

A “State” of Possibility? Reconfiguring basic income’s feminist potential through the lens of the state

Introduction

“[It] was nice to get an income without having to jump through all the hoops that you have to jump through when you’re on [disability benefits] and all the rules you have to follow and all the fear that that engenders...where every time you get a brown envelope in the mail you’re afraid to open it because you’re just afraid, what’s this going to be. Is it going to be bad news?” – Veronica, Ontario Basic Income Pilot Participant

In early 2018, the first of what would be over 4,000 individuals – one of whom was Veronica – across Ontario, Canada began receiving money as part of the Ontario Basic Income Pilot (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2017). Initiated and implemented by the former Liberal provincial government, the pilot provided participants with an annual income of up to \$16,989, less 50% of any earned income and with an additional \$500 monthly top-up for people with disabilities (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2017). Piloted in three sites across the province with the aim of gathering data on a novel approach to sustainable poverty reduction, the intended three-year program’s premature cancellation was announced after a change of government in July 2018, with the final payments administered in March 2019 (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2017; Kovach, 2018). Globally, reactions from the basic income community were immediate and damning, criticizing the cancellation as invoking harm on participants while undermining what many perceived to be a “golden research opportunity” (McFarland, 2018; Mulvale, 2018).

As an idea, basic income (BI) has been characterized diversely: as right-wing, left-wing, non-partisan; radical, libertarian; feasible, too expensive; impossible, inevitable. Defined by Van Parijs (1992) as “an income unconditionally paid to all on an individual basis, without means test or work requirement” (p. 3) basic income appears as straightforward as it does controversial. In the context of increasing attention to gender analyses of welfare states and social policy, the debate surrounding basic income’s desirability has equally found its way into the feminist consciousness – with mixed results (Orloff, 1996; Williams, 1997). Conceptualized in relation to labor market participation, unpaid care work, citizenship rights, household bargaining power,

and anti-poverty, among other themes, basic income's potentiality in advancing gender justice is contested mainly on the grounds of whether it would help or harm women. Over a decade later, Robeyns's (2008) verdict that "the views about the desirability of basic income for feminists are as wide-ranging and conflicting as ever" (p. 2) appears largely unchanged. Beyond a lack of consensus, this debate has also been characterized as incomplete. Looking inwards, feminists have called for analyses that engage with facets of gender inequity beyond the gendered division of labor, transcend a productivist reliance on paid work, and consider the ways in which gender interacts with other identities in the context of basic income (McKay, 2007; McLean, 2015; Vollenweider, 2013). The recognized need for feminist scholarship to move in further and different directions is accompanied by a noticeable lack of engagement with the experiences of those receiving basic income, a reality which stands at odds with feminist, social policy, and broader critical literature prioritizing lived experience (Robeyns, 2008; McLean, 2016; Harding, 1987; Jones, Samuels, & Malachowska, 2013). This medley of shortcomings characterizing feminist debates on basic income is summarized by appeals to "move to a second stage of feminist analyses that needs to focus more on the details of the entire package deal of a basic income society, in an empirically grounded fashion" (Robeyns, 2008, p. 5).

In particular, the question of what basic income might mean for people's interactions with the state – and the implications for feminists – has been identified but underresearched (Withorn, 2013). On one hand, some feminists point to basic income as facilitating "freedom from state domination" (Withorn, 2013, p. 146), intrusion, and even abuse for women, who are disproportionately likely to claim benefits (Fitzpatrick, 1999; McLean, 2015). Veronica's experience of fear and uncertainty provoked through engaging with bureaucracy as a recipient of ODSP, Ontario's means-tested disability benefit, supports feminist critiques of the state as "a patriarchal institution [that] reflects and institutionalizes male dominance" (Rhode, 1994, p. 1184; MacKinnon, 1989). On the other hand, many feminists are similarly cautious about the implications of basic income rendering a state *too* distant, highlighting conservative cases for welfare state retrenchment and the particular importance of many state-provided services for women (Rhode, 1994; Orloff, 1996; Bergmann, 2008; Blackburn, 1995; Orloff, 2009). In Withorn's (2013) words, "[basic income] proposals must address what remains of the state after its installation" (p. 146).

Drawing on interviews with 26 Ontario Basic Income Pilot participants and placing lived experience in critical conversation with the existing literature, this work engages with the following question: what are the implications of basic income for state-citizen relationships, and how might this contribute to the feminist case for or against basic income? Beginning with an overview of basic income and feminism as they stand, I proceed with an overview of the methodology and methods informing this work. The substance of this paper proceeds through a two-part analysis. I first explore basic income's liberating potential in its capacity to distance recipients from the state through reducing program conditionalities. Subsequently, I propose that basic income simultaneously fosters the possibility for relationships between the state and citizens that are more reciprocal, meaningful, and equal, constructing a renewed sense of citizenship for recipients to whom it was not previously afforded. Ultimately, I argue that basic income might facilitate a fundamental shift in recipients' relationship with state actors and institutions, highlighting the potential for feminist support on these grounds while endeavoring to frame feminist debates in a more systemic way.

Basic Income & Feminism: The Current Debate

Feminists have been vocal about the “ostensibly gender-neutral but clearly androcentric” (Zelleke, 2011, p. 27) nature of basic income debates as well as the political and economic theories underpinning them, with Orloff (2013) charging basic income advocates as writing about “seemingly genderless people” (p. 150; Withorn, 2013; McKay & Vanevery, 2000). Accordingly, the attention to gender afforded by much of the mainstream literature is underdeveloped by feminist standards, with feminist scholarship endeavoring to address these absences (Robeyns, 2008). Perhaps unsurprisingly, this literature largely centers around the desirability debate, supporting or rejecting basic income from a feminist perspective whilst leveraging distinct arguments from those presented in mainstream work.

Several feminists are generally optimistic with regards to the role of basic income in the pursuit of gender equality (Vollenweider, 2013; Bambrick, 2007; Elgarte, 2008; McKay, 2001; McKay, 2007; McKay & Vanevery, 2000; Parker, 1993; Zelleke, 2008; Enríquez, 2016; Schulz, 2017; McLean, 2015; McLean, 2016; Alstott, 2001). One argument considers basic income as necessarily an improvement on other programs, namely contributory schemes based on male

breadwinner models: Parker (1993) characterizes BI as desirable “not just because BI favors women, but because the existing system favors men” (p. vii; Schulz, 2017). Moreover, McLean (2016) highlights basic income’s potential in reducing the power of “bosses, boyfriends, and bureaucrats” (p. 287) over women’s lives, pointing to freedom from poor jobs, economic dependence, and paternalistic or intrusive welfare administrators. Many echo this, with particular emphasis on the role basic income might have in providing women with more autonomy and bargaining power vis-à-vis (presumably-male) partners or employers (Vollenweider, 2013; Enríquez, 2016; Withorn, 2013; Schulz, 2017). To this end, many feminists support basic income conditionally on the grounds that is it administered as an individual (rather than household) benefit with a view to maximizing women’s economic independence (Cantillon & McLean, 2016; Fitzpatrick, 1999; Robeyns, 2013). Enríquez (2016) frames basic income as favorable to feminists grounded in time use democratization, whereby basic income facilitates “the enlargement of women’s and men’s choice over their time use” (p. 40) in the context of gendered time poverty. Still other rationales include the psychological benefits for women through a sense of control and recognition, offering low-income fathers means to pay child support, the lack of conditionality, addressing the feminization of poverty, or – a decidedly-maternalist perspective – the positive implications for children (McLean, 2015; McLean, 2016; Bambrick, 2007; Cantillon & McLean, 2016; Zelleke, 2008; Withorn, 2013; Schulz, 2017; Robeyns, 2013).

Arguably, the most prevalent defense of basic income on feminist grounds do so with occurs in the context of implications for work, care, and the gendered division of labor, with many of the aforementioned justifications further bound up in these concerns. For some, basic income represents a feminist possibility in its recognition of unpaid caring labor, which is predominantly conducted by women and carries distinct economic disadvantages (Baker, 2008; Christensen, 2002; Elgarte, 2008; Robeyns, 2008; Withorn, 2013; Fitzpatrick, 1999). This rationale is a cautious one, with those invoking it generally specifying that a basic income should aim to *recognize* but not *reinforce* women’s caring labor (Baker, 2008; Zelleke, 2008; Robeyns, 2013). Others suggest basic income’s potential role in increasing men’s unpaid care work by reducing the costs of this engagement (Baker, 2008; Cantillon & McLean, 2016). Taken together, Zelleke (2008) concludes that a basic income might reduce the gendered division of labour “better than any other feasible safety-net or redistributive scheme” (p. 2).

Feminist rationales against basic income are similarly diverse. O'Reilly (2008) suggests basic income is trying to do "too much" (p. 2) with proposed payments generally too meagre to provoke radical change, preferring instead robust minimum wage legislation. Meanwhile, Bergmann (2008) positions basic income and a generous welfare state as mutually exclusive, critiquing basic income on the grounds of preferring Nordic-style regimes and suggesting that "equal public provision [via basic income] ignores women's greater needs" (p. 4). Concerns about basic income's interaction with other programs and services is well-documented by feminists, with advocates similarly wary of the possible retrenchment of other programs or services in the wake of basic income and often conditionally supporting basic income conditionally as part of a wider reform package (Robeyns, 2008; Enríquez, 2016; Fitzpatrick, 1999).

Feminists' skepticism surrounding basic income is similarly often grounded in concerns about the gendered realities of work and care. Bergmann (2008), preferring policies that increase and reduce women's paid and unpaid work, respectively, denounces basic income citing its inability to achieving this aim. Orloff (2013) echoes this critique, denouncing basic income for its perceived inability to challenge women's responsibility for domestic work and the gendered division of labor, instead citing the importance of programs that ease the balance between work and care. Gheaus (2008), beginning from the premise that basic income would result in the withdrawal of women from the labor market and the cementing of women's caring roles, concludes that a basic income might advance liberal but not gender justice in facilitating the choice to avoid gender-symmetrical lifestyles (Gheaus, 2008). Conversely, Zelleke (2011) denounces this view, stating that "gender symmetry as an ideal is nothing more than the universal breadwinner model in a new form" (p. 37), underscoring the disparate visions of gender equality that underpin the basic income debate.

To this, many have pointed critically to the ambiguity of much of the feminist basic income literature, suggesting that it is "evasive about the type of gender equality it is pursuing" (O'Reilly, 2008, p. 2; McLean, 2015). The tensions in the feminist literature are exacerbated by several factors, including the noted need for further empirical evidence as well as clarification as to the terms (i.e. conditionality, benefit levels, etc.) of any basic income program as it relates to gender equality (Cantillon & McLean, 2016; Robeyns, 2008; Vanderborght & Widerquist, 2013). For some, the question is less whether a basic income is desirable full stop, but rather the

extent to which it might promote systemic change, with both advocates and critics remaining skeptical of its transformative potential if unaccompanied by other reforms (Cantillon & McLean, 2016; Robeyns, 2008; Withorn, 2013). Citing Withorn (2013), “[basic income] begs the central feminist question of whether the patriarchal capitalist welfare state can be transformed” (p. 147), with feminists generally critical of mainstream understandings of basic income as facilitating a more palatable form of capitalism. Meanwhile, some are cautious of any unequivocal support or opposition of basic income, citing ambiguity in the absence of empirical evidence and the heterogeneity of ‘women’ as a group, concluding that a basic income would likely be “beneficial for some women, bad for others, and ambiguous for most” (Robeyns, 2000, p. 135; Cantillon & McLean, 2016).

For still others, when it comes to basic income, feminists are merely asking the wrong questions. Ailsa McKay’s work insists that the basic income debate – feminist and otherwise – is limited in its reliance on labor market effects as the basis for support or opposition. For her, the focus on the relationship between basic income and formal, paid work obscures its potential implications for other aspects of gender inequality, while sustaining patriarchal characterizations of the labor market as necessarily liberating (McKay, 2001; 2007). McKay (2001; 2007) reorients the question to one of basic income’s role in fostering more inclusive citizenship, imploring feminists to engage with basic income in a post-productivist, post-familial manner that accounts for women’s life experiences. Along similar lines, Bambrick (2007) presents basic income as means of transcending Wollstonecraft’s equality versus difference dilemma. The potential for feminist analysis to move away from polarized questions of equality, difference, work, and care thus appears undertheorized. Complementing this is a noted lack of attention to other aspects of gender inequality, particularly intersections between gender, class, and race as well as the diversity of experiences among women (McLean, 2015; McLean, 2016). For McLean (2016), “the worker-vs-mother dichotomy does not encapsulate the sum total of the female experience, or of gendered disadvantage” (p. 288), critiquing feminists’ disproportionate emphasis on the public/private divide as prioritizing the interests of white, middle-class women. In her view, the work/care dynamic obscures how basic income might interact with a host of other issues stratified along the lines of not only gender, but other identities, including poverty, risk of violence, and interactions with the state through benefit administration (McLean, 2015). Vollenweider (2013) echoes these points through an analysis of basic income’s implications for

domestic workers, emphasizing potentially-distinct effects for this group of predominantly poor women of color.

Drawing from a tradition of engagement with social policy and the welfare state, feminists made crucial interventions in the mainstream basic income literature in challenging androcentric biases and presenting distinctly-gendered analyses. Still, several questions remain. Overwhelmingly, the feminist literature on basic income is guided by polarized questions work and care, restricting the debate's thematic possibilities and serving to homogenize the women feminists intend to advocate for. While there are exceptions to this, the implications of these interventions remain peripheral, and similarly lack grounding in empirical evidence. So, as feminists, how might we move forward? In particular, how do the experiences of those who have received basic income alter the debate? What new questions or perspectives do they bring to light? Finally, what are the implications of asking these questions? The following analysis begins to explore this, drawing on the experiences of Ontario participants in considering the theme of basic income recipients' relationship with the state.

Case Selection, Methods, & Other Considerations

As a case study, the Ontario pilot offers value and limitations. On one hand, the scarcity of real-world examples of basic income underscores the importance of researching these programs where they do occur, with the recency of the Ontario case adding to its academic and broader public relevance. The benefit amount – while still below the national low-income measure – nonetheless represented a substantial increase in income for many participants, while being high relative to other contemporary pilots (Statistics Canada, 2019; Barclay, McLachlan, & Paterson, 2019; Young, 2018). Finally – and perhaps most significantly – the pilot's premature cancellation was accompanied by the loss of participant data, underscoring the importance of any research which endeavors to address this substantial gap (McDowell, 2019). The pilot's cancellation also requires careful consideration, both in its capacity to shape participant experiences and mitigate or obscure potential outcomes. Further, despite being referred to as such, the Ontario pilot departed in several ways from traditional ideas of basic income. For one, it was administered as a negative income tax (NIT), “topping up” low-income recipients to an income floor (Segal, 2016). To that end, the pilot also differed in reserving the benefit for those

under a certain income, along with administration occurring at the household rather than individual level (Barclay, McLachlan, & Paterson, 2019). While these differences are significant, they need not invalidate the value of the case altogether. For instance, some point to NIT schemes as an umbrella category of basic income, while Widerquist (2005), despite acknowledging the distinction, suggests that “the two are similar enough that any conclusive findings from [NIT] experiments is of great value for the current discussion” (p. 49-50; Calnitsky & Latner, 2017). Thus, while it is neither accurate nor desirable to conflate the two, the Ontario pilot remains a useful case for analysis if done judiciously.

Shifting towards methodology, I consider this paper methodologically informed by feminist and social policy perspectives. DeVault (1996) characterizes feminist methodology as distinctive yet flexible, concerned with action-oriented research supporting “change in [...] systems of social organization that control women” (p. 34). More recently, there has been a tangible shift in feminist methodology as focused less on women as a monolithic group and increasingly on “gendered lives” (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 5) recognizing that these aforementioned systems operate not only on the basis of gender, but also race, class, sexuality, ability, and so on (DeVault & Gross, 2014; Bannerji, 1995). Understanding these interlocking forms of oppression as central to the feminist project and having identified an inattentiveness to this in much of the basic income literature, I situate myself here (Hill Collins, 2015). This research is further informed by an emphasis on lived experience, placing epistemological value on experience as a source of knowledge while acknowledging the political nature of prioritizing neglected or marginalized voices (DeVault & Gross, 2014; Plummer & Young, 2010; Campbell & Wasco, 2000). In this case, these voices are those of participants in the Ontario Basic Income Pilot, the neglect of whose stories is founded not only on identity, but also on the termination of the experiment’s data collection. While experience-informed methodology is well-established within gender studies, the basic income literature is largely devoid of qualitative experiences of recipient experiences (Withorn, 2013; McLean, 2016). This is despite increasing attention to the importance of lived experience by social policy scholars and practitioners, as well as its potential value to the discipline’s political project of speaking back to subordination (McIntosh & Wright, 2018). As such, this research aims to address identified gaps in the basic income literature, in terms of not only content but also methodology.

Employing a qualitative approach, this research comprised semi-structured interviews with 26 Ontario Basic Income Pilot participants. Interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions, with questions surrounding participants' understanding and uses of the benefit of OBIP, experience with other social assistance programs, and basic income's effects on family life, social inclusion, work, and so on. Drawing from feminist interviewing principles, conversations were treated as the "co-construction of meaning" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 128), with the academic relevance of individuals' experience emphasized at the beginning of each interview. Shifting focus from women's to gendered experiences, this study invokes the experiences of men and women participants with a view to informing feminist perspectives. Participants were recruited through social media, community organizations, journalists, in-person at a basic income-related event, via other interviewees, and calls for participation in a local newspaper as well as the Basic Income Canada Network newsletter. Where possible, participants were offered the choice between speaking in-person, via phone, or Skype. Informed and voluntary consent was obtained prior to interviews, with phone/email interviewees providing verbal or written consent. Oral interviews lasted between 40 and 130 minutes. In terms of demographics, twenty-one interviewees were women and five men, with four based in Thunder Bay, twelve in Hamilton/Brantford, and ten in Lindsay. All interviewees had been receiving monthly payments as part of the pilot for varying durations, depending on when they enrolled. The analysis of interview transcripts gave rise to several distinct themes, one of which serves as the focus of this paper. All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

Finally, I wish to address the role of reflexivity and positionality. Feminist research demands an "awareness of, and appropriate responses to, relationship between research and researched," (Ramazanoğlu & Holland, 2002, p. 156), recognizing one's position in society vis-à-vis that of interviewees and endeavoring to mitigate these power differentials (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Underscoring the inherently-political nature of research, my role as a researcher in the context of this study is a complex one. Visible aspects of my identity as a young, white, able-bodied woman likely affected my relationship with different participants in different ways, mitigating power dynamics in some contexts while exacerbating them in others. In some cases, as a woman, a student, and an Ontario resident, my status was that of an insider; in other ways, particularly given my lack of experience with social assistance and OBIP, I remained firmly an outsider. Reflexivity in the context of this project demands constant and thoughtful attention to

these dynamics, considering the way I and my research might be received and the implications for participant responses. Having acknowledged this, I move forward with the analysis.

The Feminist Potential of Unconditionality

One of the central features of basic income vis-à-vis other income support programs is its unconditional nature. In the social policy literature, welfare conditionality is conceptualized simultaneously as a necessary tool to ensure benefits reach those intended yet also a major barrier to rights-based approaches to social protection (Nevile, 2008). Critics point to invoking conditionality as means of modifying or controlling recipient behavior, with benefits “dependent on an individual accepting their responsibility to undertake certain activities deemed socially desirable” (Nevile, 2008, p. 9). In practice, conditions placed on benefit claimants vary, mandating that recipients actively seek paid work, ensure children’s attendance in school, demonstrate a certain level of need, or show membership in a certain group, termed by Clasen and Clegg (2007) “conditions of category” (p. 172) and complemented by penalties or sanctions should they be unmet (Nevile, 2008; Shutes, 2016; Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). While the Ontario pilot was not entirely unconditional – specifically with regards to age, location, income, and via an annual requirement to file income tax – the frequency and severity of these conditions were far less than its predecessors, the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works (OW), with which most interviewees had former experience. For feminists, conditionalities have been criticized for their disproportionate and negative impacts on (predominantly poor and racialized) women (Cookson, 2018; Molyneux, 2006; Tabbush, 2010; Law, 1983; Abramovitz, 2018). Curiously, a feminist critique of conditionality has not been systematically integrated into basic income studies. Responding to this, this section establishes a three-part argument outlining the feminist case against conditionality, devising a feminist rationale for basic income on this basis grounded in the experiences of Veronica and others.

To begin, in requiring that recipients be either disabled or unemployed to receive ODSP and OW, respectively, “conditions of category” (Clasen & Clegg, 2007, p. 172) compel recipients to continuously re-assert (and often reproduce) their vulnerability. Writing of poor Peruvian women, Cookson (2018) likens conditionalities to “put[ting] them in their place” (p. 34), noting that “people learn and relearn where they fit in society when they are made to wait for goods and services to which they are entitled or might simply just need” (p. 94). This

iterative process of subordination was expressed by several interviewees describing experiences with ODSP or OW. This was illustrated by recipients' perceived need to continuously "prove" their disability to ODSP administrators: "you live with this fear that they can revoke it anytime [...] they can get it in their head to say, 'oh we're just going to make you requalify and suspend your coverage until you prove to us that you're still disabled.'" This fear of suspension from ODSP – and of the subsequent need to requalify by successfully demonstrating disability – was a common theme, with participants feeling required to "fight" for benefits, in some instances for years prior to becoming eligible and often on a regular basis afterwards. For those with disabilities, the implications of this process should not be underestimated. Some expressed the constant need to emphasize disability as a condition to receiving benefits as distressing in itself, with one interviewee sharing the struggle of personally having to explain her disability to each new caseworker on ODSP. For another woman, this practice carried further implications:

I don't feel like I had any autonomy over my health or well-being because I had to always ask for permission for transportation to go to the hospital. I have three major health conditions [...] and I always have to ask permission and get authority to go.

ODSP's mandate that recipients adhere to state-sponsored definitions of disability is featured as a core problem of the program from a critical disability perspective: "whether people wish the label [...] or not [...] they are forced to grapple with what it means to be characterized as disabled by medical and state authorities" (Smith-Carrier, Kerr, Wang, Tam & Kwok, 2017, p. 1580) along with carrying the stigma of being classified as disabled.

Along similar lines, both ODSP and OW mandated recipients' self-identification as low-income. In interviews, this often came across as a feeling of begging for benefits through demonstrating the severity of one's poverty. Quoting one participant, "it really did feel like a handout. It's like, this is how little I've made, so can you please give me money this month? [...]" To constantly, every month have to justify why I need their help to survive." Paradoxically, the state of dependence which these programs purportedly aim to eliminate needs to be continually avowed to receive benefits. If the aim of this avowal is in fact to put recipients 'in their place,' it is largely successful: quoting one woman, "I always viewed myself as pathetic or damaged being on ODSP because the extent of you having to beg for help." Thus, forcing participants to embody and repeatedly assert a label of vulnerability (be it poverty or disability) in exchange for benefits reproduces a sense of shame, unworthiness, degradation, and subordination that, I argue,

feminists should object. Such a critique also acknowledges that many of those receiving ODSP and OW are women experiencing oppression from multiple systems, and whose experiences in the claiming process are undeniably distinct. Theresa's experience transitioning back to ODSP from BI succinctly illustrates the weight these labels can carry:

I didn't feel like the same person I was yesterday. And my intellectual brain was like, you're the same person, you're still doing the same things! But it's that label. It's the label that is completely different. The difference between entrepreneur and disabled is so different. And looked at so differently.

Secondly, building on a tradition of feminist scholarship, feminist critiques of conditionalities can be grounded in their reliance on unpaid (or, if one considers the benefit as payment, low-paid) labor (Cookson, 2018; Molyneux, 2006; Tabbush, 2010). While this critique has emphasized the labor imposed on women, I point to the recognition that conditionalities will almost exclusively affect the most vulnerable to broaden this analysis. In the context of ODSP and OW, this labor included not only the persistent re-assertion of vulnerability, but also further conditionalities likened to “jumping through hoops,” implying active and complicated efforts on behalf of participants. Examples of perceived or actual conditionalities cited by participants included attending workshops, earning certificates (e.g. First Aid), volunteering, “apply[ing] to 10 or 20 or more jobs a month,” submitting monthly income reports, providing spending receipts, providing proof of disability from a doctor, and attending administrator meetings. While these conditions may not appear especially arduous, in practice they translated to a benefit-claiming experience for recipients that was stressful, shameful, and often inaccessible. In particular, interviewees described the process of ensuring their monthly income did not rise above a certain level to ensure benefits were not reduced as especially onerous. One woman described having to liquidate her retirement savings and cancel her life insurance policy to qualify for OW. More commonly, this process meant constant negotiation with oneself about every dollar earned or hour worked. What's more, there is a distinct irony in that the labor associated with navigating these conditions was effectively performed to *ensure* that participants remain in poverty, contradicting what is generally considered a central aim of these programs. Crucially, these efforts by participants should not necessarily be construed as optional. The means-tested nature ODSP and OW, combined with poverty trap effects and low benefit levels

(\$1169 and \$733 monthly, respectively), effectively rendered being – and remaining – poor a necessary condition to receive benefits (Income Security Advocacy Centre, 2018).

Other implications of program conditions are additionally noteworthy. Many interviewees pointed to the financial costs associated with meeting conditions such as paying for transport to mandatory meetings, as well as the compounding role of mental health and addiction in complicating fulfilling conditionalities. Further aggravating participants' experiences was a sense by many recipients that these efforts were unvalued by the very individuals mandating them. Quoting one former OW recipient, "it's just jumping through hoops for the sake of jumping through hoops [...] they don't really care if you found a job or not." This feeling of apathy is further complicated for those with disabilities, several of whom read this indifference as reflecting a perceived lack of value due to their disability. For feminists, framing conditionalities as labor has clear implications. Ultimately, while the labor imposed on recipients of conditional social assistance programs may not be identical to the domestic labor central to feminist debates, it shares the characteristics of being low-paid, stigmatizing, undervalued, and inequitably distributed.

Finally, conditionalities facilitate opportunities for the abuse of power and dominance by the state, sometimes manifesting in very personal ways through interactions with government workers. Participants expressed this diversely, through a perception of being gaslighted, having information about benefits or services hidden from them, or even being "harassed, bullied and stalked." Moreover, several participants conceived of state actors as intentionally malicious in these interactions: in the words of one interviewee, "it seems vindictive sometimes, like it's just like they're trying to fuck you or something." Others gestured to the role of power: "I think they like the control over the people that they can control. The ones that are relying on them for their livelihood. And the feeling that you should be grateful, you know, that you're beholden." This perception of personal discrimination by workers is buttressed by a widespread recognition by participants of the role of individual workers in shaping one's experience with ODSP or OW, echoing Lipsky's (1980) notion of street-level bureaucracy and the discretionary power of the individual bureaucrat. From a gender perspective, the bearings of participants' individual experiences with state actors echoes a substantial body of research documenting women's treatment in welfare offices (including in the Ontario context), often exacerbated along the lines

of ability, race, and class (Abramovitz, 2018; Laakso & Drevdahl, 2006; Chouinard & Crooks, 2005; Jarrett, 1996).

Simultaneously, participants interpreted the “power to push you around” as distinctly systemic in nature. This was illustrated in numerous ways, from having behavior surveilled online, references to “big brother stuff,” comparisons of existing social assistance regimes to the prison system, and a sense of being “trained, and almost institutionalized” through these programs. To this end, there is a wealth of literature characterizing welfare conditionalities and sanctions as exemplifying Foucault’s (1997) governmentality, specifically a form of neoliberal governmentality emphasizing turning “failed citizens into productive, active, valued citizens” (Reeves & Loopstra, 2017, p. 329; Tyler, 2013; Rose, O’Malley & Valverde, 2006; Foucault, 2008). The governmentality analytic compels us to think beyond everyday interactions in welfare offices and towards an analysis of “a multitude of agencies and techniques, some of which are only loosely associated with the [...] formal organs of the state” (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 1). To this end, interviewees referenced the power and control engendered by ODSP and OW as extending to multiple aspects of their lives, citing barriers to renting, mistreatment in dental and optometry offices, an inability to get married due to benefit calculations, monitoring and surveillance by neighbors, and stigma from friends, family, and oneself. For feminists, the question of governmentality propagated through conditionalities should not be overlooked, potentially serving to “(re-)produce a gendered social order” (Ludwig & Wöhl, 2009, p. 9) while constructing specific, gendered power relations between the state and individuals.

A final point worth mentioning in terms of state dominance and feminism is with regards to the character of said state. Specifically, the experiences of interviewees receiving ODSP and OW complicate MacKinnon’s (1989) claim that “the state is male in the feminist sense” (p. 161). While I do not deny the clear role of the state in reproducing gender inequalities, lived experience presents more nuanced understandings of the state and its actors. For instance, interviewees pointed to misunderstandings of disability and the relocation of welfare offices to areas inaccessible by public transport. One woman concluded that “nobody at Queen’s Park [the Ontario legislature] gives a shit about anybody in Thunder Bay,” while another described a worker “sitting there covered in gold jewelry and the best manicure I’ve ever seen.” Thus, while in many ways the state may be conceived as male, for many interviewees it also represents a force that is any combination of able-bodied, wealthy, and urban. This distinction is significant,

broadening the feminist scope for understanding basic income and enabling a better understanding of the ways in which the state enacts power in specific and often complex ways.

Taken together, the conditionalities imposed by programs like ODSP and OW carry overwhelmingly negative implications that are conceivably incompatible with feminist approaches to social protection. Understanding conditionalities as engendering proximity between recipients and the state, the reversal of this through unconditionality offered by basic income represents clear grounds for feminist justification.

On (More) Equal Grounds: Reinventing State Relationships

Beyond distancing participants from the state through reducing conditionalities, I contend that basic income might simultaneously afford individuals the potential to construct renewed relationships with the state, grounded in mutuality, legitimacy, and trust. I begin this argument with the notion of legibility, understanding basic income as a legibility mechanism distinct from that of other forms of social assistance. Defined by Scott (1998) as a tool to describe the population one is aiming to govern, legibility might be characterized as a necessary prerequisite to Foucault's governmentality, buttressed by conceptualizing it as providing the "capacity for large-scale social engineering" (p. 5). For feminists, the "suppression of difference" (Ung Loh, 2017) and necessary erasure of aspects of peoples' identities (including gender) to achieve the simplification required by legibility merits mention (Koleva, 2008). However, as discussed, being rendered legible on the basis of difference simultaneously risks the construction of stigma. This tension between sameness and difference, equality and equity – in this case, presumably between a basic income and programs targeted at distinct categories – is well-established in feminist and other critical disciplines.

In the Ontario context, I propose that the legibility offered by the basic income to participants contributed to ameliorating state-citizen relationships in two distinct ways. The first is that – perhaps paradoxically – the legibility induced by OBIP optionally offered participants anonymity – at least from apparatuses beyond the state. While this was of particular appeal to those who had transitioned to basic income from ODSP or OW, many cited the benefits of not having to self-identify as receiving basic income. While this ability to conceal oneself is undoubtedly partially attributable to participants' improved capacity to 'blend in' through a higher income, the role of a label – or more specifically, the lack thereof – seems equally

significant. The simplification process of basic income was likened by many as shedding an undesirable label imposed on recipients by former programs:

You don't have [basic income] for disability or because you don't have a job; it's just like everybody gets it [...] if you don't have a job or if you're disabled, now you're stigmatized. You're already put in a group. They've already put a label on you.

The role framing basic income as being for “everybody” rather than a specific subset of the population echoes the previous discussion regarding conditions of category, in addition to research emphasizing the role of labels in fostering stigma. To this end, being made legible as a recipient of basic income permitted anonymity insofar as it allowed recipients to avoid being made legible on other grounds, particularly those associated with stigma. Interestingly, this also led many participants to conceptualize basic income as distinct from social assistance, pointing to the crucial role of framing in program design and implementation. Altogether, while the potential of anonymity was certainly not unhindered – for instance, one participant noted the benefit as being coded as social assistance in the deposit to her bank account – it is nevertheless noteworthy.

Importantly, I contend that basic income offered recipients anonymity, but not invisibility. To this end, participants emphasized a perception of being rendered visible in a distinctly positive manner. For some, this resulted in better treatment purchasing a car or eyeglasses, with sales associates not immediately reaching for the “bottom drawer”; for others, this meant a sense of being taken seriously by financial institutions. Notably, the most frequently-cited form of visibility offered by basic income was simply attained through the ability to leave one's house. For several people, the cost of participating in everyday activities prior to basic income left them isolated, a reality that was, in the opinions of some, purposeful: “there is a definite bubble where I'm sure most of the population would like us to stay.” Shedding troubling light on how society constructs and provides access to space – while also challenging the public/private divide as occurring along the lines of gender alone – several participants noted their departure from this “bubble” upon receiving basic income. In the words of one woman, “it changed the way I interact with the world.”

At the same time, many also characterized being rendered visible to the state through basic income as a distinctly positive experience. One participant, who had previously been homeless, described having to file years of income tax to apply for basic income, and learning he

was eligible for student debt forgiveness as a result. A few participants also spoke positively of their rent in subsidized housing rising due to their increased income, invoking a sense of responsibility, but also normalcy. Interestingly, for many, the process of being made legible at all through completing the pilot's baseline survey and the promise of further data collection is precisely what rendered the experience a positive one. This aspect of the pilot was categorically described in positive terms, with participants eager to share their data – thus becoming legible to the state – with a view to fostering better understanding of the lived experience of poverty. In the words of Amanda, “personally, for me, one of the main reasons I participated in [the pilot] wasn't necessarily the money [...] But for the data. Because as an anti-poverty advocate, the data from this project would have been absolutely invaluable.” Significantly, Amanda's words – while striking – constituted a majority view in my interviews, unsettling stereotypes of passive, apolitical welfare recipients. While this perception by participants may be mitigated in the context of a full-scale implementation rather than a pilot, it nevertheless points to a sense of being *unintelligible* – or at the very least, misunderstood – by the state before the program, and a clear dissatisfaction with this reality.

With this in mind, I also suggest that in the Ontario case, basic income improved state-citizen relations through fostering a better perception of the state itself. Many expressed hesitation prior to applying to the pilot, noting a general distrust of and frustration with government. Quoting one participant, “it just seemed too incredulous that you were going to have your basic needs met.” Significantly, upon partaking in the pilot, the wide-reaching sense of apathy was converted into what can only be described as faith or pride. In Jennifer's words, “Obviously I have hope for politics doing the right thing, but I've been alive for 34 years and I haven't really seen a whole lot of it. So to see [the pilot be introduced], I was just like, this is such a step in the right direction.” This sense of confidence in the then-government engendered through the program, which participants widely viewed as “paradigm shifting,” was exacerbated by a complementary sense that the government was putting equal trust in them. In Rachel's words, “you are given dignity in that moment because people are showing you...those who implement this program show you that they have faith in you to make your own decisions.” To this end, I would be remiss not to mention the converse effects in this regard upon the program's cancellation: in the words of one participant, “if somebody comes to your door and lies to your face, are you going to be willing to open the door again?”

It was perhaps these more optimistic realities that also facilitated recipients' understanding of the money as a right rather than a handout. Participants often negotiated this distinction with themselves during interviews, with the overarching trend being that while basic income was understood as a "gift" or "lottery" by many at the beginning of the pilot, it had become a right when its cancellation was announced. This distinction seems largely mediated by an acute understanding by participants of the pilot as a contractual obligation between themselves and the government; for many, basic income was a right insofar as it was promised for three years. Still, the interviews pointed to a clear potential for basic income to be conceived of and implemented as a rights-based program. Recipients' conceptualizations or justifications of the BI as a right differed, from feeling entitled to adequate support due to disability, to believing in one's right to an income, to believing less in one's right to the money than to things like food, shelter, and clothing.

Taken together, this points to basic income as a potentially-radical means of reshaping normative ideals of citizenship, and it is here in part here where I propose feminist support might lie. While such a justification, in both the mainstream and feminist literature, is not necessarily novel, my findings here serve as preliminary evidence as to how this might work in practice. For feminists who have long criticized citizenship predicated on the worker/mother distinction, the implications of this merit closer attention, with participant experiences characterizing basic income as a potentially radical means of conceptualizing citizenship for both women and the several other groups to whom access has been systemically restricted (Moghadam, 2003; Munday, 2009). Moreover, the combined impacts of basic income fostering legibility as well as citizenship may also serve to strengthen access to claims-making by recipients. Understanding claims-making as a crucial practice of citizenship by which "citizens pursue not just resources but also inclusion in the political process and recognition by the state" (Kruks-Wisner, 2018, p. 185), there are clear possibilities for feminists in terms of how such a process might be leveraged. The politicization of Ontario recipients upon the pilot cancellation is perhaps one clear example of this potential, with a discernible movement having been formed challenging the province's approach to income assistance and poverty reduction in the year since the program's cancellation.

“State” of Possibility: A New Feminist Rationale?

On July 31st, 2018, the lives of over 4,000 Ontarians ground to a halt. “The program isn’t doing what it was intended to be doing and it’s quite expensive,” voiced Lisa MacLeod, Ontario’s former Minister of Children, Community, and Social Services, justifying the nearly two-year-premature cancellation of the Ontario Basic Income Pilot (Walsh, 2018). “When you’re encouraging people to accept money without strings attached, it really doesn’t send the message that I think our ministry and our government wants to send. We want to get people back on track and be productive members of society” (CBC News, 2018).

MacLeod’s words serve as a reminder that above anything else – beyond being an idea, a theory, or the subject of an academic article – basic income is a policy, with people at its core. Frustrated by a perceptible lack of research engaging with what basic income might realistically mean in the day-to-day lives of those receiving it, I returned to Canada in 2019 endeavoring to understand what lived experience might contribute to debates surrounding this controversial policy proposal. I did so with an additional political imperative, having identified discernible shortcomings in feminist analyses of basic income schemes and questioning how recipient narratives might complement, complicate, or challenge these perspectives. The stories of 26 Ontario Basic Income Pilot participants humanize the concept of basic income, while provoking several important and novel conclusions.

In this paper, I have endeavored to shed light on a largely-unexplored rationale for feminist support of basic income: its implications for state-citizen relationships. On one hand, I point to the reduction of conditionalities associated with basic income as productively establishing distance between recipients and the state, which, I argue, feminists should embrace. In particular, I propose that conditionalities as espoused by programs like ODSP and OW should be viewed as incompatible with feminist approaches to social policy on three distinct yet interrelated grounds: 1) their mandated re-assertion and resultant reproduction of vulnerability, 2) their reliance on unpaid or low-paid labor, and 3) their facilitation of state abuse or dominance vis-à-vis recipients. Basic income, as a result of reducing or eliminating conditionalities, serves to mitigate these concerns. At the same time, I argue that basic income simultaneously presents opportunities for strengthening relationships between the state and citizens. For Ontario participants, this occurred through several mechanisms, with basic income offering both anonymity and visibility, fostering confidence in the government, and creating a foundation for

rights-based social policy and, key to the feminist case, novel pathways to citizenship. Taken together, this presents grounds for feminist support both from those wary of and optimistic about the role of the state in pursuing gender justice. On one hand, basic income achieves distance from abuse and paternalism engendered by the state, as well as rendering participants legible in a uniquely positive way. Thus, the argument presented here hopefully distinguishes itself from those presented by basic income advocates predicated on the wholesale reduction of state responsibility or oversight, grounded largely in neoliberal or conservative ideologies. Crucially, this moves from a conceptualization of basic income as predominantly beneficial in the short-term, addressing distinct vulnerabilities and fostering resiliency, towards a policy with the capacity to engender more systemic change.

While I have begun to create space for feminist rationale for basic income on these grounds, this paper's findings equally present additional considerations. Firstly, there is clearly value in analyzing basic income schemes within their specific contexts, with the transition from OW and ODSP undeniably shaping peoples' experiences in the Ontario case. To that end, we might ask whether basic income is only as "feminist" as its predecessors were not. Further, the implications of basic income in shaping state-citizen relations would surely differ in a truly universal programs, with impacts predictably less dramatic for those who are already enfranchised, per se. That these impacts are likely to be unevenly felt should not, in my view, necessarily deter feminist support. Perhaps controversially, I would suggest that it is precisely because certain benefits of basic income are likely to disproportionately affect certain groups – and in particular, those living in poverty – that they have received relatively less attention in both mainstream and feminist literature. To this end, for feminists concerned with the liberation of people from poverty – as well as the gendered implications of conditional programs – the findings in this paper surely merit consideration.

Evidently, altering the state's orientation to citizens is merely one aspect of basic income worthy of analysis. While I propose that in the Ontario context, these implications buttress the feminist rationale for basic income, how a BI program changes state-citizen relations will undoubtedly differ in varying contexts, and surely needs to be measured against other implications. Despite this, my findings ultimately gesture to basic income – when viewed through the lens of the state – as holding discernible potential in fostering a world where gender justice is realized.

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