



TRANSCRIPT

The Work Goes On

Guest: Solomon Polachek

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Solomon Polachek

The interesting piece I did in my dissertation that I felt was interesting was why it is that men and women have different wages via the human capital model. And the explanation I gave is basically division of labor in the home. So, the question is why is there division of labor in the home in the first place?

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 [Solomon Polachek](#), who is Distinguished Professor of Economics at [Binghamton University of the State University of New York](#). He also served as Dean of [Harpur College at Binghamton](#). He is renowned for his work in labor economics on a very wide range of topics. Sol, welcome to [The Work Goes On](#).

Solomon Polachek

Well, thank you very much and thank you for inviting me. It's a real pleasure.

Orley Ashenfelter

I'm so glad to have you. Let's begin the discussion by talking about your background. Where did you grow up?

Solomon Polachek

I grew up in Washington DC if you're familiar with the area. My parents lived in Alexandria, Virginia when I was born, then moved to Langley Park, Tacoma Park, then Silver Spring, I went to school at Montgomery Blair High School. The famous person in my graduating class was Goldie Hahn, but I didn't know her because the class had about 800 students. And then I went on to George Washington University, and I loved Washington DC. It was a fantastic place to grow up. They had museums galore, most of them were free. And then the other interesting thing is that we were able to take the bus downtown. Kids were allowed to do that in those days, and I was able to sit in on Senate hearings, sit in

on the House, sit in on the Senate itself, and it was easy to even talk to Congress people and senators. So, I enjoyed growing up in Washington.

Orley Ashenfelter

I know a little about that period because I was in the government in 1972 and it was still kind of like that, sort of a glorious, easy place for a kid to survive, and my kids were happy there too. So, now I know you went to George Washington. Why did you go there, next door to your house?

Solomon Polachek

That's correct. It was not quite next door to my house. There were really two universities that most of the people in my group went to, either the University of Maryland or George Washington. I chose George Washington in part because I had a few friends that were going there. And it turned out that I really liked George Washington University, and I think I got an excellent education. I was worried about it when I went to graduate school, but it turned out that I did OK in graduate school. So, I learned a lot at GW.

Orley Ashenfelter

And you went to Columbia. How did that happen because it was the great moment at Columbia's history, wasn't it?

Solomon Polachek

Yeah, so it actually was a very special moment. Why did I go to Columbia? There are a couple few reasons. One is that when I was an undergraduate, I took one of my courses in microeconomics. One of the textbooks of the course was Bill Vickrey's [Microstatics](#), and I don't know if you remember that book, but it had all these kinds of wonderful graphs in it that were basically three dimensional. And of course, Bill Vickrey taught at Columbia University. Of course, another reason is that my father did his Ph.D. in math at Columbia University. And a third reason is I went to visit Columbia University when I was thinking of going there. And that was the day that Reuben Gronau was giving a seminar in the Labor Group, and I actually fell in love. Well, let me tell you what the seminar was about.

It was basically his Ph.D. dissertation, which was on estimating the demand for SST travel. And so, he was using Becker's time allocation model to get estimates for the demand for SST travel. And I thought that that model was absolutely super fantastic. And in part because when I was an undergraduate, what hooked me on economics was learning about utility theory and allocation of resources. And when I was an undergraduate and thinking of utility theory, it was a kind of a period in time when I was finding myself and I was thinking of commodities, not just what we buy in the store, but how we allocate our time, who our friends are, how much time I spend with this friend compared to that friend. And so, I thought this notion of shadow prices were really interesting, but I couldn't put my finger on it when I was an undergraduate. But hearing Gronau's seminar helped me put a finger on the notion of shadow prices, which therefore I found absolutely fascinating.

Orley Ashenfelter

Gronau, of course, is [in our podcast series](#), and he was always a charming guy and probably gave a charming talk. We should probably tell people what an SST is. Doesn't that mean supersonic transit or something...

Solomon Polachek

Supersonic transport, yeah. So, we don't have them anymore, but those were the planes that were going like Mac two, twice a speed of sound or two-point-one times the speed of sound. They turned out to be dangerous.

Orley Ashenfelter

And I think actually Gronau argued against the Concord and all the rest on the grounds that the timesaving wasn't worth it.

Solomon Polachek

Yeah, that might've been the case.

Orley Ashenfelter

I vaguely remember him talking about that too. So, you were at Columbia and then somehow you went there and you got attracted, I guess, to the Labor Economics group, which was quite an extraordinary group at that time.

Solomon Polachek

It was definitely an extraordinary group. I mean the people that were there, I mean between Gary Becker, Jacob Mincer, but then Finis Welch used to come, Barry Chiswick, Bill Landes, Isaac Ehrlich, Bob Michael, and many, many more people. [Inaudible]

Orley Ashenfelter

Was Jim Heckman there yet?

Solomon Polachek

Jim Heckman was not there yet. He came when I was a graduate student later on, I think maybe in year two or three, probably year three when I was a graduate student.

Orley Ashenfelter

Because you did write a paper with him.

Solomon Polachek

We did write [a paper](#) together. That's correct. It is an interesting paper, and mostly his idea, I will say, and that was at a time when Jacob Mincer was very much interested in, of course, earnings functions. He was always interested in earnings functions. So, at the time, I think there were three kinds of specifications for earnings functions. One was a linear-linear specification. Another was a log-log specification, and then another specification was Jacob Mincer's log-linear specification. So, the idea was to see which specifications seemed to be right empirically. And at the time, Jim Heckman is a superb econometrician. He is, was talking about Box-Cox transformations of dependent variables, and there was also Box-Tidwell transformations of independent variables. So, the idea was to use these transformations to test out which specification had the highest likelihood.

Orley Ashenfelter

Jacob probably would've been happy if you found that it was log-linear.

Solomon Polachek

Well, that's exactly what we found, that it was log-linear seemed to work the best.

Orley Ashenfelter

So, you ended up working with him, I guess Jacob Mincer.

Solomon Polachek

I ended up working with Jacob Mincer. That's a long story though...

Orley Ashenfelter

Is that right? He's a legendary... In some ways, I think the earnings function, that earnings is a function of education and experience, has almost replaced the angle curve as the most commonly agreed upon empirical analysis that you can find everywhere in the world basically, and is used by lots and lots of people. I think now without even probably realizing how much, much energy he put into it. I know you wrote a whole book about it. How did you come to work with him? What'd you think of him?

Solomon Polachek

Okay. Well, it's a long story of how I got to work with Jacob Mincer. I started out thinking that I was going to work with Gary Becker actually. And so, when I was doing my dissertation and I'm not sure why I did it on gender differences, but I think it might've been because Becker said that that would be a good topic. In fact, three people were working on gender differences when I was there. One was Harriet Zellner and the other was Lisa Landes. We both did, all three of us did different kinds of things. But originally I was going to work with Gary Becker, and the idea that I started with was I even wrote a paper on it, and that was more of a theory of prejudice. So, at the time, this was maybe about eight or nine years after George Stigler's article on search theory.

So, I devised this kind of search theory model of prejudice, which I wrote up, and it turned out that by the time I finished my dissertation, someone else had already thought of the idea and perhaps better, and that's called statistical discrimination now. But anyway, Becker then left Columbia University and went to Chicago. So, I obviously could not, or I did not think I could work with Gary Becker. So, I had to work with Jacob Mincer. And I mean that was a very good choice, I must say. But when I was working with Jacob Mincer, the idea was he likes earnings functions. So, I had thought I had to do something with an earnings function. And of course, as you said, earnings functions are basically, the log of earnings is a function of school and experience, experience squared. So, the question is what would I do which would make it unique and interesting?

And so, the innovation that I had, I thought, was to put in an interaction term. So, I put in a variable called, we called it sex at the time, but it's gender. And then I put in marital status, and I interacted marital status and gender, and then found out that the wage gap between men and women vary dramatically between singles and marrieds. So, the wage gap between singles was, I don't remember it exactly, it was probably about 10 percent, but the wage gap between married men and married women was more like about 60, 65 percent. And so, the interesting question is, is that clearly discrimination varies by marital status or there's got to be something else which explains the gap in wages between men and women. And so, I thought that there must be something else, and therefore I got involved with thinking about human capital theory.

And so, what I did is... Well in the background, the interesting thing is at the time there was a lot of work on labor force participation. So, you well know about [the Bowen and Finegan book](#), which dealt with all

kinds of models or empirically looking at labor force participation of men and women, and people were plotting out lifetime labor force participation rates. So, basically what happened is I noticed that the labor force participation rates over the lifetime of single men and single women varied and married men and married women varied. And so that was a piece of information. The other important article that came out was [Yoram Ben-Porath's lifecycle model of investment in human capital](#). And so, what I then did is I linked the two and said that the difference in lifetime labor force participation between men and women, especially the married versus single, could explain the differences in the marginal gain of investment in human capital, and that led to a theory of human capital explanation to the gender difference in wage. And so, that turned out to be the main part of my dissertation. Eventually it was published in the IER, which is the same journal that Ron Oaxaca published his decomposition. That's why I put it there. I'm not sure it's read as much as it should be, or it's not read as much as Ron Oaxaca's piece. But what it did actually is it certainly, I liked that piece. The one I did, I like both pieces, but I liked the piece that I did very much because it actually explained pretty much a hundred percent, well, maybe 90 percent of the gender wage gap.

Orley Ashenfelter

Now, you finished your dissertation. I know you didn't start off at Binghamton. Where did you go first?

Solomon Polachek

Well, after getting, well, the first job I guess was really a postdoc at the University of Chicago. And then after that I went to Chapel Hill and I spent a long time at Chapel Hill, probably about 10 years, and then went to Binghamton.

Orley Ashenfelter

North Carolina at Chapel Hill. What did you think of being there that must've been a little different for a George Washington Columbia University person?

Solomon Polachek

I actually liked Chapel Hill a lot, and we had a very, very good group. One of the reasons I chose Chapel Hill, actually, funny reasons, but one of the reasons was that it had the kind of IBM computers that was compatible with all the data that I was using. So, if you go back to the old old days, universities had different kind of computer systems, either a Burrows computer, Remington Ranch computers, but I was so used to using IBM computers. That was an important draw. And at the time, actually, Chapel Hill University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill had two computer systems. They had what's called Tuck, the Triangle University's computer systems, which was a combination of NC State, Chapel Hill, and maybe some other universities, and then Chapel Hill had its own computer system, but it was all, they were all IBM based, so that was very helpful.

The other reason was, well, there's probably two other reasons. One is that NC State had a couple or a few good people that were working in lifecycle models. Tom Johnson, I don't know if you remember him, Dudley Wallace, Loren Ihnen, and then there was a labor economist Bob Fearn. And so, they had a very good group of labor economists. Chapel Hill did not have any good labor... or did not have any modern labor economists at the time. They had one person in historical labor economics. So, I thought that it would be a good place for me to do my own thing and be able to do my own thing. Then there was another reason I went to Chapel Hill because on the fly out, Chapel Hill has a hotel pretty much right on campus called the Carolina Inn. I don't know if you ever saw it or stayed in it, but it's right on campus. And so, after the interview and after dinner, I went back to my room, but I wanted to go back and look

at the department. And when I went back to the department, I saw a couple people working there at night, which is what I used to do. So, that was Richard Sheffler, who was a health economist who was now at Berkeley, was there working at night. And I said, well, if this is a place where people work at night, this is a place for me.

Orley Ashenfelter

That sounds pretty good. But you did leave North Carolina and then ended up at Binghamton. How did that happen?

Solomon Polachek

That's a good question. Well, I think I know how it happened. I took the job offer....

Orley Ashenfelter

You didn't go for the weather.

Solomon Polachek

I didn't go for the weather. But what happened was there were a few things. One is we had a really good group at Chapel Hill, but it was beginning to disintegrate. For example, Peter Schmidt went to Michigan State, Bob Strauss went to Carnegie Mellon and other people had left. And so, there were people that were leaving North Carolina. That was one reason. Another reason was my wife didn't particularly like the humidity in the summer, and that played a role. And then our son was about age five, and I knew that if I was going to move, that was the year I was going to move because I didn't want to interrupt his schooling and a number of schools... I had some offers, but Binghamton came up with a really good offer and it was close enough to New York City for my wife to like it. Her family or her relatives were in New York City, and it was far enough from New York City that I could like it as well because I'm not a big, big city fan because I don't like the high cost of crowds and dealing with shopping in a crowded place and all that.

So, Binghamton seemed pretty ideal. The other thing about Binghamton is it had a few good people that I liked. There was a guy named Phillip Nelson who did stuff on search theory and then a former classmate of mine, Hiam Ofek, was at Binghamton as well. And then also Stan Masters, who at one point edited *The Journal of Human Resources*, was at Binghamton. So, that was one factor, and the other factor was it was very, very close to Cornell. And so, what I actually did when I first got here is I used to commute up to Cornell for the weekly labor group. What I did is I took my Ph.D. students, we got a state car, and we were able to park close to the labor group at Cornell, so I didn't have to waste a lot of time walking from a parking space to the seminar. And what we did in the car with our Ph.D. students is we talked about their dissertations on the way up and on the way back we talked about the seminar. So, it turned out to be pretty productive.

Orley Ashenfelter

And of course, that group, the labor group there was evolving to become quite an impressive group on its own at that time. We used to have an annual conference, Princeton versus Cornell.

Solomon Polachek

That's right.

Orley Ashenfelter

We'd all drive up there and kind of did this, although it was a heck of a lot longer drive from Princeton than it was from Binghamton. So, you stayed there a long time and I noticed that you even won a teaching award.

Solomon Polachek

That's correct.

Orley Ashenfelter

How did that come about? Who gets to choose?

Solomon Polachek

Actually, I won two teaching awards here. One is the student... The first one, the students voted every year. It was a department one, and the students voted for the professor that apparently they liked the best. So, I guess I was either the easiest grader or the most charming or something, and so they voted me in. And then the second time was a little bit more complicated. Someone had to nominate me and then it had to go through the university and then the chancellor's office. So, that's how it came about.

Orley Ashenfelter

You've also been involved with this research and labor economics volume. Are you still involved with it?

Solomon Polachek

I am still involved with it. I'm going to try to sort of gradually un-involve myself. Now we have a co-editor from Binghamton, David Slichter, who's very good, very smart, and a really keen labor economist, and hopefully he will gradually take over the reins of that thing. It was affiliated with IZA, but since IZA is getting out of existence, we're going to be more on our own, and Binghamton University is going to really host the research library.

Orley Ashenfelter

How long have you done that?

Solomon Polachek

I've done that since about 1995... Or for me, it started at one of the latter conferences the Princeton-Cornell Conference. And I think the first volume that I did was basically the papers from that conference. I think it was about 1995 or so, '96. And so, I've been doing it since then, but with other people too.

Orley Ashenfelter

The papers have had, I think, a big influence because you really permitted people to write much longer papers than they ever would be able to get away with in a journal. And I think that probably meant that some of the papers you publish are unique in that they could not have really appeared in a normal journal. Do you feel the same way?

Solomon Polachek

That's probably the case. I think Ron Ehrenberg, who started research and labor economics, was really the person who really promoted that. And I do feel the same way. We're trying to try to be as unique as we can, but yet we also want to be more like a journal so that people feel that their work will be well read and important.

Orley Ashenfelter

And it's always a lot of work to do stuff like that. Are you still working in the human capital area?

Solomon Polachek

I am still working in the human capital area and other areas as well. As I said, the interesting piece I did in my dissertation that I felt was interesting was why it is that men and women have different wages via the human capital model. And the explanation I gave is basically division of labor in the home. So, the question is why is there division of labor in the home in the first place? Well, if you go back, it basically starts that men have a higher wage than women at the outset of marriage. And that might be a good reason why men should, or men, they don't do that as much nowadays, but in the old days, why men specialize more in market activities than home activities. So, the question is why is it that men have a higher wage than women at the outset of marriage? And it turns out that if you look at marriages or the average age of marriage for men and women, it turns out that within marriages, men in the U.S. are about two years older than wives. And it's true that in every single country, except for one, the husbands are older than the wives. And that one country where husbands are not older than the wives, I bet you can guess it's a small teeny country near Portugal. San Marino. San Marino is the only country where on average husbands are not older than their wives.

Orley Ashenfelter

That's barely a country.

Solomon Polachek

But, so the stuff I've been working on lately is why is it that husbands are older than their wives would be one topic and then testing out some implications.

Orley Ashenfelter

It's interesting, isn't it? Their husbands usually have to be taller than their wives too.

Solomon Polachek

Well, that might be the case as well.

Orley Ashenfelter

If you never noticed that, but it's not clear why that has to be, but it does seem to be a custom. We're coming to the end of our podcast. And there is one other thing I wanted to ask you about that's associated with work that you've done as an academic. I didn't realize this, that you'd been Dean of Harpur College. How did you get into that position? What does it entail? What is Harpur College?

Solomon Polachek

Well, [Harpur College](#) is the arts and science college of the university. So, the university has an engineering school, a school of education. What else? It had five schools, a business school, and the arts

and science college was basically about 67 percent of the whole university. So, I tried to do my administrative duties as serving as a Chair. And I guess in my second year as Chair, the dean of Harpur College resigned and they had to pick a new dean, and often they pick a dean from the outside, so they do a national search. This time they wanted to pick an internal person. So, I guess I was nominated along with about two other people, and they ended up picking me, and I'm not sure I wanted to do it, but the logic was as follows. Some people spend their whole life trying to be a dean and they never get the opportunity, and here this opportunity was put in my lap. So, I said, "well, why not try it? It's a free commodity and maybe I'll learn something and maybe I'd like it." Well, I actually did like it a lot in many ways. I thought that what I would not like is dealing with alumni and raising money. And I thought what I would love is dealing with faculty. Well, it turned out that it was kind of the opposite. Faculty, which I really do love the faculty, but they're very needy in many ways, and they want things...

Orley Ashenfelter

Well, people call it, it's like herding cats.

Solomon Polachek

But it turns out that the alumni were really fascinating because the alumni that you meet are basically the ones that really loved going to Binghamton University and they want to give back, and they all have very interesting stories because these are the successful alumni. And so, I kind of really enjoyed that part a lot. I, of course, stopped being dean after a while because I felt that my skills as an academic economist were depreciating. That was a time when I think the field was changing dramatically going into mostly because of you, I think, going into more quasi experimental-type analysis. And so that was one big change that I didn't want to lose out on. The other big change, I think, was that we were going from mainframe computing to more PC computing, and there were a number of new programs coming into being, Stata being one, and others. And so, I thought that my skills were depreciating. I spent all this time doing economics, and I love economics, and so I didn't want my skills to depreciate further and so that caused me to go back and do academics.

Orley Ashenfelter

Yeah, that's one reason people often say that they don't want to stay in the government too long, that you kind of use up your skills, you consume them rather than add to them. I had the opposite experience, but I only stayed in the government for about a year, and it was a particularly interesting period for me because it gave me the chance to get connected to some data that was at the very beginning of the big data revolution.

Well, it's absolutely been a delight to talk with you, Sol. It's been such a pleasure that I hate to end it, but all good things come to an end.

Solomon Polachek

Yeah, well, it was a pleasure talking to you Orley. It always is. And I learned a lot the year that I spent at Princeton when you were there, and I thought you were a very excellent host and a very, very good mentor. So, I really enjoyed my year there very much.

Orley Ashenfelter

Thank you, Sol. Our guest today has been [Solomon Polachek](#), Distinguished Professor of Economics at [Binghamton University](#). 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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