

Episode 165 - Dr. James Mulvale: Basic Income: An Anti-Poverty Strategy for Social Work

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate we connect. We care. We are in social work. Hello I'm Charles Syms and welcome to social work over 1 billion of the world's population lives in extreme poverty approximately 45 million people in the United States live below the poverty line. Some 3 million American workers live in poverty despite having a full time job and one third of poor families with children include a fulltime worker. The harmful effects of poverty are well-known. They can lead to reductions in academic achievement poor health outcomes and a myriad of social problems along with stressed and under-resourced communities. A core mission of social work in America and internationally is to strive to address poverty and economic inequality. The basic income model may represent one possible solution for these inhumane conditions. Our guest today is Dr. James Mulvale. Dr. Mulvale is dean of the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg Canada. Before taking this position in 2013 he was a faculty member at the University of Virginia in justice studies and in the Faculty of Social Work where he also served as associate dean. Dr. Mulvale is a registered social worker whose practice experience includes community development roles in the field of intellectual disability and mental health.

[00:02:08] Dr. Mulvale research is focused on basic income social work theory and economic development in Aboriginal communities. He is vice chair of the basic income Canada network a member of the social policy interest group of the Canadian Association of Social Workers and Secretary of the Canadian Association of Deans and Directors of Social Work. Dr. Mulvale has written and presented extensively on the subject of economic justice. Included in his many publications are reimagining social welfare and possibilities and prospects. The debate over a guaranteed income in today's podcast Dr. Mulvale will explain the concept of basic income and how he became interested in it. He offers reasons for setting in place a basic income and reviews some of the typical objections Dr Mulvale provides a rationale for why basic income is an idea that social work should embrace and ends his discussion suggesting next steps for the social work field regarding this model. Dr Mulvale was interview in December of 2014 by Dr Gretchen Ely an associate professor in the School of Social Work at the University at Buffalo this is Gretchen Ely and I am here with Jim Mulvale and he's going to talk to us a little bit about basic income and social work. Thank you Jim for joining us. We're just going to get started. And my first question to you would be could you please just tell me a little bit about the basic income model. Certainly the basic idea behind the basic income model is that a floor of economic security should be available to everyone in a given political community in a given province or state or country.

[00:04:01] And that this kind of economic support available to all should be at the level to guarantee the modest but dignified lifestyle. People have choices and abilities to pursue their goals. So it's in one sense it's a very simple and I guess I would argue I like that idea. Compared to our current economic security approaches and in the welfare state it's quite different than existing programs either social insurance programs or social assistance last resort kind of programs that it's intended to be universal covers everyone unconditional. It's not depending on having to go to work or means tests or things like that and it's tailored to individuals. So it doesn't go to households per se but individuals to ensure that individuals within a particular household and family have choices leading their lives. And it sounds really interesting and something that's certainly very much supported by social work and something many of us have been advocating for since the beginning of the profession. So I wonder what sparked your interest in this particular topic. Well many years

ago. Well in 2001 specifically I published a book called Reimagining social welfare. It was based on my doctoral research and kind of thinking about new approaches of social welfare field specific reference to Canada. In the book I included a brief mention I guess two or three paragraphs on that the basic income idea is a new approach to economic security. So that kind of initially sparked my interest. I started reading more and going to meetings and the basic income work network and actually the American groups established for some time called United States Basic Income Guarantee network or U.S. big for short.

[00:05:55] So kind of getting more exposure to the idea and talking to people doing research and activists it became more and more interested in that and really started to focus on how it might work and practical policy terms. Certainly in the Canadian context I live in Canada but looking at international kind of projects or experiments with basic income as well. OK that sounds great. Well I wonder if you could talk with us a little bit more about what are the reasons given for setting in place a basic income by those who support this approach. Well I think there's a number of reasons. I guess one of the key people that sparked the contemporary interest in the basic income model is the Belgian philosopher of the name of the meat bond price and Felipe and writing in the 80s into the 90s presented the basic income model as you do it as kind of left libertarian approach where there's a commitment to collective welfare through welfare state and other public mechanisms but also the libertarian part is meant to address human freedom and the goodwills being able to pursue their goals in life without fear of economic Quattrill or economic bad consequences. So there was kind of came from that biggest philosophical perspective but thinking about it you can see that social workers were concerned about social justice and human rights. Basic income can be very much framed in the context of social equality social equity you know redistribution of wealth. And also I mean if you can frame it as a human right we have conventions through the United Nations on economic and social rights and arguably the right to a modicum income regardless of one's circumstances especially in wealthy developed industrial countries can be thought of as a economic right.

[00:07:59] Beyond that I mean there's been interest in the basic income model and faith communities that are thinking about social teachings of their particular faith. There's been interest in basic income among environmentalists which is to me a really interesting point of departure. Of course much of our social programs have built traditionally on economic growth and never growing economic pie that's redistributed to people at the lower end. Oh that's getting away from that in recent years. But that's idea behind certainly the Keynesian welfare state if you will that the environmentalists are saying if we're going to leave a survivable livable planet for our children and grandchildren and we have to end our addiction economic growth. So if we can really talk seriously about steady state economics and redistribution of wealth through I'm sure that everyone has enough to live on an basic income could be the key mechanism in that regard. And it sounds like you have some very compelling reasons for supporting this type of movement and it also sounds like it would eliminate the need for many of the social welfare programs that we have in place and also keep people from going below a basic standard of living so things like homelessness will be addressed. Those are sort of the positive arguments for it. And I wonder if you could talk with us a little bit about the typical objections to basic income. Sure. I mean just the point you made Gretchen about replacing aspects of the existing welfare state apparatus. That's actually kind of a tricky and sometimes contentious discussion when people interested in basic income.

[00:09:38] I mean the basic income might clearly overlap with certain existing economic security programs universal pensions the state for children's allowances or perhaps even social insurance programs could be displaced to some extent by a more universal basic income. But certainly many of us working on basic income here in Canada feel very strongly that it should not be seen as a replacement for the kind of inclined services or social welfare state. You know healthcare social housing and mental health of addictions programs you know the kind of value added services of

social welfare really need to continue to be in place even if we supply everybody with enough money to live on. There's other social needs that basic income cannot address or do not replace existing services. Now move on to objections of course one of the most frequently cited if you will moral objections to it is that critics say well you know if we just give people money for nothing then they won't engage in work. They'll kind of lead a lazy and kind of pointless life. I guess there are certain people that kind of want to do that in their lives I think it's a very small minority I'm not sure whether or not you have a basic income is going to change that. But some of the research that's been done on basic income or guaranteed income experiments have actually demonstrated that if we have a guaranteed income scheme in place they will not significantly withdraw from the labor market. There is a pilot project that ran in the late 70s and early 80s and often Manitoba in Canada.

[00:11:22] It was called Minne comment was a joint provincial federal guaranteed income experiment and there's been some research done on that actually quite recently and has demonstrated that there was not a significant labour market withdrawal because the economists see that the income was available to families and often there was some withdrawal for very good reasons. You know kids finishing high school that might have otherwise dropped out take a job. Mothers that were able to stay home longer with newborns in the absence and those days of maternity benefits but overall people wanted to work and continue to work. But this was kind of a bridge for them between jobs during difficult times. It sounds like some of these objections you're sort of responding to how they can be addressed if somebody has concerns about the model. So I appreciate you talking with us about that and I wonder how his basic income similar to or different from current income security programs in countries like the United States and Canada. You touched on a little bit about how the basic income would overlap with those programs. Can you go into a little more detail please. Sure. Well it's different than kind of means are income tested last resort programs like social welfare or I guess in the U.S. the town of the program it's different than those kinds of programs in that you know you don't have to undergo those kinds of often demeaning and stigmatizing means tests because it's universal and available to all people automatically qualify. It's different than social insurance programs like in Canada for instance we have the Canada Pension Plan in the U.S. there's some social security programs in that people who are not expected to contribute. It's not a contributory social insurance program. So it sort of works in different premises in that regard.

[00:13:17] Now a question gets raised of course about can we afford this kind of generous universal individualized income security program. And that's an important question and that's a tough question. It requires careful analysis. I mean social insurance does have people contributing and maybe you know their social insurance program should continue even as a basic income mechanism might emerge. Kind of give people the additional income beyond the bare minimum with last resort social assistance kinds of programs. I mean I think it's pretty clear in recent years that those programs have eroded so dreadfully that's contributed significantly to the growth of poverty I mean we have to come up with something different and maybe that requires more investment maybe it requires greater government funding for a basic income in lieu of last resort social assistance programs. But of course in regard to costs one can argue that there's lots of literature on this sort of the economic costs of poverty and the social determinants of health. Investing in individuals and families now will have long term payoffs in terms of better school completion rates better health status and this kind of a better set of circumstances that will get fewer people going into the criminal justice system. So it's a tough sell politically because politicians are in short term election cycles often maybe can't think beyond the next election. But there's a long term benefits I would argue. Do you think it would work similarly to house security works in the US or how the Canadian Pension System works for you pay in and get a minimum amount or any thoughts on that. Well I try to be a pragmatist about these things.

[00:15:11] Certainly in Atlanta short to medium run if that's the kind of way we can build towards

something like a basic income architecture which you know might include more than maybe a few programs if we can kind of take a step by step approach towards having that more universal guarantee of economic security for everyone. I think we should talk about building on extending stitching together existing programs. In fact here in Canada and I think there's probably similar programs in the States. We do have basic income programs of a sort for elderly people and for families with young children in Canada we called Old Age Security. That's actually still touted as a Democrat. Everybody's eligible to receive it. Well they're upping the eligibility age from 65 to 67 which is a bad idea in my view. But when you reach eligibility age everybody can apply for a very modest old age security. Universal payment now it's taxable. So people at higher income levels have perhaps most of their old age security tax back but then there's also a program built around what called Guaranteed Income Supplement that works as a negative income tax mechanism. If you have a low income as a senior you can apply for it and get the guaranteed income supplement that goes on top of your old age security the universal payment. And I mean you know it could be improved theoretically but certainly in Canada the OAS GISS combination has had a significant impact in lowering seniors poverty over the years. And in my mind certainly it's a form of basic income if you will called such. But that's kind of what it amounts to.

[00:17:03] I mean I think we've had similar good results I think in Canada with the child tax benefit which is a negative income tax mechanism that sends money to lower income families with young children. So once again it's not a Democrat to universal payment that goes out to everybody but it's a negative income tax income tested mechanism to put money in the hands of young families when their children are young. So I think that's a very positive approach and part of a basic income scheme if you will. And so I wonder has basic income been tried in other areas and does it work such as the Brazilian legislation or other pilot projects in North America. Yeah it's interesting to me. I mean I think some of the countries that have been most open to thinking about the idea of basic income have been in developing countries not in the relatively wealthy you know advanced welfare states. So in Brazil they've had a program in place for many many years now called the Bolsa Familia. Now it's income tested it's geared to people in low income range and it's geared to families families with young children and there's very minor conditions on it. Children have to be enrolled in school and mothers have to be who are expecting need to be hooked up with prenatal care but since those are good conditions if you don't have any conditions at all and as a kind of a household as a grant that goes out to families at the lower income scale and Brazil when it reaches millions of families it really has had a dent lowering rates of absolute poverty. They've had experiments on a more pure basic income model in Namibia in South West Africa.

[00:18:57] Unfortunately it ran as an experiment in that it ran out of funds that was largely church funded. It had all kinds of interesting positive effects. And there's currently a large scale project on basic income payments occurring in select villages in India. So that should show some interesting results for tomorrow. So it sounds like it's something to consider that you can't think about building on for some of the models that would look good in the United States and Canada. Yeah. The most interesting US version of it and it's garnered much attention at one basic income researchers and basic income conferences has been in the state of Alaska where they have the Alaska Permanent Fund dividend. The portion of the oil and gas resource revenues that accrue to the state of Alaska are put aside and actually paid out to families on a yearly basis. There's a form of basic income at the time of the yearly payment varies from year to year depending on oil and gas revenues. But in many past years the benefit has hovered around a thousand dollars per person for all residents of the state of Alaska. So it's obviously not a living income but it's a family that's economically struggling here living below the poverty line. Let's say a family with two parents and four kids that could be potentially six thousand dollars or so per year is a tax free benefit which have very good effects in terms of raising the economic security of the family and that kind of money makes a difference when people are on the verge of living near poverty so I think it's something very important to consider.

[00:20:40] And I wonder if you could talk a little bit about the description of the position recently taken by the Canadian Association of Social Workers in regard to implementing versions of basic income there in Canada. Sure. The Canadian Association for Social Workers NSW recently put out a paper on social equity and part of it focused on health care. Part of it focused on program administration across the social service field. But the third part of it focused on stitching together or moving incrementally towards a basic income scheme at the federal level in Canada. So once again as I was mentioning earlier the proposal was to take existing basic income like programs such as Old Age Security the Canada Child Tax Benefit the working income tax benefit for working poor people. And we have very small sales tax rebate that goes out to low income people at the federal level did kind of look at this array of programs and think about filling in gaps or extending benefits or broadening eligibility and kind of moving in a step by step fashion towards what's again Basic Income architecture if not a you know rather than to try to work towards a one size fits all basic income singular program. So I mean that's what's been proposed to be realistic with our current federal government I don't think it's something that they're not just arrested in at all in fact the kind that runs contrary to their views of social welfare that you know governments change political discourses evolve over time so they're hoping that this can kind of get on the agenda undergo some discussion in the months ahead for years ahead.

[00:22:31] I think you make a good point there because I feel like the government here in the United States it's probably not on their radar either. So we sort of have a parallel situation going on but I do agree that it is important to keep this kind of thing in moving forward because political climates do change and so I wonder if you can talk a bit about why basic income is an issue and that social workers should be concerned about. I mean I think our profession and our discipline of social work we've been firmly rooted since our early days and understandings of social justice and human rights. And I mean I think a basic income is kind of premised on those kinds of values you know redistribution of wealth and ensuring that everybody has enough for dignified life with choices and possibilities. And I mean social workers probably more than any other single profession deal first hand with the negative effects of poverty whether their work and income assistance or child welfare mental health addictions or whatever field they work in. Social workers confront poverty and the negative effects of poverty day to day basis and their work. So I mean I think social workers more than any other profession and have a bird's eye view of the problems that the poverty of economic and security of that basic income is intended to address. And I think when we look at our ethical and value statements in the profession we're very much committed to collective welfare and kind of ensuring that everybody has the ability to make their human rights real and tangible and I think economic security moves us in that direction.

[00:24:15] I think if you make some good points about why social workers should be on their radar and when they need to be involved in this discussion and I wonder what your thoughts are about what we can do as social workers to promote discussion research and implementation of these concepts and basic income will just on the kind of research and academic side of me and I'm anxious that the social workers become more engaged in teaching the idea of basic income getting students doing field placements. Thinking about it and the research side I mean to be honest there's not a lot of people working within the social work profession that have been engaged in research and basic income per se. It's very much a multidisciplinary research area for sure. We've had people from political science and policy studies in economics and philosophy and lots of other areas who have been engaged in the discussion and the scholarship and the research but it would be really good to see social workers you know whether they're focused on direct practice or whether they're focused on social policy to be more engaged contributing just in the wider political arena. I think social workers and social work organisations have credibility either take the message to politicians across the political spectrum to know the basic income is just kind of a liberal or social democratic project if you will. And in fact many of the politicians who have been interested in it have come

from kind of the conservative or right wing side of the political spectrum actually some of the interesting experiments on basic income in the U.S. and some of the discussion and policy circles occurred during the Nixon administration a number of years ago. In some cases some of the Democrats like Bill Clinton have kind of rubbed away from this model.

[00:26:08] So we've had similar things here in Canada where we have a man of a former conservative senator you Siegel who is what we call in Canada a Red Tory progressive thinking conservative politician that he was championing a version of basic income. So I think social workers along with others can play a role in introducing this idea and engaging in thoughtful discussion of it. Politicians of all stripes not to mention other social justice and social policy organizations. So what would you say is next on the horizon for the US if we want to advance a political advocacy agenda or a public education agenda to put forth our cause and basic income. It would be really great to see more interests including from social workers and social policy academics in the work that's been done around basic income and continues to be done in groups like the United States. Basic Income Guarantee network the basic income Canada network. There's an international group called the Basic Income Earth Network which does actually span all the continents. As bi annual meetings that bring together people we had one in Montreal in June 2014 that brought together over 250 people from all parts of the globe. So we're really good to see social workers involved in those kinds of discussions and meetings and research more locally. I think through one's political parties or faith communities or local groups if people can make up this idea and get people engaged in thoughtful and critical reflection on them that would be very good within our daily practice of social workers.

[00:27:52] I think it's probably fair to say that some people working in the social work field are social workers themselves have kind of got a bit caught up with some of the sort of deal conservative blaming of the victim. So if we can have these kinds of thoughtful discussions to critically reflect on what's happening to people that get caught up in these very inadequate and sometimes quite demeaning means of income security programs. So pick a perspective we can bring social workers. I just think about the potential that it would free up the human potential to be less concentrated on making ends meet or not falling below basic level and more concentration on just moving forward into a human being it seems like it fits very well with such short principles and is something we should be advocating for. Yeah I mean in terms of self-determination of those with whom we work. It's been interesting some of the pilot projects picking up some evidence that came out of them the Libya experiment with basic income where you know and these were very often maybe single very poor African women with children that with a modest basic income payment that they could count on month over month. They did Dulkaninna of interesting things I mean we managed to get their kids back in school. They started up small businesses. They kind of networked with each other and kind of build community resilience so I mean these kinds of results can be seen in some of the experiments have happened so far so interesting if we had the chance to see more of those kinds of things happen. It sounds like a lot of potential on a larger scale. Interesting to see that.

[00:29:37] Well I thank you so much for your expertise and your time talking with us today about basic income and the benefits of it and how social work should be concerned about it and pay attention to it. And we thank you today. OK Gretchen pleased to be able to speak with your you have been listening to Dr. Gretchen Ely interview Dr. James Mulvale on the concept of basic income. We hope that you found this unique idea thought provoking. I'm Charles Syms and I invite you to join us again in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school art history or online and on ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work

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