



TRANSCRIPT

The Work Goes On

Guest: Judy Gueron

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Judy Gueron:

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Orley Ashenfelter:

Welcome to [The Work Goes On](#), a podcast from the [Industrial Relations Section at Princeton University](#). I'm your host, [Orley Ashenfelter](#), the Joseph Douglas Green 1895 Professor of Economics, emeritus at [Princeton University](#). In this podcast series of conversations with leading thinkers and practitioners, we are creating an oral history of an entire generation of industrial relations experts and labor economists whose contributions to their fields have been absolutely extraordinary. Our guest today is [Judith Gueron](#), who is Independent Scholar in Residence and President emeritus of the MDRC, [Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation](#). She's renowned for her work in program evaluation, especially for her work in the development of randomized trials for such evaluations. Judy, welcome to [The Work Goes On](#).

Judy Gueron:

Thank you.

Orley Ashenfelter:

It's great to have you here. Let's begin the discussion by talking about your background. Where did you grow up?

Judy Gueron:

I grew up in New York City, on the west side of Manhattan.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Interesting. So, you went to school in New York?

Judy Gueron:

I went to a small progressive private school from kindergarten through the end of high school, which was of mixed quality. Had some great people and some chaos, but it did its job.

Orley Ashenfelter:

And that was all the way through secondary school too?

Judy Gueron:

Yes, yes.

Orley Ashenfelter:

And then I know that you went to Radcliffe. How did that happen?

Judy Gueron:

Well, the greatest influence on my life was my father, who was the last of nine children, the only one born in the US, didn't speak English. His parents didn't until he got to school, never went to college, graduated high school at 16 and wanted to go to law school, but had to make a living. So, it was those values that he communicated that were always progressive, do your best, do the maximum. Never quit anything. He didn't have any sons, so he communicated this to daughters. So, the big picture was I went to Radcliffe because I heard it was the best, and my father told me I could do anything, but it was totally unfocused. I'd say that just as background to Radcliffe, this was a time when women... Really, it was a totally different time on the role of women and work, and Radcliffe was, I went there because it was the best and coed, and I thought it was a combination with Harvard, but Radcliffe was distinctly not equal to Harvard. And those things, I think, explain some of the wandering around that I've spent for years.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Where did your father come from?

Judy Gueron:

His family came from what is now Belarus, and as Jewish people subject to pogroms and all the rest. They left in 1905.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Oh, really? So, a long time ago.

Judy Gueron:

Oh yeah.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Long time ago. So, Radcliffe... Now you are a female economist of a certain age, and there aren't a whole lot, frankly, like you. Radcliffe. Did you take economics there?

Judy Gueron:

Yes. I took economics one freshman year. At one point John Dunlap invited... I might've been the only girl in the class. I mean, it was a huge class. I don't remember if there were other women. I took that

because in high school I had a teacher in my senior year who gave a brief course. He was the best teacher I've had my whole life, and he gave the best a sort of very brief course in economics in our senior history. And so, I took Economics I freshman year, and I loved it. So, Dunlap said, "why aren't there more women studying economics?" And my reaction was, "why should there be?" I mean, if you were good in math, you became a high school math teacher or something. Who told you anything about economics? I mean, when I grew up, I didn't know one working professional woman except our pediatrician. Zero. So, there was just no exposure to that. So, what were you going to do with economics? I had no idea.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Well, now this just continues because then you went to Harvard.

Judy Gueron:

To get a PhD, you mean?

Orley Ashenfelter:

Yeah.

Judy Gueron:

Yes, I did.

Orley Ashenfelter:

And if girls were short supply in the Economics I, I imagine they're pretty short supply in the graduate school.

Judy Gueron:

Absolutely. And I don't know if it was explicitly said it was two contemporaries who went to Harvard Law School that basically they were wasting a spot on you because you weren't going on to do anything anyway. So why were we bothering with you? And I have to say, I got probably the award for the best thesis, undergraduate thesis in economics. And I graduated first from Radcliffe, summa cum laude. I was a bang-up student because my father told me to do everything well. So, there for complex reasons, I applied to graduate school in economics. But I have to say I was drifting throughout this period because I had no idea that I would ever spend my whole life working, let alone have a career. And Orley, I never studied labor economics. I mean, when you introduced this as the background, I didn't have that background at all. I kind of blundered into the work and the rest is history in a sense.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Yeah, you learn as you went, I guess. So, your undergraduate thesis at Radcliffe, what did you write about?

Judy Gueron:

I thought I was very interested in the Soviet Union, and I took a lot of Russian, and I thought I was going to go to the Russian Studies Program, but then I married a European and that all changed. So, I wrote the undergraduate thesis on what was called Comecon, the economic block of the Eastern European countries. And I read the Russian. I read Bulgarian. I put statistics together. I worked hard on it.

Orley Ashenfelter:

It sounds like a, well, I have to admit, anybody who can read Bulgarian gets the a plus points for me. So now you're at Harvard. Who did you work with at Harvard, and what was it like as a woman?

Judy Gueron:

My whole Radcliffe/Harvard experience was in some extent... I got a reading list. I did all the reading. I was very conscientious. But it was self-study in a way. I mean, I went to lectures, but nobody paid any attention to me. It didn't matter how well you did or how brilliant you were, you weren't going to do anything with it. So, I don't know if I was just shy or what, but I never protested about anything because I was so, the crumbs were enough for the women at Radcliffe at that point, and to some extent at Harvard, but the crumbs were not equal.

Orley Ashenfelter:

So, who did you work with at Harvard?

Judy Gueron:

Oh, so I wrote a thesis with Richard Musgrave in public finance, but I left Harvard and Cambridge right after... I had one child already. I was married. I was married at 22. I mean, it's ridiculous. And I married a European. We lived in France. I had a traveling fellowship that I never took. And so, I then got to Harvard and wrote this thesis with Musgrave. But I was back in New York City by the time I had passed generals. So it was, again, a lot of aloneness working on something that I only finished really given my drifting nature of it was because my father sort of had taught me that we're not quitters. So, if you're not a quitter, you're going to finish the damn thesis. But where I was going with it was a mystery.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Oh, it's funny. Dick Musgrave was at Princeton before he was at Harvard, and I actually took a course from him.

Judy Gueron:

He was terrific.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Very interesting guy.

Judy Gueron:

Yes, yes. Yeah.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Well, one of the ex-pats from Europe, of course.

Judy Gueron:

Of course.

Orley Ashenfelter:

For good reasons. What did you write about? You had to write a dissertation. I know.

Judy Gueron:

Yes, of course. So, it was about how neighboring communities that benefit from public services should finance externalities and spillovers among communities. And frankly, I've never looked back on it, so I don't remember anything about it, but....

Orley Ashenfelter:

Local public finance, that was sort of in the air at that time. Yeah, people were talking about it. Well, now you leave Harvard. Well, you started working in New York, I guess.

Judy Gueron:

Yes.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Yes. Where did you start?

Judy Gueron:

I had some lucky breaks. When I finished the doctorate I had no idea what I wanted to do. You can do a million things with a PhD in economics. Fortunately for me in life, I had two lucky breaks. One was I had a friend working in the Lindsay Administration in New York City government, and he said, "you can get a job." And I said, "I got two kids now, both young. I won't work full time. I'll only work two or maybe three days a week." And I got a job in the Human Resources Administration for the administrator, Jules Sugarman, working in a new research organization set up then. And it was a time of a lot of hot shots working in that Lindsay administration, and I learned a hell of a lot about the welfare system, employment and training programs, statistics, public data files, how to organize them to answer important questions, and also communicating with senior government officials.

That served me very well. It served me well, both talking to welfare administrators later and testifying in Congress. So, I learned a lot of useful skills in this part-time job for the Lindsay administration. And then Lindsay was out. There was an election. I knew I had to leave because they just... My skills and the nature of things had changed. And then I caught another lucky break, which was the Ford Foundation was setting up this organization, MDRC, and they asked Jules Sugarman for a recommendation of someone to be the research director, and he recommended me. And I met with Dick Nathan and later Bob Solow and Gil Steiner and Bob Lampman and Eli Ginzburg and Phyllis Wallace, I mean the crew that was then the advisory committee to the Ford Foundation. And in some sense, my father's push, go to the best place, do well, all got me the job.

Orley Ashenfelter:

That's interesting. Well, of course, I want to talk to you about the MDRC because you were there from the beginning and until it became quite an established organization. How did it get started? I know there was funding from the Labor Department at some point, but how did it get started?

Judy Gueron:

So, the Ford Foundation, the Vice President for National Affairs, Mitchell Sviridoff, Mitch Sviridoff, had this idea of replicating a program that had been run in New York City across the country as a

demonstration, but he had a loose idea of demonstration. He didn't think of a randomized control trial to test this, but Bob Solow and Bob Lampman said, "if you're going to test this idea across the country with what turned out to be 15 or so sites, and you want to figure out whether it works for ex-offenders, ex-addicts, long-term welfare recipients, and disadvantaged youth, you need a strong design. It's not going to make a big difference, and you've got to be able to say with confidence that it made a small difference." And so, they were pushing for a random assignment trial. I got there, and there was no staff at MDRC, but we had control of a large pot of money from the Ford Foundation and six federal agencies, something like 80 million dollars, which was real money in 1974, 60 plus million of it was to go to sites to run this program. And it turned out to be a pivotal social experiment. It was the first time that this technique had moved out of researcher academic control into the real world of operating social programs. Supporter work was going to be run by community organizations, and you were going to impose on them that they had to take people in under random assignment. And I was very fortunate, given how little I knew when I got there because I don't even think I'd studied the negative income tax experiments and I had not studied labor economics. But at that point, MDRC wasn't doing the research. A team at Mathematica Policy Research and the University Wisconsin were going to do the impact evaluation of supported work. I was supposed to direct them up.

Orley Ashenfelter:

We should say this was, I think it was called the National Supported Work Program, wasn't it?

Judy Gueron:

The National Supported Work Demonstration. Yes.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Demonstration.

Judy Gueron:

And I was very fortunate that the principal investigator was Rob Hollister, and you must know Rob, and he was just a fantastic teacher, and I was like a sponge. I learned it all, and I became a complete convert in the course of that project to the power of a random assignment design because of the nature of the findings. But when we went out to do it in these... get community organizations around the country to agree with it, we were called everything from Nazis to, this was like the Nuremberg trial. We were experimenting on people in the real world. So, we had to sell them on the fairness, the equity of this method of selecting people because there were always going to be a limited number of slots and this randomness is fairer than many other techniques. And the whole idea of the experiment... It was after the Great Society, after a view that there'd been a lot of research, but there was a lot of conflict about whether what was definitive.

And there was a general sense that nothing worked. So, the determination in Supported Work was to do it right, have a big enough sample, follow people long enough, high quality data, deal with all the skepticism about why other studies were considered, you know led to arguments about methodology. We were going to be definitive, and we managed to convince the sites and to discipline the process so that it was a high integrity impact study and benefit cost study building on the experiment. And the results were such that it was so clear that you would've reached the wrong conclusions had you not had a randomly selected control group because the group that had the largest impacts for which the program made the largest difference was the long-term welfare recipients, but they had the lowest post-program success. So, if you hadn't had the control group, you would've concluded that the program

had failed with them. But we had the control group. So, it really showed to me and to those of us involved in doing this study of the vital nature of having random assignment because you never could have, we felt predicted that that would've been the outcome, and that the groups that had the highest outcomes had the lowest impacts.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Well, it's interesting because now you probably don't pay much attention, but randomized trials, field trials, are done rather commonly in economics. It's hard to pick up a journal without seeing some examples. Some of them are like what you did, but some of them are quite different. And there was always pushback, I know, at the beginning. I advocated randomized trials when I was in the Labor Department in the 70s. There was always pushback. Some of it was about the issue that hung over everyone, this idea of the medical trials where people have been forced into doing things they shouldn't. And that was a totally bogus argument, but nevertheless, it was made. But it took a really long time before it became common in typical economic analysis. And now some people think that it's too common, that there's too much. Yeah, because there may be questions you can't really tackle that way and they may get missed. So, tell me a little bit more. I'm very curious. Supported Work. What was it? What was that? What was the program?

Judy Gueron:

It was 12 or 18 months of structured employment for very disadvantaged groups that were out of the labor market when they got into the program. And it had elements of peer support and close supervision, and the idea was that they would go on to get jobs afterward and for the welfare recipients move off public assistance. And it didn't work for the other groups because the control groups did so well without the program. For welfare recipients it did work, but it was expensive. And then came the Reagan, well, eventually the Reagan administration and the election in 1980, and it never was expanded as a national program.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Now the MDRC then went on to do many more, not always randomized trials, I guess, but quite a few. What would be, what's your memory of the follow-on work that was done at that time?

Judy Gueron:

What MDRC grew into and why there were 40 years of uninterrupted random assignment studies in the welfare field was because despite what was very strong opposition to this technique, particularly from econometricians who thought it wasn't necessary or more qualitative researchers who thought it answered the wrong questions. But a reason it went on was that during the Reagan administration, there was a huge cutback in funding for social science research. MDRC fired 45 percent of our staff. And Congress passed a law that the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act giving states flexibility to employ Workfare programs to get people off of welfare. And having just fired 45 percent of the staff, MDRC put together the idea, which was a departure for us because we'd always tested until then, if you will, progressive ideas that clearly were intended, whether they succeeded or not, to improve the wellbeing of people. Workfare was not such an idea.

It was an idea to get people off of public assistance. And we decided to approach the Ford Foundation for what was a really pretty small grant to try to capture what states did under the new flexibility that the 1981 law gave them to turn these relatively conservative programs into social experiments. In the sense, to hijack the state programs and convince administrators to turn them into social experiments.

And that was really a feat. We had very little money, no money for the states. I mean a three and a half million dollar grant to cover what studies that eventually involved 35,000 people. So, a lot of people. So, it led to a very different vision, which I think transformed the field and the scale of what we did because we eventually did experiments involving 55,000 people across the country. I mean, these were big deal projects. And that while it changed over time, and we were always had a view that each project that MDRC was going to be involved in should push the agenda forward and address new questions.

But the change was – answer a few key questions well. You're not going to be able to answer everything because you can't do surveys. You have to use administrative records and combined with random assignment, and convert that into a low-cost, high-quality way to follow people over years and look at the short and long-term effects of what these states were going to do, and in the process, convert the states into partners in these random assignment studies. And that took two years in visiting 30 states to finally recruit eight that would go along with us. And the welfare commissioners were really the heroes of the story because why would you do this? It seemed so difficult, and they would say unnecessary, and my challenge was to convince them that it was necessary despite all the econometricians at the same time saying they could get the answers without this.

I acted as if there was no dispute among economists because what was I supposed to do with that, and that if they wanted to find out whether their programs worked, this was the way to do it, and I could use the data from Supported Work to show them what happens with the control group and that they're not going to know whether their program made a difference unless they have a randomly assigned control group. And besides, which folks, you're never going to have the resources to serve everybody on your caseload. So, at the welfare office, among in all the tension and helter skelter process of welfare intake, we're going to add in random assignment. And incredibly enough, we found eight welfare administrators that would do that and let us randomly assign tens of thousands of people. And it really was pathbreaking in that it showed what worked and what didn't, that impacts were relatively modest, but we always pushed for a cost-benefit analysis, which I believe was instrumental, which built on the random assignment for both the costs and the benefits, and that these programs sometime were cost effective and that they could reduce welfare and sometime increase employment.

Orley Ashenfelter:

I'm always curious about why people can be convinced into, it's not such a common problem today, but at the time, I'm always curious about what convinced people to do it. So, of the eight, what do the eight have in common that you could explain why they were willing to do things with randomized trials?

Judy Gueron:

Well, part of it was that although the Reagan administration... Workfare was not something,...all these commissioners knew that the welfare population is very diverse and that this was not going to be some kind of Swiss cheese solution for everybody that you just go out.... And they also knew that running Workfare, suddenly you're supposed to run Workfare for tens of thousands of people in your state. How are you going to do that? That costs money. The idea that it's cheaper to run a workfare program-- they also knew that was complicated. So, in some sense, the welfare administrators were not against the idea of being able to say to their state legislatures, "we're going to try out this great new idea, but we're going to do it as a demonstration at a certain scale, and we're going to find out whether it works or not, and we're going to report back to you."

And their major problem was that while they were doing this, other administrators, for example, the one running Dukakis's program in Massachusetts could cite that I got 50,000 people off of welfare this year. Whereas in our studies, we were saying 40,000 of those would've left welfare anyway. I mean, so it

put the administrators, I mean, they kept saying, “give us some way to defend ourselves against these claims.” But nonetheless, Bill Clinton's Arkansas program and other states across the country participated in this. And the other thing that began to happen is those are the only states anyone talked about afterward because they were the only states with reliable findings. So, there was a halo that you got from being part of this Ford Foundation-funded randomized trial of welfare reform programs. So, many things happened. And then of course, eventually after Robert Lalonde at Princeton did his work using the Supported Work data to show that these econometric solutions didn't easily mimic the results from an experiment and you weren't going to be able to figure out which statistical technique got you the right answer so easily.

And there was also two large studies that came out. One from the National Academy of Sciences about youth programs operated during the late 70s and early 80s. Rob Hollister was the chairman of that committee that concluded the only studies you believed was the one using random assignment, and you didn't really believe the results of the others. And then the fact that the Department of Labor had spent tens of millions of dollars studying the CETA data set at the CLMS study and basically produced not a number they could defend for Congress. So, the power of the random assignment studies and the evidence that the alternatives didn't tell you convincingly whether something worked helped make heroes out of these welfare administrators, which they loved.

Orley Ashenfelter:

We should say that CETA was the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, as I recall, that followed up on the other one, the MDTA, which was the Manpower Development and Training Act. I'm so glad you mentioned Bob Lalonde. He was a student of ours at Princeton, of course, and I always thought that work had bigger influence than most people were aware of, but it was certainly in its time, kind of a wakeup call for a lot of people in the business of econometrics itself. Now, of course, most econometricians spend their time trying to explain how to make randomized trials better, so it's not like something wasn't accomplished. Well, we've taken a long time. We're just about to the end of our podcast. And I wanted to ask you, as a woman in economics early on, I wanted to go back to that time because you were unique. Were there any other women in your class at Harvard?

Judy Gueron:

Yeah, I hear you. You mean in my PhD class?

Orley Ashenfelter:

Yeah, yeah.

Judy Gueron:

Yes. There was one, Susan Shimelman, whose brother was, I think, an economist. I forget his name, and she may have been it. We were few.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Very few. I know. I've had on the podcast a few women from that same generation, and some of them are, they're willing to call out some bad behavior that they saw in their own programs, and you haven't done that. So, I take it that whatever happened wasn't bad enough to make you angry with the program itself.

Judy Gueron:

Basically, that's right. I mean, I had no harassment incidents like that. None of that happened. But I don't know, Orley, maybe I was very shy at the time. I don't think so. But no one ever, as an undergraduate or a graduate, talked to me about the opportunities that I could have in this field or suggested, and I had zero contact outside of the classroom and listening to lectures and things. I had zero contact. When you look at the books that Harvard puts together, red books of comments around special commencement events, and you read what men say and what women say. I was the class of '63 at Radcliffe, so you can sort of get the timing, and men talk about sitting around with their faculty advisors and their professors over a meal. Never did one faculty person ever sit down for a meal with us. I mean, there was just no interaction. So, it was a lonely business.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Well, obviously, and of course, you've done so well with the MDRC. I mean, it's probably one of the... I'm sure you're very pleased. That's a great accomplishment in having done something that really changed the way social scientists do their work.

Judy Gueron:

Orley. So far, we've talked mainly about me, but I need to make clear that MDRC's track record of implementing randomized controls trials of increasing scale and complexity, and I'm talking about tens of thousands of people across the country, was no solo achievement. The entire organization, aided by farsighted, philanthropic and government funders, made that breakthrough possible. So, my story is really their story.

Orley Ashenfelter:

It's really been great to talk to you, Judy. I really appreciate your coming on and talking frankly about these matters. I think it's wonderful.

Judy Gueron:

Well, thank you, Orley. It's been a delight. A real delight.

Orley Ashenfelter:

Our guest today has been [Judy Gueron](#), president Emeritus of the MDRC, [Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation](#). Please join us again for the next episode of "[The Work Goes On: an Oral History of Industrial Relations and Labor Economics](#)" from the [Industrial Relations Section at Princeton University](#). I'm your host, Orley Ashenfelter. Thanks for listening.

Announcer:

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