation, and to once again be able to say, "Well, maybe things could be different."

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah.

CJ Appleton:

Which is kind of irrational at the time. But for me, it was similarly that I got diverted by others, I was able to be lured back on track by others.

Manoj Mohanan:

Others.

CJ Appleton:

And so, I got connected with a mentor of mine, who actually just visited me a couple of weeks ago, and he said something to me that was very, very pivotal. Because I was a 27-year-old man, I had no education. I had none of the things that I thought I should have at 27. I was very aware of that and very sensitive to that. And he said something to me. And he said, "How could you be expected to go somewhere that no one ever taught you how to get there?"

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah.

CJ Appleton:

And he was the first adult man who gave me permission to be imperfect and didn't meet me with that, "You need to get your life together. You need to just..." That kind of just hard-nosed, kind of like... I knew I needed to get my life together, but I needed also that hope. And he basically broke it down. He said, "Every place where you're at, we're going to figure out where you need to go to get to the next level, and then we're just going to start working on those things."

And then I started to think of myself and my deficiencies as things that could be worked on, not things that were just a part of who I was and that I had to carry with me everywhere. But they were all skill-based, often, and things that I needed to kind of just, "Okay, I need to actively, purposefully..." Kind of like a systematic approach to improvement is what he walked me through.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah.

CJ Appleton:

And that allowed me to make some strides that I wasn't able to make before.

Manoj Mohanan:

That's really impressive, and impressive that you were able to find the mentor that you did at the right time, because not everyone is fortunate. But equally importantly, not everyone who has a great mentor is able to take that and then run with it.

CJ Appleton:

Right. Yes.

Manoj Mohanan:

And you were able to really turn it around. So what was your journey of turning it around from this point to becoming a scholar and taking it there?

CJ Appleton:

Right. Well, it's not a clear one. And so, interestingly enough, we were talking about the students and how they think that the path has to be clear in order for them to get to the end. And that's not the case at all. When I first started, I just wanted to finish what I started because there had been so many years when I would talk a big game, say I was going to do something, and not follow through.

So one of the things that he taught me is to be more principally driven. So we are the type of people who do what we say we're going to do. We walk with a certain level of integrity, we do things to a certain standard whether you want to do them or not. These are some of the things that I didn't have the ability to do before we started working

together. And when I took those principles back into community college... Because I went back to community college. I always knew I needed a degree and I wanted to do that, but I hadn't done it.

When I took those principles back into my education, I always was smart enough, I just would miss assignments, or I wouldn't study, or I... It was the execution of being a student that I was missing. And so, that first term back, I got a 4.0 for the first time in my life. And it didn't have anything to do with the product. It had something to do with my accountability to the academic process. Once I realized that if I had a process in place, I could get the grade that I wanted, then school changed for me completely, because it was no longer, "What happened? Why didn't you get the good grades? What is this B?" Because my mom also has a PhD, and she's not playing any games.

Manoj Mohanan:

Okay.

CJ Appleton:

And so it was always a reason... I always had to explain what went wrong with school, so I didn't like it. And so, when school became a thing I could be proud of, it changed my relationship with school. And now I began to want to go to class. I began to enjoy... Because I always liked learning, and so it really flipped it upside down in a way that it wasn't in the past. And so, that began me interested in school. And then I was also playing sports on the side, which was an interesting combination.

Because many times, they'd tell you if you're a dedicated athlete, it's hard to be a dedicated student. But what I found is that it was more difficult for me before, when I was switching off and on who I was. Because in football, it was attention to detail focused, locked in. But in academics, I was all over the place. But when I was that person across all domains of my life, it became easier to be excellent in all those different areas.

And so, that began me on the process of being bought in. And then just trying to do as well as I could at whatever was right in front of me. And then people began to come to me and say, "Hey, you should think about getting your PhD. You should think about your studies."

Manoj Mohanan:

And did that happen when you were doing your masters?

CJ Appleton:

So, that happened when I was at community college. So I had some incredible people in my life who, speaking of that dreaming that we talked about before, when you struggled and when it's been very visible in a way that mine was in Portland, Oregon, very small place. It's a city, but it's a small community. You put a ceiling on yourself. And even when you dream, you're dreaming to that ceiling. And it's an artificial ceiling.

And I had these people, the coaches at PCC, the people that they put me in contact with, they were constantly trying to tell me there was more there. There was greatness out there. And I was under the belief that my chance to do something incredible was missed when I was young. Because when you're young is the time when you do incredible things and you put yourself on a track to do something incredible. And so, I was under that belief.

And these people kept telling me... The first time somebody asked me to get my PhD, I looked at them like, "I just started liking school three months ago. A PhD? You're out of your mind. I'm just barely getting this thing started." But he was the first of many people who said, "Wait a minute. There's a path here. There's a path here you could take." And it was very important for me because it takes a while for us sometimes to get used to an idea, to see ourselves maybe possibly going in that direction. Sometimes it takes a while for us to get on board.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah. So I love how you said that, see yourself in that position. So when you first saw yourself wanting to get a PhD, did you know that criminology was what you wanted to study, or were you-

CJ Appleton:

I had no idea. For me, what eventually got... Two things got me to actually pull the trigger on getting my PhD. One was I looked at the percentage of people in America who have their PhD, and I said, "Well, this is my second chance of..." I always thought I was going to make the NFL. And it's famously 1% of all people who try make the NFL. And then when I saw 1% of the population has a PhD, for me it was like, here's my chance to do something that is not professional sports, but it's better in many ways, because there's no shelf life.

I don't get to be an academic for four years, and then my back goes out or my knee goes out. So I saw this as a chance for me to redo what I missed. But also, it was a couple people who I asked, I said, "How many times in your life has an adult Black man been the intellectual authority figure in your life?" And I asked this to about 20 people, and every single one of them said never. There's never been a time in my life where a Black man had been the person I went to to figure something out, either academically or intellectually.

And it was at that point that it just became very meaningful to me. If I had the ability to step into that role to be that person, so more people would have an experience with that, just so we could... It just became very important for me. And so, then I made the decision. But I just wanted the PhD. I didn't know what I was going to do afterwards. And I was in a sociology program. There was a scholar who came in and did a talk about the work he had done on syllabi in the '80s. And he found out in the eighties that if you have five different students, they all read the same words, they got five different things from that syllabi.

And he was like, well, depending on the demographics of the person, whether they were a first generation student, all these factors played into what they were getting from this document. And I thought, wow, that would be really interesting to do on probation and parole, because probation and parole also has a syllabus. It's your conditions. When you're on probation, the first thing you get is a paper telling you all the rules you need to follow.

And I'm wondering, they're giving the same piece of paper to everybody, but I'm wondering what are the different messages that people are getting? And so, I had this idea, and then that took me on this path to doing probation and parole work that set me on the journey to switching my discipline to criminology.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah.

CJ Appleton:

And so, that happened the summer of my master's, the first year of my master's program, that I decided to start doing criminal justice work.

Manoj Mohanan:

Fantastic. And so when you were in the PhD program, what did your research look like? And what did you focus on?

CJ Appleton:

I had my probation and parole work that I did with Dr. Faye Taxman, and we did two really cool projects. I was planning on, how do I say this in a very short space, because it's complicated, but you can think of probation and parole work and using an analogy with the medical field. So if I break my leg in Durham, or if I break my leg in Portland, Oregon, or Chicago, Illinois, I'm going to generally get a similar type of treatment. There's general practice guidelines of what you should do with a broken leg.

Probation and parole has no practice guidelines. There's no unified set understanding of what should we do at these times with these people. And so, imagine how difficult it would be to administer a particular type of standard or a particular type of care for this population over time. And so, my advisor, Faye Taxman, she had recognized this and got some funding to create practice guidelines.

And so, we actually used an appropriateness method borrowed from the medical field to take the evidence, academic, also clinical experts, and as well as frontline staff, and we did a national survey, had clinical experts on

our team, and then did a really exhaustive literature review and tried to combine all three of those to give practical guidelines and create practical guidelines of what should we do with different populations depending on criminal history, depending on compliance method? How should we speak about these things? What should you...

I mean, it's really, there's 20 different what we call appropriateness statements that we developed. And so, I worked on that project for three years. And then, now, we're working on another project to try to take those and use them as a part of a project to see if utilizing resources like these can help staff change their practices and improve overall outcomes.

Manoj Mohanan:

That's fascinating. Can I ask a follow-up question on the guidelines? So during the time you were working on the guidelines and you developed this with your advisor, did you see any institutions or organizations that were actually willing to say, "Hey, this a new set of guidelines. This looks great. Let's go ahead and adopt them."

CJ Appleton:

So this is the thing. Two different things. So criminal justice institutions generally are, we view them as very resistant to change. Probation and parole is unique in the sense that, because, and this is my view of why this is the case, because probation officers need to have consistent continual contact with clients, then their view on what should be done is different than, let's say, the police or the courts.

Manoj Mohanan:

I see.

CJ Appleton:

Because if I'm a police, even in community policing, I may not see you or engage with you often. I may drive past you, but I don't have to develop a relationship with you, I don't have to be an active part of your change, I don't have to sentence you or give you a punishment and then meet with you afterwards and talk to you about what happened. And so, because that is a fundamentally different relationship that is in probation than any other place, there's a lot more justice agencies that are more open to say, "Simply locking people up doesn't work. And we know it doesn't work for these reasons. Let's try to do things a little bit different."

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah.

CJ Appleton:

So there's a lot of receptivity to the idea of things need to be improved. And then, hey, this is a really cool tool. The issue is, how do we get a group of people to do and follow these guidelines and have fidelity to what we're trying to change? That's what we are not as good at, is the implementation component. So more buy-in than actual results, I think.

Manoj Mohanan:

Fascinating. And so, the objective of all of this, if I understand correctly, is to eventually get to what you study, which is desistance?

CJ Appleton:

Yes.

Manoj Mohanan:

So for the benefit of our listeners, do you want to tell us what it is?

CJ Appleton:

Yes. So desistance is broadly just the ending of a person's criminal career, how we use it in criminology. And so, I always had an interest in desistance work. I'm very fascinated in behavior change and people's change generally, probably because of my life and how my life went in one direction and now moved back to another direction. And so, I see probation and parole as the systems component of that work. But I was always fascinated by desistance work.

So the entire time I was in my PhD program, I had to do side quests and side forays into the desistance research with no real guidance. There was no desistance scholars at my institutions. And so, I did reach out to Shadd Maruna, who wrote famously one of the most impactful desistance books, Making Good, on narrative identity and the role of narrative identity in desistance. And he was gracious enough to mentor me in this work.

And so, I was always very interested in the desistance work, and then decided that I was going to do my dissertation on desistance so that when I stepped into my academic position, I would have been established in both probation and parole, as well as desistance, the thing that I was really interested in.

Manoj Mohanan:

Fascinating. And so, during your dissertation work, as you were studying the criminal trajectory of individuals and through your research and you did a lot of person-centered approach in your research as well, what did you find about the trajectory itself? What did you learn about that?

CJ Appleton:

So really what I was most interested in is, so there's two different ways that desistance scholarship often is approaching, that people approach desistance scholarships. So one way is trying to view desistance as a process. And that process begins before the ending of a person's criminal behavior. We understand it builds up. A person decides that they may want to change, they think about it, they maybe try a couple of things, it doesn't work. And eventually, they get to the point where they desist.

But then that's not the end point, because then people have to maintain that desistance throughout the rest of their lives. Because we really truly never know whether somebody desisted until they are no longer with us and they still have not committed a crime, which we could have another interesting question about operationalization of the concept in empirical research. But there's another branch, which I think is more of a quantitative branch, which is more focused on the actual ending point. And how can we know, as a society, or how can we understand, when is the point when we no longer need to worry about that person being as risky as other groups?

And so, there's really interesting research that has shown, at the seven-year point is actually when people become statistically indistinguishable from the general population, which I think has guided some efforts, I know in Portland, Oregon and some other efforts to say, at a seven-year point of being crime-free, we should open up pathways for expungement and stuff like that. So there is a more quantitative approach, which looks at the criminal trajectory. What my research was more focused on is understanding that process. So where does it begin before you are able to stop committing crimes, but then also who you have to become, how do you view yourself in a way that maintains and sustains that desistance beyond the point where you no longer commit?

Manoj Mohanan:

That's fascinating. And so, when you think about the system, that individuals, we don't live in islands, individuals are part of the system. So what kinds of systemic changes help with this process? And what have you learned?

CJ Appleton:

So one of the things that was really fascinating is I ended up doing my dissertation on the effects of childhood trauma on a person's criminal career. So the onset, all the way through desistance. And what I found in the desistance article of my dissertation is that I argue that childhood trauma and early life adversities actually happen often before we ever have an identity. See, identity formation happens in adolescence. And a lot of things happen before your adolescence.

And so, there are contaminating elements that are in people's original self-conception that stick with them before a long time and are very resilient to things like getting a job and things like... We know people who've experienced childhood trauma, they have on paper wonderful lives and they're plagued with low self-worth, and they're plagued with these things that of stick with them. I'm working right now actually to try to coin a term that I'm loosely calling anchor identities, where we have these parts of ourselves that are like anchors that we carry with us through life.

And so much of desistance has been focused on changing our criminal identity for a good reason. We want to understand how do people get away from crime, and so we've been very focused on getting away from criminal identity and redeeming ourselves from the criminal past that we have. But for me, our criminality was not the beginning of our lives. And so, I'm trying to highlight the fact that people had lives before that, and they're carrying with them often the baggage from earlier in life. So they also need to redeem themselves from those moments too.

So I have very powerful quotes in my dissertation from people saying, "Once I recognized the trauma that had happened to me, I realized I wasn't contaminated. I was not this person. That person I became was a reaction, sometimes a natural reaction, to the environment that I was in, to the things that had happened to me." And once they're free from that contaminating force, then now, they have the possibility for change. "Once I realized that I wasn't that, then now I can move forward."

Interestingly, to answer your question, a lot of that realization sometimes came through institutions. So I call it prescribed healing, where those people did not go there for that healing from their past trauma, but that healing was a built-in component of the institutional framework that they were in. And those were all substance users. So as a part of substance use, we take a wraparound, 360 approach. People go to treatment, they get parenting services, they get cognitive behavioral change, they get connected with a mentor, we talk to them about their past.

This is all a built-in part, because we understand we have to heal the whole person. And so, a part of my sample, they got their traumatic healing as a part of a prescribed part of their change. But for my other group that were not substance users, there was no wraparound services for them. So they had to become entrepreneurs of their healing. They had to go find their healing in ways that they could.

And so, for me, I think that, to answer your question in a very long-winded way, I think that if we had a more wraparound type of conception of what was needed for general change from a criminal past, then we would be able to give people all of what they need instead of just simply focusing on their criminal cognitions and thinking, if we could just explain to you how what you're doing is affecting other people, then now you're all of a sudden be able to feel better about yourself and move on with your life.

So I just think that, in a short way, we are so much further along understanding that if we remove substances from a person who's a substance abuser, then they'll probably do something different with their lives. And we know that many things lead people down the road to substance use. So we're there. If you're just a person who burglarizes people's houses, and you rob people, and you're not a substance user as a society, we don't understand why you would have done that. We don't have the same amount of sympathy for a person who has made that choice.

And so, I want to try to build that sympathy and recognize they're not a substance user, but there was a set of circumstances that led them down that path. If we heal those circumstances and we address those things, that person will also change.

Manoj Mohanan:

We are all products of our circumstances one way.

CJ Appleton:

100%. 100%. And the interesting thing about childhood trauma is it's not... Childhood trauma is not as much class-based. It is something that many people experience and have experienced. And so, similar to substance use, it's something that traverses that typical low-class, high-class dichotomy that we often see in criminal justice research. That's an interesting thing as well.

Manoj Mohanan:

Yeah. Well, thank you so much for telling us about that journey and what you learned along the way. You've been now here at Sanford for a couple of months, not very long. But in these last couple of months, as you start thinking about your future academic career, as you're starting up, you're a brand new assistant professor, what career trajectory do you want to pursue? What kinds of research projects are you hoping to accomplish and undertake? And tell us more.

CJ Appleton:

This could have been the whole thing. I have so many plans. So right now, I don't know if you've ever heard of Crime Hotspots?

Manoj Mohanan:

No, I have not.

CJ Appleton:

All right, so very fascinating. Actually, a scholar from George Mason, David Weisburd, developed this back in the '80s. And he tracked the police calls and he got police call data, and he said, "Well, where are these locations that people are calling the police to notify them of?" And he found out that over half of the police calls in an entire city were centered around 3% of the addresses. So crime concentrated in very particular spaces. And the-

Manoj Mohanan:

Is the crime concentrated, or are the calls concentrated?

CJ Appleton:

The calls about crime. And so, these things were very concentrated in particular spaces, a very small number of these particular spaces. And that obviously led, for the last 40 years, they've been saying, "Well, what is it about these spaces?" Because it's not just the south side of Chicago is bad or this part of Durham is bad. It is particular locales within that space that are crime generating or that are really the center of those. And so, I took experimental criminology with Dr. Weisburd, and I've always had this idea of where does trauma concentrate? How does traumatic experiences concentrate for people?

And so, I've contacted some scholars in Florida who have the juvenile justice data as well as census data. And so, we have the data to potentially be able to map childhood trauma within the state and see not just where, but on a street-by-street level, where within these cities and these towns is trauma located? And what is it about those spaces that is potentially generating those? So I'm really, really excited about that. I just had a conversation with those scholars a couple of weeks ago, where I presented them the idea and I said, "You might have the data." And so, we're going to meet at the conference to potentially build that out. But that has so much potential.

I also have a desire to expand how we conceive of childhood trauma. Right now, we use the ACE framework Adverse Childhood Experience framework, which is in the home. And it's a very popular framework and it's a great framework. But my first article in my dissertation says, well, that's not the only place where people are being abused, or scared for their safety, or exposed to violence or substance use. That's not the only place where people are at.

And so, one of the things that I'm working on now is the advocation for expanding that framework into the neighborhood, into schools, into incarcerated spaces, and highlighting that there's a cycle of revictimization for these populations. And sometimes, when they're perpetrators, we have a hard time viewing them as victims, but there is a cycle of victimization that these people have experienced, and that has impacted them. And we need to understand what has happened to these people in order to help them change their lives.

And so, also doing work advocating for the expansion of that and potentially building a tool that isn't an expanded thing. And the other thing that's interesting about that too is, in empirical research right now, we often will say,

"Oh, they're in an urban space," or, "They're in another space," or, "They're in this part of the city that we know to have these things," and then we assume their experience. With this tool, you could say, "Well, you may have lived in this neighborhood. But what happened to you there?"

Manoj Mohanan:

Right.

CJ Appleton:

And we, right now, don't often have that included within our analysis. So having something like that could be more a fine tooth comb to get through some of our quantitative analysis as well. So it could be very beneficial in that way. I could keep going. I don't know.

Manoj Mohanan:

No, this is fascinating.

CJ Appleton:

I have so many projects. The other thing is I have really interesting ideas about how to use AI to help probation officers. So right now, we have a situation where probation officers, what they do is they have to take notes. And then, since that notes is string data, it's never included in anything. But the problem is those notes is where all the details are. So we don't know what happened in the case unless somebody goes through every single one of those notes. And so, I think they're doing some of this in the medical field where they're using AI-

Manoj Mohanan:

Medical transcription. Yeah.

CJ Appleton:

... to transcribe, I would like to bring that to probation and parole. It would fundamentally change how we view quantitative data in probation and parole, because then we'll have the context. Right? And context very much matters. And it would allow us to do certain types of analyses en masse that we're just incapable of doing now because people just aren't going to take the time to go through 10,000 cases of notes.

And I also think that there's ability to view... Oftentimes, we view probation officers as things that we understand and people we understand, but there's very little research on probation officers, and who they are, and how they become who they are, and their identity as officers, and how that's matched or mismatched with their identity as people. We know nothing really about them.

And so I would like to do similar methods of narrative analysis on probation officers themselves to better understand who are they, and how they make decisions, and what is important to them, and really build out that understanding. So we can take that into consideration when we're building our evidence-based practices, instead of just saying, "Well, officers have a hard time maintaining fidelity to our instrument." Why? What type of officers do you even have? Are there taxonomies of different types of officers beyond just this is a helper, and this is a punisher? Right now, it's very crude how we do it. And I think that there's room to kind of expand our understanding of the dynamic nature of these individuals.

And while they may cluster, it's probably in a much more dynamic way than helper and punisher. You know what I mean? Or law enforcement. There's probably much a lot within those categories. And so, I think I can stop there. There's more, but I can stop there. There's four different things that I'm very excited about that have promise for the future.

Manoj Mohanan:

They do sound very promising, and I could not be more delighted that you are a member of our faculty. And we look forward to all this research coming up and what you'll learn in the process. One last question, if I may, is you talked about childhood being a very important formative part. If you had an opportunity to go back and talk to you in high school, not in college, I know that college was a tough time, but before even you got to college, what would you tell your former self? And I ask this because, as our students and maybe prospective students might be hearing this podcast, and some of them might be college athletes about to come to Duke or other programs, what can a high school student learn from your advice to your former self?

CJ Appleton:

Ask for help. No matter what it is, whether it's academics, whether it's in life, whether it's something you're confused about, and especially if it's something you're scared of. If you're frightened of something, just ask for help. Because that's the thing that may trip you up. The thing that you're not asking anybody about, the thing that you have no experience with, and the thing that you're scared of, which means that you'll probably make a bad decision around it, that is the thing that could potentially get you.

And when we're young, especially for young men, we feel like we need to know the answers. And especially if you, as an athlete or as a person who is of high standing, you feel like you can't make any mistakes. So you can think of a student, what's the difference between an A-plus and an A? That's not a big difference. You know what I mean? A couple mistakes on an essay, and now you're no longer... A couple mistakes on a quiz, and now you no longer have this status.

It's the same with athletics. A couple mistakes on the field, and you're no longer the five star. You're now considered... You're no longer getting the scholarship. So the stakes are so high for these young people. And it's at that moment when you feel as if the world would not understand you not being that perfect person. And I would tell my young self, we get it. More people get it than you think. And to ask.

And you can't ask everybody, right? Or you can ask people and they may not give you the thing that you need, and that's okay. That doesn't mean you shouldn't ask the next person. Because you don't need a village sometimes of people who understand. Sometimes it's just one to two people that you can go to when things are getting a little hairy for you, that you can ask for some advice that could fundamentally change your experience. And so, I think getting used to that as a young person will help you do that when you're on your own in college, and then into adulthood, and then moving on and on.

Manoj Mohanan:

Thank you so much. Thank you, CJ, for joining us today. It's just been wonderful chatting with you. CJ Appleton is assistant professor in the Sanford School of Public Policy here at Duke. Thank you for joining us, CJ, and thanks to the master student, Robert Gansard, for his help with Policy 360 this fall. And thanks also to our producer, Carol Jackson, who is the award-winning producer of Policy 360. We'll be back soon for another conversation. I'm Manoj Mohanan.