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Universalism Contested: The Exclusivity of a Universal Basic Income

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Abstract

Universal basic income is recognized as an adequate response in fulfilling the needs of persons with disabilities. Proponents of basic income believe that it could potentially reduce financial strains often prevalent in the disability community and shift negative connotations currently attributed to persons with disabilities. My paper addresses the repercussions that could arise amidst the implementation of a universal basic income in Canada. My analysis indicates that the eventuality of basic income will not further the participation of persons with disabilities, nor will it address the lack of resources that are indispensable to the creation of meaningful and inclusive opportunities. Rather, I will demonstrate that a universal basic income would increasingly perpetuate the marginalization of persons with disabilities. This basic income would also render their participation within society difficult. In sum, I will argue that the implementation of a universal basic income in Canada would not respond to the systematic barriers that shape the participation of persons with disabilities within today's society.

Keywords: basic income, citizenship, disability, economy, participation

Universalism Contested:

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Increasing wealth inequalities have spurred debate about the universal basic income program. Current policies often do not meet the needs of various marginalized groups. As a result, proponents of universal basic income are advocating for its implementation so that all individuals become eligible to receive financial assistance, regardless of their personal circumstances. Such a program could potentially increase the level of social security for marginalized communities and reduce discrepancies of status throughout society. While some believe that this would lead to improvement in the lives of persons with disabilities, I disagree. I argue that the universal basic income program would not accurately address systemic barriers that are currently impeding the participation of persons with disabilities in their own communities and greater society.

In this paper, I delve into the intersection between basic income and the state of disability. My central argument is that the universal basic income model proposed by the government of Canada will not address the issues that are readily ignored through contemporary welfare programs, such as economic productivity and social production. The stigmatization of persons with disabilities would remain prevalent throughout the context of this social security. The universal basic income program overtly implies that these individuals are deemed incapable of being active participants within their own communities and the greater society. This program does not create meaningful opportunities for individuals that require further assistance to fully contribute in economic life and politics. Rather, empowerment would only emerge once government officials and policymakers shifted the social construct of disability as a form of divergence by portraying persons with disabilities as influential community actors and essential to the growth of society.

In section one of this paper, then, I analyze the impacts of current neoliberal arrangements on persons with disabilities, and describe how these factors impede the participation of these individuals within society. I also provide an overview of the contemporary welfare system in Canada, and indicate the ways in which universal basic income directly impacts the complete citizenship of persons with disabilities in a demeaning manner. In section two, I discuss the role of powerful political and social institutions that are predominantly involved with the current state of welfare. I will then identify how the understanding of disability is shaped by the actions of these institutions. Ultimately, I suggest a call to action that ensures a positive representation of disability in community participation despite the implementation of a universal basic income program.

To begin, the efficacy of the proposed universal basic income program is debated within marginalized communities. This program aims to deliver financial assistance to increase the well-being of all individuals in marginalized communities, such as the disability community, and to establish economic security standards across the province (Blau & Abramovitz, 2010, p. 29). The ideologies of welfare remain at the root of basic income. The goal of welfare in general, of which basic income is one possible component, is the implementation of various “benefits, programs and services” tailored to satisfy the common and primary needs of individuals living in marginalized communities (Blau & Abramovitz, 2010, p. 29). As such, proponents believe that the social security generated by welfare will reduce the inequalities within the realm of economic participation, which ultimately would abolish the presence of social problems (Blau & Abramovitz, 2010, p. 36). Moreover, it would ensure that individuals’ financial situations would not be compromised by lived experiences derived from marginalization. Such a view contributes to the portrayal of marginalized individuals as incapable of contributing to society and its

economy in meaningful ways. This represents a false dichotomy created by the state that appears to enhance the status of persons with disabilities.

Although this paper provides an analysis of the constraints imposed by a potential universal income benefit program upon the daily lives of persons with disabilities, I cannot deny that this type of social security could enhance the quality of life for these individuals in today's society. The urgency for a universal income benefit program arises from the recurring attempts of the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD) to "[eliminate] discrimination on the basis of disability and positively [promote] inclusion" (O'Reilly, 2007, p. 12). Integration of these components within contemporary legislation and policies demonstrates that the needs of persons with disabilities are considered by government officials in Canada and proponents of universal income benefit. Moreover, the potential universal basic income program highlights the importance of disability rights within today's society. Its implementation could contribute to the beginning of a positive social movement in regard to disability rights, and encourage inclusivity in all aspects of society with the creation of financial stability amongst marginalized communities. Universal basic income would ensure an economic and political development that remains mindful of the diversity of capability and needs that are present throughout all communities. Furthermore, the proposed universal income benefit program would recognize the influence of persons with disabilities pertaining to the relationship between "economic activity and political stability" (Blau & Abramovitz, 2010, p. 38), which is a reality that is often disregarded in contemporary political and social institutions. Hence, the creation of a universal basic income program would reinforce the necessity for persons with disabilities to obtain a source of income in a society that is economically driven. Persons with disabilities could contribute significantly to society if they received the means to engage with the economy, despite the reality of precarious employment. As such, the core of a universal basic income would

promote equality throughout society because it would create a minimum income standard for all individuals, including the disability community, despite different lived experiences (Dwyer, 2004, p. 11-12).

It remains indisputable that the current welfare system diminishes the capacities of persons with disabilities from reaching their greatest potential, and ultimately from participating within society (Griffo, 2014, p. 149). The current resource distribution fails to address issues of inclusivity in community participation. Such systemic barriers impeding access to participation further disable persons with disabilities, notably because of the absence of reasonable accommodations. They are thus barred from performing their participatory duties as citizens, which increases both their exclusion within society and their divergence from societal norms. Accordingly, persons with disabilities are perceived as victims of oppression because they cannot conform to dominant norms, such as contributing to society, while being recipients of welfare. This diminishes their societal value and impedes their growth in crucial economic, political, and social domains that provide context for community participation. Persons with disabilities are further disabled as a “result of the social and political inequality that exists” in society (Kennedy-Kish et al., 2017, p. 34), since it is perceived that they cannot contribute to the spheres of economy or politics in a meaningful manner.

The current welfare system renders the inclusion of persons with disabilities incredibly difficult because the major proportion of funds is allocated to financial assistance instead of to implementing a framework ensuring the availability of inclusive participation opportunities. Inclusive programming should be embedded in political and social institutions to facilitate community engagement of all individuals. Persons with disabilities should be at the forefront of community initiatives, instead of being portrayed as outsiders. This would notably reinforce the value of persons with disabilities in contemporary society. Alas, government expenditures are

increased because the welfare system, with its budget restrictions, cannot sustain the primary needs of all persons with disabilities (Kennedy, 2013, p. 43). Persons with disabilities are thus recognized as “a financial burden on society” (Griffo, 2014, p. 149). Government officials are contributing all available financial resources for marginalized communities to the welfare system, which ultimately annuls all other inclusion endeavours. As such, the distribution of resources is flawed because it does not account for the needs of persons with disabilities to function as fully recognized, well-rounded, and participatory citizens.

The current distribution of economic resources stems from dominant interests held by government officials and other prominent community actors. This is problematic, as it does not consider the lived experiences of persons with disabilities. This resource allocation has significant repercussions for the various benefits and services that are distributed to persons with disabilities, defining their undermined social status. The diverse realities of these individuals are not considered in a society in which the practices of economic productivity and political participation are held in such esteem. The potential for these individuals to actively participate in society is therefore hindered by the limiting conception of disability that is contextualized by welfare. As a result, the current distribution of government resources, driven by neoliberal principles, unfortunately represents the inequalities and restrictions of social policies in today’s society because it does not respond to the diverse needs of persons with disabilities. Thus, social security neglects to consider the potential contribution of these individuals, especially considering that participatory opportunities are characterized as fundamental components in the practice of citizenship. This absence of participation generates a debate regarding the significance of citizenship within society. Persons with disabilities cannot be considered active participants, since they are denied the possibility of fulfilling their duties as citizens (Dwyer, 2004, p. 12-13).

Ultimately, the absence of participatory opportunities can be attributed to the government's inadequacy in validating the importance of the disability community throughout society.

Contemporary welfare policies are currently shaped by condescending beliefs about disability that are perpetuated by government officials (Jongbloed & Crichton, 1990, p. 25). Such policies undermine the social status of persons with disabilities. This representation of disability is extremely problematic because of the power that these policies have. Based on these representations, many political and social institutions construct barriers that are inflicted upon persons with disabilities, such as the absence of facilitation in inclusive employment, positive social presence, and other community participatory opportunities. These institutions remain at the forefront of discriminatory policy implementation that prevents economic and social participation because they do not account for the diversified needs in today's society. As a result, persons with disabilities are politically silenced, as key actors in political and social institutions do not understand the importance of disability in the growth of society.

The negative influence derived from the possibility of a universal basic income program in the daily lives of persons with disabilities is shaped by the overwhelming presence of political and social institutions in all aspects of daily living. The hegemonic position of government welfare policies in the entire social hierarchy allows officials to be recognized as primary leaders of political and social change. Ultimately, this undeniable relationship signifies that legislation and policies implemented for persons with disabilities are derived from institutional assumptions that negate their capabilities to participate in society. Moreover, these legislations and policies do not allow for the potential of persons with disabilities to participate in the economy and political system.

Furthermore, the notion of power is deeply rooted in the potential universal basic income program. Decision-making and other policymaking pertaining to the community participation of

persons with disabilities reside exclusively in the control of individuals in powerful roles. Ideologies that drive current social security have been constructed by dominant attitudinal behaviours that undermine the presence of persons with disabilities. Individuals in powerful roles do not adequately analyze the repercussions that could potentially occur with the implementation of a universal basic income program, because this does not impact their assured participation within society. Persons with disabilities are absent from decision-making processes, because they are generally not considered active participants in society (Prince, 2009, p. 3-4). Their non-normative lived experiences are often viewed as divergent and are not considered as important in designing the current welfare state. Accordingly, the proposed universal basic income plan is controlled by conflicting interests, resulting in strains within the system that could be attributed to the inequalities between marginalized communities and powerful communities. While proponents recognize the benefits that could occur from universal basic income, the potential outcomes will not remove all participatory barriers currently faced by persons with disabilities. Individuals holding powerful roles in society do not comprehend the underlying causes of the prevalent discrepancy between themselves and persons with disabilities from the lack of inclusive participatory opportunities.

Persons with disabilities are constantly stigmatized by political and social institutions as incapable of engaging in daily life activities, and thus they are not considered productive members of society. Attitudinal behaviours and beliefs imposed by such institutions will potentially impede the willingness of persons with disabilities to achieve their fullest potential in both the economic and political realms. Rather, persons with disabilities are defined according to their disability by prominent decision-makers and policymakers alike, and illustrated as divergent, diminishing their mobilization throughout their communities and the greater society. The potential of a universal basic income program will further reduce inclusive opportunities for

persons with disabilities to actively participate in the growth of society, by reducing the necessity of inclusive participatory initiatives.

Within the current welfare state, allocated funds cannot be used to further meaningful participatory opportunities because this system is tasked to become an alternative to employment and other means of production, which impedes the possible contribution of persons with disabilities. Social benefits derived from the potential universal basic income cannot respond to the absence of these individuals in the realm of community and social participation. As such, disability scholars argue, “the welfare state has failed [persons with disabilities]” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 42). Notably, Mike Oliver mentions that the current support system is driven from a needs-based approach instead of focusing on the rights of persons with disabilities (Kennedy, 2013, p. 43). The welfare state does not maximize the capabilities of these individuals, because it does not facilitate their participation in daily life activities. Rather, this support system reduces the need and willingness of persons with disabilities to contribute meaningfully within their own communities and greater society. The fact remains that government officials are not held accountable to represent the diversified lived experiences that are prevalent throughout marginalized communities. The lack of knowledge pertaining to disability is embedded within the framework of influential legislation and policies, which precariously remain at the forefront of central debates regarding the proposed universal basic income program. Proponents believe that universal basic income will dismantle restrictions that are inflicted against persons with disabilities. However, I believe that it will further contribute to the systemic oppression of marginalized communities because it does not address barriers to community participation. The current welfare state is challenged by the disability community as it does not “[invest] in tackling disabling barriers [by] providing resources” (Kennedy, 2013, p. 44). The inadequacy of the state to promote engagement results in the absence of meaningful economic and political participatory

opportunities for persons with disabilities. The lived experiences and learned knowledge of these individuals are not perceived as valuable assets within communities, and thus their presence is considered a strain on economic and political resources.

Government officials and other influential proponents of the universal basic income program must recognize the oppressive measures that remain embedded within current legislation and policies derived from political and social institutions (Finsterbusch, 2011, p. 177). While proponents of the universal basic income program argue that social security is a critical component to furthering the participation of persons with disabilities, for the reasons enumerated above, I cannot consider this as a complete and viable option. The universal funding distribution would ensure that all individuals would have their basic financial needs met regardless of their lived experiences. However, it would seldom address their exclusion from economic and political opportunities that are offered within their own communities and throughout the greater society.

How could we conceptualize an inclusive and viable support structure? Government officials and other policymakers contributing to the framework of the universal basic income program must create inclusive opportunities that adequately respond to the needs of persons with disabilities. The possibility of community engagement would further facilitate the participation of all individuals in economic and political realms and allow the disability community to thrive in a growing and enriched society. Moreover, the active participation of persons with disabilities would highlight their citizenship rights, such as participating in economics and politics, that are often omitted within contemporary society. Disability rights activists must challenge contemporary benefit and income programs to dismantle normative beliefs about the prominence of disability within today's society.

The standards of living for persons with disabilities do not accurately represent their desire and potential to become active participants in their communities, and thus the conception

of disability is highly discriminatory. The significance of disability activism must be recognized by key actors and influential scholars, allowing persons with disabilities the opportunity to exhibit their learned knowledge and lived experiences in the realm of community engagements, policymaking, and beyond. Government officials, in turn, must recognize that current policies hinder the participation of persons with disabilities because they do not address the principal issues regarding the lack of diversification in essential spheres of society, such as community and societal initiatives. Proponents of the universal basic income program must ensure that persons with disabilities are offered the opportunity to achieve the highest quality of life possible within their own scope of capabilities and desires. Persons with disabilities must therefore be included in all economic and political relations embedded within their own communities and greater society, regardless of the implementation of a universal basic income program. Paid employment opportunities must be readily available to persons with disabilities, allowing them to thrive within the workforce. Government officials and disability rights activists must thoroughly collaborate with one another to acknowledge and address the urgency for inclusive practices within existing employment opportunities (Jackson, 2009, p. 149). The potential universal basic income program cannot be considered a substitute to active participation within the workforce, since access to the inclusive employment opportunities is key to attaining “social inclusion” and “economic interdependence” for all individuals (Lamichhane, 2015, p. 20). As such, adequate resources and supports must be offered to persons with disabilities, facilitating a meaningful participation within the workforce. Inclusive employment opportunities valorize the social roles of persons with disability and validate their significance within society. Community engagement through employment ultimately enhances their “self-worth” and empowers their “social interaction” amongst individuals who do not have a disability (Heyer, 2015, p. 188). Accordingly, the importance of collaboration between powerful individuals and marginalized individuals must be

reinforced within practices of daily living because there is an array of learned knowledge and lived experiences that can be integrated with legislation and policy implementations.

I believe that the proposed universal basic income program would be detrimental to the livelihood of persons with disabilities. While scholars believe that this type of social support would undeniably offer a financial stability currently absent from marginalized communities, I argue that the universal basic income program would fail to address systemic barriers that infringe upon participatory opportunities for persons with disabilities, such as the absence of an inclusive workforce. Social and political institutions, including government agencies and non-profit organizations, must be held accountable in representing the diversified interests and needs of all individuals. In sum, disability rights activists much challenge the objectives shaping universal basic income and ensure that its implementation does not compromise the daily lives of persons with disabilities. The learned knowledge and lived experiences of these individuals must be utilized to influence future legislation and policies. The vitality of persons with disabilities must be acknowledged in all forms of economic production and social participation, or their lasting portrayal as members of a marginalized community will remain engraved within contemporary society.

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