Poor, but Privileged

STORY BY LORY HOUGH PHOTOGRAPHS BY TODD DIONNE
NEW FACULTY MEMBER TONY JACK KNOWS FIRST HAND WHAT HIS RESEARCH REVEALED: SOME LOW-INCOME KIDS COME TO COLLEGE MORE PREPARED THAN OTHERS
He looked around and saw a diverse group of students, but unlike him, none seemed poor. They talked about study abroad programs and boarding schools like Andover and Groton. Back at home, in Miami, summer was just a season. At Amherst, he quickly learned, it was also a verb.

“I kept asking myself, am I really the only poor black person here?”

The answer was no.

Some of his classmates had grown up the way he did — barely making ends meet, the first in their families to go to college — but they had taken part in programs like Prep for Prep and A Better Chance that pluck promising, low-income kids from struggling urban schools and give them funding to attend private high schools.

What Jack noticed about these students was that, unlike other poor kids who hadn’t gone to elite schools, they all seemed to be transitioning from high school to college without issue. They were already versed in college terms like “orientation” and “syllabus.” They didn’t hesitate to approach faculty members or raise their hands in class.

Jack didn’t know it at the time, but this observation would eventually help shape the research question that he is currently trying to answer as a junior fellow at the prestigious Harvard Society of Fellows and as an incoming faculty member at the Ed School: Why do students from equally disadvantaged backgrounds experience the same college so differently?

What he found is that colleges and universities, and society in general, tend to treat all low-income students the same. While reading articles for his Ph.D. in Harvard’s sociology department, Jack says the story — whether it was written by an anthropologist, economist, or sociologist — was always the same.

“If you’re poor and black, if you’re poor and Latino, if you’re poor and anything in college, you’ll have this experience. Period,” he says. “There was so little variation in talking about the experience of poor students. I didn’t see in the research what I saw at Amherst.”

So Jack did what made the most sense: He set out to change the research — and the national conversation around diversity in higher education.

As his mentor and dissertation chair William Julius Wilson, a professor at Harvard Kennedy School, says, “When Tony initially described his research project I immediately thought, Here is a project that will very likely uncover issues not previously considered by sociologists and will enhance our understanding of how pre-college exposure to important social milieus for the acquisition of cultural and social capital matters for low-income students.”

After two years of interviewing more than 100 black, Latino, and white undergraduates at an elite university, Jack came up with a new way to think about how factors like poverty and socioeconomic segregation — segregation by class — shape the way students experience college. He splits low-income college students into two groups: The “doubly disadvantaged” are poor kids who went to public schools, often underresourced. The “privileged poor” are poor kids who went to private high schools, usually well resourced.

As he explained during a recent podcast interview with a Harvard alumni group, the terms are purposefully loaded. “Privileged poor is kind of like jumbo shrimp, right?” he said. “It’s got that oxymoronic quality to it intended to make the reader ask: How can one person be both privileged and poor?”

What he found is that students who are privileged poor and went to private high schools come to college not only academically prepared, but also culturally prepared. Jack says they come knowing how to navigate the informal social rules that govern college life and this gives them an advantage. For many, it also helps them get more out of college.

On the other hand, the doubly disadvantaged, although also academically gifted, usually come less exposed to the norms and unspoken expectations of college, making the transition especially difficult. The privileged poor also experience culture shock, but much earlier, he explains — in middle or high school, when they are recruited into programs like Prep for Prep. As one student told Jack, “The shock I would have experienced [at an elite college], I experienced from eighth grade to high school, ...from public to private school.”
While talking about these two groups, Jack often uses office hours as a way to explain how different their experience can be in college.

“One thing I would like for every college to do is institute a policy that professors define terms like ‘office hours’ on the syllabus. That’s so simple,” he says. “The college doesn’t have to dictate what kind of description they give because office hours look different for a chemistry class or a Spanish class. But what would happen if a professor said, ‘Hey, I’m Professor Jack. The class meets on Tuesday and Thursday at a certain time, and my office hours are 1 to 2:30, now let’s get started,’ versus ‘Hello everybody. I’m Professor Jack, and class is Wednesday and office hours are Thursday from 1 to 2:30, and I view office hours as a time for us to not only go over course material and larger course aims, but also an opportunity to talk about fellowships or how this course relates to larger issues.’ That’s making it personal. How different do those two things sound to everyone? In the first one, you’re assuming everyone knows what office hours are. They don’t. That’s a fact of the matter. Not all kids come to college knowing what office hours are. So translate it. And this is a kind of translation that has nothing to do with language like Spanish or French or Mandarin. This is about translating the college experience for students and their families.”

When Jack started at Amherst, he was lucky enough to know what office hours were because, although he had attended public schools in Miami through 11th grade, he transferred his senior year to a nearby private school, Gulliver Prep, after a bad experience with a football coach who didn’t value his academic skills. That one year — just one year — gave him a leg up navigating his way in college.

“My one year gave me such an advantage,” he says, noting that because of that year in private school, he puts himself in the privileged poor category. “My school had mandatory office hours for teachers. Because they did that, I was used to going not only to my academic adviser at Amherst, but also to the academic dean. It put me on a pathway to be a little more at ease at Amherst.”

While he was doing his research, he found that other privileged poor students felt the same level of comfort when it came to approaching faculty. He tells a story about a boy from a troubled neighborhood who attended an affluent boarding school. In college, the boy felt “empowered” telling professors he wanted to meet with them, and he had no qualms calling a professor on his cell phone for virtual office hours.

As Jack said, low-income kids who come up through the private school pipeline learn not only that it’s okay to reach out to faculty, but that it’s actually expected. In his research, he found that the privileged poor pattern with middle-class students in this way. In contrast, the doubly disadvantaged
Since then, Jack has been very forthcoming about sharing his personal narrative. He grew up in West Grove, a section of Coconut Grove that the Miami Herald dubbed “the Miami neighborhood that time forgot.” Some of Florida’s first black settlers, Bahamian natives, set roots there in the 1880s, and the area quickly became home for people who worked at the Peacock Inn or as nannies and butlers for the wealthy. He lived there with his sister and brother, a single mom, and his grandparents. His mom, Marilyn, worked security; his grandmother was a maid for a lawyer in nearby Pinecrest. He says the Wednesday before payday was often tough.

“When I go home, it’s one of those moments in which you remember the lived history of segregation, both racial and socioeconomic,” he says, “and you see the legacy of that.”

He started out as a Head Start kid, something he says he’s very proud of, and later spent most of his nonschool hours at nearby Elizabeth Virrick Park, a city-run playground that offered organized after-school and summer programs. One of the highlights was ceramics, something he did at Virrick from elementary to high school with a park leader named Gina Knowles.

“We would go there every day after school and stay with Gina. I never really talked about Gina before,” he says. “With her I made owl banks, chess sets, everything.” He pulls up photos on his phone of a few of his pieces, including a ceramic chef that holds cooking utensils and sits in the kitchen of his Cambridge apartment. There’s another of a Dalmatian dog he called Cookies and Cream that he gave to one of his elementary school teachers who recently shared a photo on Facebook.

“We used to stay at Virrick until 11 at night, when the lights went out, doing ceramics and playing flag football and card games like Spades and Tonk,” he says. “If I was doing any activity outside of home, it was at Virrick. It was a safe space to be creative.”

The neighborhood though, like many, skewed toward sports — something Jack liked but didn’t love.

“The neighborhood was one where if you were good at sports, everyone knew who you were — a classic tale,” he says. Frank Gore, a running back for the Indianapolis Colts, was a local kid. “Everyone knew Frank. He was a cool dude,” Jack says. “But I was a bookworm. I was always a nerd.” Because of his size — Jack is now 6’4” with a size 16 foot — his mother didn’t want him to play organized football with kids his age until freshman year in high school when he reluctantly joined to please his brother. “I enjoyed the camaraderie, but I still did ceramics.”

Football was what led him to private school.

“I had no intention of going to private school, but we had a football coach who only wanted you as an athlete-student. If you didn’t need the coach to go to college, he didn’t care,” Jack says. He was eventually cut from the team after a shoulder injury, and the situation led to what he calls a “bad breakup” with the school. He decided to leave. “I would have stayed. I was going to be a public school student my whole life.”

At Gulliver Prep, he says he was exposed to a lot, both good and bad. He got more attention from his teachers and thrived in small classes, but he says, “They weren’t ready for diversity. They didn’t know

“What Michelle Obama has done, especially for first-generation students, especially in higher education, has been phenomenal.”
What Jack does think is that we need to do a better job of equalizing the pre-college experience. Disadvantaged students shouldn’t have to be recruited into a program like Prep for Prep and leave the public-school system to get a good college education.

We also need to start telling the full story about disadvantaged kids and success. He talks about former Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick as a good example.

“Deval is one in a million,” he says. “He writes in his autobiography that he was so poor that he had to share a bed with his mother and sister or sleep on the floor — they had to alternate. It’s remarkable — a Horatio Alger story of someone who pulled himself up by his bootstraps. He’s a remarkable guy, but what happens when you frame him instead as someone who graduated from Milton Academy? All of a sudden you’re like, ‘Yeah, someone from Milton Academy went to Harvard Law School.’ How many times have we heard that story before?”

But they’re one and the same person, Jack stresses. “We love telling poverty stories of poor black people so that we don’t actually want to see any kind of diversity in that story. To tell you how life can be for someone who’s poor and black or poor and Latino — everyone wants to hear that — but to tell a story about how all of a sudden that person went to one of the oldest, most prestigious boarding schools in the country with a multimillion dollar endowment, then went to Harvard Law after Harvard undergraduate? That is real. My research shows that on average, 50 percent of the lower-income black students at elite colleges graduated from private high schools, which is remarkable. One-third of lower-income Latinos, on average, graduate from private schools. These are huge numbers. But we still want to say they have a singular experience. What I’m saying is not only do they not have a singular experience, but I’m showing just how different their experiences are [from one another]. I’m also using their experiences to show that where their experiences are different, their divergent pre-college experiences are shaping their sense of belonging in college and how they move through elite institutions.”

We also need to rethink what diversity means for colleges and universities. While higher education has made necessary strides in the past few decades, as Jack recently wrote in The New York Times, “they have thought less about what the inclusion means for academic life, or how colleges themselves might need to change to help the least advantaged on their road to success.”

In other words, achieving diversity alone isn’t the final answer, he says. “I don’t mean to sell it short, but creating a diverse class is easy. That requires money. That requires being able to say we’re going to recruit this many people and we’re going to take the cost of the school off the table. That’s easy compared to creating an inclusive community. I say time and time again, we need to move from diversity to inclusion. We need underrepresented students not only graduate, but also graduate whole and hearty. That’s a more noble goal in the end.”

After spending seven years as a resident tutor at Mather, one of Harvard’s undergraduate residential houses where he says he was allowed to be the “Glee-loving, Harry Potter-reading, House-watching person that students would geek out with,” he saw many doubly disadvantaged kids who didn’t feel whole and hearty. “Universities have a responsibility to say we’re not helping all of our students in a way that we should.”

Which is why he’s already gone to bat for them, first by helping to get the Harvard undergraduate dining halls to stay open during breaks so that low-income kids who aren’t going home or on vacation have a place to eat.

“I could talk all day about how these two groups experience college differently, but both groups go hungry during spring break,” he says, referring also the privileged poor. “I never say one is richer than the other. I say one has more cultural capital than the other. Both lack economic capital.”

He’s also mentoring future Ed School students. To one student from his home state, he said, “If you come here, I’m going to mentor you through the nonacademic side of Harvard. To know that now I’m in a position where not only can my research help colleges become more open and accessible to all of its students, but also my being here is making the place feel slightly more comfortable for some students” is amazing.

Quoting actress Viola Davis, he says, “Diversity is not a trending topic or something to be placed on the back burner as soon as the day is done. What we do here shapes conversations in ways we should never underestimate. I don’t take it for granted that the things we do here can shape the policies that a generation has to contend with. Which is why I’m very clear that I don’t think everyone should go to private
it’s a smart woman, and she worked at a public school for 30 years as a middle school security guard,” he says. “She knows, from an historical context, that public schools have been gutted. She saw that field trips ended. She saw that summer programs, which were for enrichment, not just catching up, ended. Now there’s nothing. She also drove me to private school and saw the difference.”

But that’s not the only reason she’s proud.

“She’s most proud that I found something that makes me happy. She always wanted us to do our best. She didn’t make us get certain grades. She loves that I’m loving what I do and that I’m still me. No matter what, I’m still me,” he says. This includes a continued love for all things Harry Potter. He even has a pair of Harry Potter Chuck Taylors given to him as a gift after officiating a wedding (he’s done five). Harvard College students have given a Ravenclaw beanie, an Elders Wand pen, and a Hogwarts computer decal. Even his favorite quote is from Hogwarts’ headmaster Albus Dumbledore: It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live.

“When I got to Amherst, I was working so much — four jobs — that I exhausted all of my financial aid work study funds in the first semester,” he says. “I got straight A’s that year, but I never got to know or explore Amherst. It reminded me to slow down. I so often am future-oriented that I forget to live in the present.”

He’s trying to do just that. These days, he takes long walks along the Charles (listening to Harry Potter books on tape), and treats students to dinners out as often as he can.

“The kind of conversation you have over a meal or baking is much deeper,” he says. It’s a lesson he learned from his grandmother, who taught him how to bake from scratch, including her famous pound cake. “With Swan Down flour, Land O’Lakes butter, and Dixie Crystals sugar,” he says. “If you came home with anything else, you had to go back out to the store.”

Although his star is clearly rising fast at Harvard (he also has a forthcoming professorship at Radcliffe and the Ed School recruited him two years before he’s slated to start) family has kept him grounded, says Amherst Professor Kristin Bumiller. She taught Jack in several of her courses and even now, a decade later, says her connection to him is “one of the strongest I have made during my long career teaching at Amherst.” He feels like family, she says, and he often visits for birthday parties and other events. (It’s one of the things he says he loves about Amherst College. “Relationships never end” at Amherst, he recently tweeted.) In turn, she follows his research and has gone to all his graduations. She knows his relatives. “After you meet his mother, you fully understand the secret to his success — it is founded in her enormous pride in his accomplishments, instilling the sensibility of always doing what is right and responsible, and the ability to put him in his place with the roll of an eye.”

It’s the eye roll that also keeps him grounded.

“When I go home to visit, I’m not Dr. Jack or someone who’s been in this paper or interviewed by this person,” he says. “I still take out the trash. The last time I went home, my mom made me catch an Uber. She didn’t even pick me up. I’m just me.”