

This May, I had the honor of speaking on a plenary panel at the North American Basic Income Guarantee (NABIG) Congress held in Hamilton, Ontario.

My talk was titled “My Life as Basic Income Experiment ($n = 1$).” There’s no slides or “official” transcript, but I’ve posted something of an approximate transcript below.

A theme of the conference was “convergence” – the notion that many paths converge on the idea of basic income as an appropriate or necessary solution – and the panel on which I participated was one of several intended to represent convergence. During the very brief Q&A period, all panelists were asked their opinions on the possibility of convergence given the divergence of political and social views within the basic income movement. My reply, paraphrased in section 2 below, was critical.

Overall, I was highly pleased with this year’s NABIG experience. The conference was very well organized, even if it did not reflect the type of diversity in thought that I would greatly prefer (i.e., especially, more voices skeptical or critical of basic income or the basic income movement). From a personal perspective, the experience reaffirmed not only the project that I have going with *The Useless Life* but also my sense of belonging in the basic income community – effects that were surprising and unexpected, at least in their magnitude (perhaps due to a “pessimists are never disappointed” phenomenon).

NABIG 2018 was my first time attending a basic income since leaving *Basic Income News*, and my first time speaking merely as myself. I had worried that I might now feel like more of an outsider. On the contrary, however, it meant that I could more easily relax enough to spend some time socializing, catching up, and meeting new people. Indeed, my reception has nearly inspired me to revisit more basic income work this year...

1. “My Life as Basic Income Experiment ($n = 1$)” – something near a transcript

When I was invited here to speak, I had a different role in the basic income movement, and everyone – myself included – assumed I’d be talking about something different. I was then the lead writer for a publication called *Basic Income News*, and I wrote some articles on the current basic income experiments that resulted in my being labeled an expert on the topic.

But, around the end of last year, I left *Basic Income News* and around the same time turned down some invitations for other work related to the experiments, including

my initially planned speech at this conference. I was burnt out from working *so much* on this one narrow and specific topic. And, what's more, I was never enthusiastic about the experiments *per se*. I found them at best irrelevant to my personal interest in basic income, and, at worst, harmful distractions from a deeper and more important cause.

And so I proposed a talk with this title as the next closest thing...

I sometimes describe my way of life an "experiment" in the informal, non-scientific sense of the word (the way we might say "this is an experiment" when we toss some odd spices into the pan while cooking without a recipe). I have even started blogging about it.

And what's long been at the heart of this experimental approach to life, even before I started thinking about basic income, is a rejection of the idea that I need to cultivate "employability" or pursue any professional track or career path. Instead, I seek tasks and projects that engage me in the moment, generally things I find interesting for their own sake, and simply wait and see what jobs or funding opportunities befall me on the way.

Without a doubt, a certain baseline economic security has been ineliminable in enabling this lifestyle (first due, in my case, to savings I managed to accumulate from a college scholarship). I've never been forced to take a job out of economic necessity, and I've never felt under pressure to "professionalize" myself for the sake of future employability or to strive to earn a high salary to repay debts. Yet I'm far from extravagantly rich, and must also remain relatively frugal and modest in my expenditures. So the life I live is not unlike the kind of life that some believe a basic income would make available to people.

However, despite the tongue-in-cheek title of my talk, I don't *really* think of my life as any kind of a test—not even a *bad* test—of basic income. For one, it's not best construed as a test of anything. I sometimes blog about so-called "preliminary results," but I don't presume that these results are generalizable. I am just one person, and I'm kind of a weirdo. I might still be the weirdo in a society with basic income. I don't presume that I'm publicizing my "life experiment" and its "results" for the sake of science. My goal is to provoke, inspire, and provide a role model or moral support for other who aspire to live outside of capitalist career culture. Furthermore, I don't see this personal project as directly related to basic income. Insofar as my project functions as any kind of activism, I see it as activism for *cultural change*, not for basic income or any other particular policy.

But what *is* true is that some of the same values I strive to embody in my personal life also undergird my interest in policies like basic income. In short, I want to live in a society that cares less about money, less about titles and salaries, and more about community, culture, and cultivation of our appreciation of the intrinsic value of all that makes life worth living. I believe we need much greater appreciation of work done for its own sake—or for the good it brings to the world—and a much diminished role for financial incentives. I believe we must undo the perverse and pervasive influence of consumerism, competition, and commodification.

To some extent, my lifestyle is the product of quirky, idiosyncratic preferences. And so I'm not gonna argue that everyone should live exactly as I do. To some extent, though, my choices *do* reflect a deliberate attempt to live in greater accord with values that I believe society should adopt in general: my refusal to directly monetize work that I perform as a labor of love; my refusal as a writer to publish any content behind paywalls; my rejection of the use of professional titles; my commitment simply to be upfront and honest before potential employers (not, for example, to oversell my strengths or hide my weaknesses); my new year's resolution—with which I have admittedly been struggling lately—not to worry *at all* about future employability or marketability when choosing projects or hobbies. I talk and write openly about these aspects of my personal lifestyle because I want to play some small part in generating the cultural change we need, or at least to live and die trying.

So how does that all relate to basic income?

Well, the end of the day, the liberation of work from monetary incentives does seem to require a basic income, unless we skip straight to its in-kind equivalent in a moneyless society a la *Star Trek*. But while a post-commodification society might demand something like a basic income, the implementation of basic income doesn't guarantee a transition to a post-commodification society.

My present interest is not so much the end state, but the cultural change necessary to inspire more people to see it as desirable. And here the role of basic income is murky.

It *might* be that a basic income would liberate existing weirdos like me to reject traditional notions of professional success, to downshift, and to refuse to commodify their work, and maybe all together we'd have some sort of impact. And it might be that some who are now motivated by monetary incentives, or think that they are, would find they care much less about making money if their basic needs

were met unconditionally. But it might be that a basic income would just distribute money a little differently, a little more fairly, while leaving the culture of capitalism and consumerism untouched (as Jason Murphy has said, it could be that middle class would just “spend the basic income on their lawns,” keeping up with the Joneses remaining fixed as the perennial life goal). We need to listen to those who believe that basic income would fuel economic growth, job creation, and consumption.

Overall, I believe the jury’s still out when it comes to the potential for basic income to catalyse cultural change. And, what’s more, we can’t expect the jury to return after the current experiments have been completed and analyzed.

For one, experiments are limited in duration. If participants know that their cash payments will persist for only two or three years, we shouldn’t expect them to make radical changes to their lifestyle, such as changes in job status that could jeopardize future employment opportunities or put a terminal stop on a potentially lucrative career. Even if their dream is to break free from their professional life, they know they’ll need the money in a few years.

Now, to be sure, there might be a few people who are disposed to take advantage of a two-year basic income plan to shift down from a professional path, perhaps taking the risk that they’ll find adequate part-time employment, self-employment, or freelance work before the end of the experiment. But this brings us to another limitation—and a contingent one—of the current basic income experiments in the developed world: they’re all tests on low-income populations! Current welfare recipients, the unemployed, and other low-income persons aren’t in positions *to* downshift. They’re also, unfortunately, unlikely to hold the best social positions to serve as “trend setters” and drivers of cultural change.

Relatedly, the current experiments investigate the impact of unconditional cash payments on adults who are already been enculturated into consumerism and careerism, who’ve most likely already become entrenched in lifestyles that reflect these dominant values and social networks that reaffirm them. It would be more interesting, I think, to test the effects of a basic income during the formative years of adult life, such as during or right after college.

Fourth, existing experiments in the developed world are designed to test the impact of cash payments on individuals in isolation (with the sole exception, I believe, of the Lindsay test site in Ontario, and even here it’s a stretch to call Lindsay a “saturation site”); unlike Mincome, for example, they aren’t designed to

capture community-level or social multiplier effects. When we're talking about cultural change, we're of course talking about society-wide phenomena. Even aside from that, however, we should expect individual-level decisions about work, jobs, and careers to be impacted by peer effects.

Even if an individual is financially able to reduce her work load or pursue some atypical career path – or, like me, deliberately avoid a fixed career path – she might not do so if her friends are all employed in traditional jobs and careers. She might worry about feeling lonely, or like an outcast, or she might feel that she needs to continue to earn extra money in order to afford a social life with her professional friends. Or she might worry about losing her competitive edge if she did ever need to return to traditional work. Even if she'd “secretly” like to devote less time to paid work, and even if she can afford it, her choice may turn on the choices of her peers. The treatments in RCTs can't overcome these peer effects.

Lastly, it's worth noting that experiments attempt to test the effects of basic income in isolation, while ignoring its funding mechanism. But if the basic income is to be financed in part by higher taxes on income or wealth, then the funding mechanism itself should be expected to have a non-negligible effect on the role and influence of monetary incentives.

All of this being said, those who propose basic income experiments are typically *not* interested in adducing whether basic income would produce radical cultural change – and herein lies the real danger of a focus too much on experimentation. Supporters are usually interested in convincing policymakers of the efficacy of the policy in, essentially, preserving the *status quo* – allowing people to continue to work, spend, and consume. Politicians are interested in questions such as whether basic income will increase or decrease employment, and their standard of “success” is that employment should increase, or at least not decrease. Because they want to gain the support of politicians, advocates who propose experiments tend to align their idea of “successful results” to the same.

Oh shit, that's time. But you can read the full version of my critique of experiments [here](#).

2. Diverging from Convergence

I am critical of the desirability of “convergence” and the rhetoric of convergence.

The alleged broad base of agreement has already been overstated and oversold. Much of this alleged agreement is superficial and specious. It is what philosophers

might call a “merely apparent” agreement. Supporters of basic income don’t agree in their ultimate visions for society, and they don’t agree on what basic income is supposed to do, in either the normative or descriptive sense.

The movement—if it can even be called such—doesn’t need more false and misleading pretense of agreement. On the contrary, we need the underlying disagreements to be revealed and laid bare. If they are not seen, they cannot be understood, studied, or resolved (or recognized as fundamentally insoluble differences in value, as the case might be).

It is not enough these days (if it ever was) for one supporter to say “I support basic income,” another to say “So do I,” and for an alliance to have thus been built. Supporters must be clear and transparent about the premises and reasoning on which their support stands.

In the end, however, I simply don’t think that basic income is an appropriate nexus around which to build a movement. Instead of seeking agreement at the level of a single policy plank, we would do better to seek out those who share our ultimate visions for society. When we thus have found our true allies, we can then discuss and debate the best policies to reach our common goal, including whether or what type of basic income is among them.

That said, I certainly don’t oppose the organization of conferences around the topic of basic income, bringing together any individuals who have any type of academic or activist-related interest in the idea (and whether they are supporters, opponents, or merely “BI-curious”). On the contrary, such conferences are potentially great opportunities to reveal *different* approaches and expectations surrounding basic income, expose underlying disagreements (or underlying points of agreement between supporters and skeptics*), and generate *debate*. They should be occasions at which critics and advocates alike may be dislodged from narrow thinking about the proposal (or, better, family of proposals), and perhaps realize a need to revise, sharpen, or clarify their own views. What they must *not* be are affairs that purport to build a single unified movement.

Some say that a simple and unified message is necessary to build political support. But debate surrounding basic income is anything but simple and unified. And if our methods of political persuasions are the methods of sales and advertising, not science, logic, and critical thinking, and science, and then that itself is deplorable situation calling for wide-sweeping institutional reform. We need to move beyond a system in which we try to “sell” people on our favored ideas and policies rather

than collectively debating and deliberating in the quest for a common solution. Sadly, when people talk about how to “market” basic income or any other policy, they are typically interested only in the outcome of getting that people to like the idea; they are seldom concerned that their audience accept the policy proposal on the basis of reason and evidence, or as the result of a deliberative process, much less that the audience *only* accept the proposal on these terms.

* ... or underlying points of agreement between supporters of basic income who appear to disagree in their basic values and world views. For example, folks who see basic income as a way to boost “entrepreneurship” and folks who see it as a way to increase “freedom from work” often agree on a basic value: it’s desirable that all people have time and resources to pursue self-directed projects and passions. They might have substantive disagreement in the role that traditional employment and monetary incentives ought to play with respect to this fundamental goal, but at least some of this disagreement might stem to differing beliefs about psychology and sociology, which are worth exposing and exploring. For another example, some of those who support basic income as a way of increasing economic growth also propose a redefinition of economic growth into something greener and more humane (cf., e.g., Andrew Yang), and some of those who put forth basic income as a way of promoting “work” also propose a broadening of the concept of “work” (cf., e.g., Chris Hughes). At a deeper level, in a few cases, some apparently opposing supporters might be “just arguing semantics” (a merely verbal disagreement lying beneath a merely verbal agreement?), but see Michael Lewis [on the significance of arguing semantics](#) (a point with which I fully agree and might even expand on... it was, after all, related to [my PhD work](#)).

3. Relaxing Conditions on ‘Basic Income’, Redux

Attending a conference organized by the Canadian affiliate of the Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) reminded me of a long-standing gripe that I had have with BIEN: inconsistency in the organization’s approach to divergent uses of the term ‘basic income’.

On the one hand, BIEN has adopted a [precise stipulative definition](#), according to which the payment is “paid to all, without means test.” On this definition, the program being piloted in Ontario is not a basic income (it is means-tested, as well as household-based instead of individual, and less confusingly described as a version of a negative income tax). Due to this discrepancy, BIEN’s current General Manager has even in the past urged editors of *Basic Income News* not to cover the Ontario pilot *at all*.

On the other hand, BIEN's Canadian affiliate clearly has no gripe with calling the Ontario project a pilot of a "basic income" and itself seems to deploy the term in a looser manner, perhaps consistently with the Government and Ontario—and, crucially, BIEN is not poised to stop this, for BIEN has not required its affiliates to conform to its definition (!). It's a bit as if an international, European-based "football" society had insisted that 'football' must not be defined to count American "football" as football ... but then admitted the NFL among its affiliate groups without feeling the need to offer so much as a justification or disclaimer.

Now, personally, I don't give a rat's ass about means testing or the lack thereof, as long as recipients never become *worse off* or lose benefits *entirely* when their income or employment status changes (as with, e.g., Medicaid in the US). No one should have to refuse a job out of fear of losing benefits or financial security—that's just silly—but, at the same time, I don't think monetary incentives ought ever to be the driving force behind the acceptance of work. I mean, hell, the theme of this blog is kinda premised on that, as is my sympathy for programs like basic income. So I'm *never* going to say that we need to do away with means tests in order to encourage people to take jobs for the money.

Thus, I'm not going to pound my fist on the table and declare that a means-tested policy isn't "worthy" of being called a "basic income." For me, insistence on clarity and consistency in definition isn't the result of dogmatic attachment to certain type of policy. *It's a mere matter of wanting people to be clear and avoid equivocation. Because f'ing logic.*

(For more on this, see my *Basic Income News* swan song editorial "[Relaxing Conditions on 'Basic Income': A Case Against Definition](#)." While it's called a "case against definition," it can be read as either a *modus ponens* or a *modus tollens*; if BIEN wants to adopt a stipulative definition, then it should require its affiliates to conform to the same stipulative definition.)