

CANADIAN DISABILITY POVERTY, POLICY, AND MARGINALIZATION: CRITICAL ANALYSIS, NEOLIBERAL INFLUENCE, AND LIVED EXPERIENCES WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CANADA'S LIBERAL WELFARE STATE

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William MacGregor is a PhD student in the Health Policy and Equity graduate program at York University. His SSHRC-funded research focuses on disability policy and poverty in Canada, utilizing a political economy approach. He is interested in issues of health policy, the politics of health, and broader equity concerns around federal and provincial policies in the areas of disability, health, and health care.

Tell us about your field and your professional experiences before starting your current studies.

My path in getting to my PhD was unusual. I first came to York in 2010 after completing my Bachelor of Fine Arts at Concordia University in Montreal, where I focused on Theatre and Political Science. I then started my MA in Theatre Studies here, focusing mostly on political theatre, documentary theatre, and broadly, art concerning social and political change.

However, while I was completing my Major Research Project (MRP), I was diagnosed with Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome, a serious and worsening heart condition. The very abridged version of what happened next is that while having a life-saving surgery, I woke up during the procedure and sat upright on the Operating Room table, causing severe internal damage. Within three months, I was forced to drop out of my MA, lost my part time job, my apartment, and was in severe chronic pain and experiencing high levels of disability. I moved back home to Nova Scotia to receive medical care.

It has been a very long and unlikely journey back to York over about eight years, with slow steps forward and serious setbacks the whole way. The entire story takes a long time to tell (no joke, my

full medical history once took about 40 minutes to relate), but I got very, very lucky to have the support I did and find treatments that eventually worked – all of which is what drives me in my own work.

Tell us about your dissertation and how it relates to the study of Canada.

My research concerns the impact (or lack thereof) of disability related policies on poverty among Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in Canada. I focus primarily on federal programs, with particular emphasis on newer policies like the Disability Tax Credit (DTC). I take a critical approach to examine what exactly these policies are, what impact they do or do not have, and – most important and vexing to examine – the *why* of their designs and outcomes.

A crucial component of this is to examine the history and development of these policies over time, which requires looking at the development of the Canadian welfare state, the rise of neoliberal political and economic philosophy, the changing nature of government, and how disability (like poverty) is both socially produced but also increasingly blamed on the individual. In short, I mostly write about neoliberalism and the negative

effects it has had on Canadian society and specifically PWDs.

How did you come to choose this research topic?

I became familiar with these policies because I used them: I was on Canadian Pension Plan Disability Benefits, I have a DTC and a Registered Disability Savings Plan (RDSP), and I know first-hand the titanic gaps that exist between what these policies say they are supposed to do on paper, and what they actually do in practice. When I was returning to graduate school, this was the area I felt I needed to explore and write about. In a way, I suppose you could say I didn't choose my topic; my topic chose me.

What are the main takeaways you want others to come away with?

1. As a society, we are moving away from publicly funded income supports, like disability benefits and income assistance, towards a market-oriented society where your ability to benefit from programs like the DTC or RDSP is no longer an entitlement based on citizenship rights, but instead dependent on the employment or investment income you generate.

2. This is part of the broader dilution of the welfare state and the policies that build prosperity and well being for all the people in this country, not just the few at the top. I argue that this dilution is deliberate, and has been advanced by all mainstream political parties in almost all wealthy nations.

3. Disability policy trends in Canada are reflective of much broader seismic shifts towards austerity and privatization in the areas of health, education, transportation, and myriad other areas of public good - the effects of which are deeply regressive, inequitable, and unfair.

Tell us about what you enjoy the most about the work you do.

This may sound odd, but one of the most fulfilling parts is really locking into the nitty gritty details of a policy: doing the background work, building on existing analyses, and mixing it with policy history scholarship to produce a comprehensive analysis of the gaps between the rhetoric and reality of a program. In essence, my goal in all my work (and the fun part) is to explore what a policy says it does on paper, and articulate what it actually does in practice, because the gap between those two points can sometimes be massive (along with the critical analysis that attempts to answer the "why" of why these gaps exist). At times, you can feel like a bit of a Poirot, or one of the Scooby Doo gang, unmasking the villain at the end of the episode ("It was Old Man Neoliberalism all along!!!").

Tells us about the challenges you as researcher are experiencing or had to overcome to do this work.

Personally, while my health is quite good *especially* compared to six years ago, it can still go up and down, and knowing when I can push and when that will backfire is something I am still learning. Another part that adds up over time is that the topic of my work concerns poverty, marginalization, suffering, and often premature death; it can be a very heavy and emotionally draining topic to occupy your brain day after day - a worthwhile and needed topic to cover but a difficult one.

Beyond that, a serious challenge is feeling sometimes like you are shouting into the void; we are seeing the effects of privatization, neoliberalism, and cuts to social and economic services that redistribute wealth and power back to the economic elites. This shift reverses the progress made through the formation of the

Canadian welfare state after World War Two. Like the austerity measures of the past, Prime Minister Carney's proposed austerity measures¹ will not only disproportionately negatively affect poor and marginalized people, but will not lead to more robust growth and prosperity.²

Despite forty years of failed neoliberal policies, politicians continue to propose more neoliberalism rather than a return to the policies that for (a brief moment in time), improved the political power, and thus the material livelihoods, of the poor.

In short, to crib from many scholars and thinkers in this field: If distribution of wealth is distribution of power, then distribution of power is distribution of the resources necessary for health.

What advice do you have for those starting their academic journey?

The number one thing I will tell undergraduate students that I teach is to "*learn how you learn*"; are you someone who can work at home, on a laptop in bed, and be super productive, or are you someone who needs a specific place and environment (and the headspace that comes with it) to get your best work done? Being self-reflexive about the "hows" of your work, who you are as a junior scholar, and what is driving you, can be very useful. I focus a lot on processes, and try to be reflexive about my own habits and blocks I throw up in my own way.

To those considering a PhD, the most fundamental warning I will give is to only pursue it if there is *something*, some research question you need to answer, some topic you need to study, that is driving you to do start it. It is this internal motivation, this inner passion inside you pushing you forward, that will sustain you through the late nights and weekends, the low pay, the trials and tribulations of the

institution of a university, and navigating personal and professional relationships. My topic chose me, and I am here because I feel this is work I should be doing, because if I don't, who will?

What are the next steps in your research?

I am developing my dissertation proposal presently, looking ahead to conducting critical policy analysis, a qualitative interview study with users of these programs, and my intent is to go back to work I began during my MA in Theatre and Performance Studies here, to include arts-based components in my work; this is both for specific knowledge translation and mobilization goals, and that as a (still semi-) practicing artist, I know the affective power really, really good art can possess.

Notes

1. Tranjan, R. (2025, Jul 20). "Income inequality reached a new high. Here's why Ottawa's DOGE-style cuts will only make it worse." *Toronto Star*. Retrieved from https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/income-inequality-reached-a-new-high-heres-why-ottawas-doge-style-cuts-will-only-make/article_1d9b8ac3-faf5-467c-899a-2b20ed018a4a.html.
2. This is discussed extensively in British political economist Mark Blyth's (2013) book, *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea*, and French political economist Thomas Piketty's (2021) *A Brief History of Equality*.