

Work, Leisure, and Care: A Gender Perspective on the Participation Income

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Abstract

In 'The case for a participation income', Anthony Atkinson identified unconditionality as an obstacle to support for a citizen's income. He advocated prioritising the universality and individuality of a citizen's income but replacing its unconditionality with a 'participation' requirement. At the time, Atkinson's critique read as political realism: to eliminate means-testing, make a concession to the fear of free-riding. Ironically, Atkinson remained opposed to unconditionality despite his own critical contributions to documenting the growing income and wealth inequality that have increased support for an unconditional basic income. In this article I consider the 'participation' requirement from a gender perspective in order to uncover the problematic notions of 'dependence', 'independence', reciprocity, and free-riding that underlie normative arguments for conditional over unconditional benefits. Employing such a perspective demonstrates the superiority of unconditional benefits in achieving more efficient and effective income support and reducing inequality—Atkinson's core commitments throughout his distinguished career.

Keywords: participation income, citizen's income, basic income, wealth inequality, gender, unconditionality

Introduction

IN HIS 1996 *Political Quarterly* article, 'The case for a participation income', Anthony Atkinson identified unconditionality as a political obstacle to support for basic income.¹ He advocated holding fast on basic income's universality (the lack of a means test) and on its individuality (the payment to individuals rather than households or couples) but replacing its unconditionality with a 'participation' requirement. At the time, Atkinson's critique read as astute political realism: to achieve the big win of the elimination of means-testing, make a concession to the fear of free-riding. Atkinson intuited that in the 1990s basic income advocates didn't have the support needed for unconditionality.

It is ironic, then, that he remained opposed to unconditionality to the end of his life despite the growth of support for basic income over the last two decades, and despite his own critical contributions to developing exactly the arguments required to defeat objections to unconditionality. In particular, Atkinson's more recent work on

income and wealth inequality (often in collaboration with Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez and other leading inequality researchers) has demonstrated convincingly that economic returns now go disproportionately to owners of capital, rather than being shared with workers, and that arresting the growth of inequality requires measures beyond full employment and faith that a rising tide will lift all boats. Furthermore, throughout his career, Atkinson acknowledged the gendered effects of social insurance and social assistance means-testing, which disincentivises labour force participation of low-income and secondary workers, who are disproportionately women and caregivers. Atkinson's proposal for a 'participation income' explicitly recognised caregiving as a social contribution, and he consistently supported universal child benefits—effectively an unconditional basic income for children and an indirect form of income support for their caregivers. However, his continued advocacy of a participation requirement, his frequent references to the problems of 'dependency', and his support for categorical social insurance

programmes suggest unresolved tensions between conflicting commitments to gender equality and the primacy of the social insurance model. Twenty years after 'The case for a participation income', Atkinson's continued opposition to unconditionality appears to be more of a normative commitment than a political expedient.

In this article, I consider the 'participation' requirement from a gender perspective to uncover the problematic notions of 'dependence', 'independence', reciprocity and free-riding that underlie normative arguments for conditional and categorical benefits over unconditional and universal benefits. I argue that employing such a perspective demonstrates the superiority of an unconditional basic income over a 'participation' income in achieving the goals of more efficient and effective income support and reducing inequality—Atkinson's core commitments throughout his distinguished career.²

The case for a participation income: 1996

Atkinson's call for a participation income in his 1996 article was based on his desire to reduce drastically the government's reliance on means-testing for social assistance programmes. He argued that means-testing has several flaws that cannot be repaired:

- Because benefits are limited to those who need them, they penalise incremental work effort through high withdrawal rates as earned income rises, leading to effective marginal tax rates well above those applied to higher earned incomes, and to poverty traps for those unable to secure incomes above the benefit levels.
- Because benefits levels are calculated in relation to disposable resources, means-testing has to apply to family or household income and assets, which has the effect of discouraging saving and the work of secondary workers as well.
- Because of these perverse incentives and the stigma attached to social assistance, take-up rates for means-tested benefits are lower than they are for social insurance benefits and leave many of the neediest unsupported.

Atkinson argued that a citizen's income grant, as he called it, that was taxable but not means-tested, would reduce individuals' 'dependence' on social assistance and reduce the government's 'dependence' on means-testing, which had increased as a result of cutbacks in social insurance programmes in the UK. A citizen's income would

- reduce or eliminate poverty traps and perverse incentives;
- supplement, not replace low wages;
- reduce or eliminate the take-up problem;
- complement, not replace social insurance programmes which provide differentiated benefits that are (in his words) 'not arbitrary'.³

This, together with some improvements to social insurance programmes, would lead to a more efficient and effective welfare state.

Atkinson believed the citizen's income could not be unconditional because of concerns about 'dependency' on social assistance and about unconditional benefits appearing to run counter to active labour market policies. As a political matter, Atkinson was almost certainly right. The 1980s was a period of conservative leadership and welfare state retrenchment in the UK and US, and the Labour government and Democratic President that followed in those countries were decidedly centrist, 'market-friendly', and unlikely to push for an unconditional basic income (UBI). He thus proposed making the citizen's income a 'participation income' (PI)—a universal (non-means-tested), individual (not family-based) cash grant conditioned on a 'participation' requirement broadly defined to include unpaid and voluntary activities, including caregiving. In the 1996 article he endorsed a modification of Hermione Parker's partial UBI proposal that would have provided between £18.00 and £39.00 a week to adults (calculated in 1992 pounds sterling, with the amount dependent on the tax rates selected), with a smaller benefit to children.⁴ Atkinson's PI was more supportive of women's economic security than the then-prevailing alternative of 'workfare'—social assistance programmes conditional on job seeking and other verifiable forms of willingness to work. In contrast to workfare, the PI recognised the value of

unpaid but socially useful activities disproportionately performed by women and promised to provide some compensation for them.

Revisiting the participation income

Twenty years later, in *Inequality: What Can Be Done?* Atkinson again endorsed the PI.⁵ In this work, Atkinson's attention shifted from reforming social assistance programmes to addressing the problem of rising inequality in advanced economies in Europe and the US. The book presents an ambitious fifteen-point programme of industrial, fiscal, and tax policies and social programme reform in which the PI is again proposed as the replacement for means-tested social assistance, but here as an *alternative*, rather than a complement, to his now-preferred strategy of expanding social insurance programmes with higher benefits and broader eligibility. Although there is much to discuss about Atkinson's broader policy goals, I limit my comments here to examining Atkinson's defence of a 'participation' requirement for receipt of the citizen's income.

'Dependence' and 'independence'

Atkinson's consistent preference for a PI rather than a UBI owes much to his explicit goal of reducing or eliminating forms of 'dependence' he and others find objectionable. His use of the terms 'dependence' and 'independence' is characteristic of much academic and policy work on the welfare state in the post-1970s period, and betrays implicit endorsements of gendered social norms, existing labour market and social programme structures, and the market distribution of income and assets. Recipients of social assistance are negatively portrayed as being 'dependent' on cash assistance, while recipients of social insurance cash benefits are considered legitimate claimants to benefits which they have 'earned' through tax contributions, despite their equal 'dependence' on these benefits during periods of unemployment, disability, or retirement.⁶

Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon have traced the shifting meanings of 'dependence'

and 'independence' through evolving economic regime types, from an historically nearly universal state of 'dependence' for peasants and slaves tied to land and landholders, together with the rarer 'independence' of those who controlled the land and other resources, to a mid-twentieth century 'independence' of male 'family wage' earners with appropriately 'dependent' wives and children, to today's increasingly racialised and feminised 'dependent' poor. Today's 'dependent' poor are excluded—by programme design—from categorical social insurance benefits for 'independent' workers who may, despite their 'independence', still require wage supplements in order to survive.⁷ Atkinson's own critique of social assistance programmes suggests the way programme design reinforces the very 'dependence' we are supposed to deplore: if social assistance benefits are withdrawn at high effective tax rates, low-wage or intermittent workers are discouraged from accepting work that would make them 'contributors'. In addition, the decision to fund social insurance programmes by dedicated taxes, and social assistance programmes from general revenues, reinforces the perception that social assistance recipients are free-riding on the work and taxes of the employed, while social insurance recipients are merely withdrawing from a fund to which they have already contributed.

Both problems are direct results of their programme design. Both could be eliminated under a citizen's income subject to progressive taxation. But they signify a larger issue with the categorisations of citizens in modern welfare states, as illustrated by the list of activities Atkinson judged as 'participation' for purposes of eligibility for a PI, to which I now turn.

Participation and reciprocity

In his 1996 article, Atkinson included, as 'participating':

people working as an employee or self-employed, absent from work on grounds of sickness or injury, unable to work on grounds of disability and unemployed but available for work ... people engaging in approved forms of education or training, caring for young, elderly or disabled dependents or undertaking

approved forms of voluntary work ... It would also, of course, cover those who have reached the minimum retirement age.⁸

In other words, nearly everyone was defined as 'participating': the working, the unable but willing to work, those preparing for work and those not expected to work, stretching the definition of 'participation' beyond coherence. If the coverage was so broad, why the need for a participation *requirement*? In the 1996 article Atkinson suggested that free-riding would be a small but real problem, significant enough to need a participation requirement in order to build *political* support for a citizen's income. After the article was published, the participation requirement was criticised as being administratively intrusive and unwieldy enough to threaten its political appeal. In the 2015 book, Atkinson was more explicit about the free-rider problem, and made clear that the participation requirement was not just a political concession, but also *justified* on the grounds of reciprocity:

The Belgian philosopher Philippe Van Parijs has written a famous article titled 'Why sufferers should be fed: the liberal case for an unconditional basic income'. In advocating the participation income, I am adopting the opposite position. I agree with John Rawls, who said that 'those who surf all day off Malibu must find a way to support themselves and would not be entitled to public funds'. The participation condition should, in my view, be interpreted positively. It is an answer to the question, who is eligible for the basic income? *The answer conveys a positive message about 'reciprocity', a message that is both intrinsically justified and more likely to garner political support.*⁹

In shifting from a political to a normative argument for unconditionality, Atkinson invoked the androcentric work/leisure dichotomy that pervades the literature on conditional *vs* unconditional benefits: if one is not working, one is engaged in leisure, and a life of leisure fails to 'reciprocate' the contributions that workers make to fund social assistance. But what if there are more than two categories of human activity—not just work and leisure, but work, leisure, and care? Atkinson's inclusion of unpaid caregiving as

meeting the participation requirement can be seen as recognition of its importance to human societies. But his conceptual starting point from a perspective that minimises its status leads to several problems.

First, imagining the PI recipient to be guilty of free-riding until proven innocent by reason of verified participation prioritises identifying the free-riders over ensuring that the benefit reaches all the legitimate claimants it is designed to serve. Doing so undermines the superiority of the citizen's income approach to the means-testing it was meant to replace: 'participation-testing' merely replaces means-testing as the obstacle to full take-up of a much needed benefit, making it less effective in meeting that goal—a problem Atkinson himself recognised.¹⁰ This is especially true when acceptable forms of participation are subject to change according to broad social norms. In the second half of the twentieth century, when the Beveridge model's 'dependent housewife' gave way to increased labour force participation by women, those who chose to devote their working-age years to full-time care found themselves in a precarious position with respect to social assistance in many countries, especially when they were unmarried, divorced, widowed, or abandoned. Atkinson's shifting definition of participation reflects this: in his 1996 article, he wrote that 'caring for young, elderly, or disabled dependents' was included in the forms of participation qualifying for the PI;¹¹ in his 2015 book, this category of participation has been narrowed to 'home care for *infant* children or *frail* elderly people'.¹² Caring for adolescent children or elders without disabilities has become 'leisure', not 'participation', and the 'family wage' which employers were once expected to pay can be lowered to individual levels as the expectation that all adults work full-time (and, implicitly, that they are part of two-adult households) becomes the norm, and care for infants and the frail becomes the exception. The instability of categories of 'participation', and the linkage of support—for women in particular—to socially sanctioned relationships and family structures, undermine their ability to serve as stable gateways to effective income support.

Second, from a perspective that recognises care as a sphere of human activity as

important as wage labour, this androcentric notion of reciprocity encompasses only a *selective* reciprocity—an obligation for caregivers to document the care they provide in exchange for the PI, but not for recipients of care to document what they provide in exchange for the care they require before (and indeed, during and after) they are able to engage in paid employment and become contributing participants to social insurance programmes. Nor does the PI have any positive effect on the redistribution of care work away from those whose gender, class, or ethnic status makes them disproportionately responsible for care. Indeed, if the PI is a complement to, rather than a replacement for, social insurance benefits, the traditional forms of reciprocity to caregivers, including support of aged parents and entitlement to a share of wage earners' incomes, is undermined: the aged, for example, are provided not with a share of their children's income, but with *socially determined* pensions whose benefits correspond to their own earned income and tax contributions, rather than to the amount of care they provided. Since income from employment must on average exceed PI benefit levels paid to caregivers, those of working age are incentivised to *minimise* time in care work and *maximise* time in paid employment. Any redistribution of care in this context is likely to be from the employable and the affluent to the low-skilled and economically vulnerable, rather than from women to men. Any meaningful attempt to reduce inequality should address inequalities in responsibility for care as well as inequalities in income and wealth, if only because disproportionate responsibility for care has negative effects on lifetime earnings and savings for those who withdraw from the labour force to provide it—and who are disproportionately women.

Participation, income, and wealth

To be sure, simply removing the participation requirement and moving from a modest PI to a modest UBI might not on its own have much effect on the distribution of care work, although any relative increase in the economic resources of carers compared to workers should increase carers' bargaining power in negotiations over the division of

labour within the family or household. But in addition to implementing a selective reciprocity, the PI implements a *selective conditionality* as well. The 'participation' requirement disadvantages those with comparatively little income or wealth, for whom declining to 'participate' has much more serious consequences than it does for those with comparatively more: those with sufficient capital are free from the need to document the social utility of their daily activities while those without capital must do so in order to survive. This selective conditionality implicitly endorses the basic legitimacy of the status quo distribution of income and wealth as being based on merit.

In contrast, the principle of unconditionality recognises that many of us are free-riding 'surfers' in any number of ways: as direct or indirect beneficiaries of the unpaid care and other voluntary work that sustains and reproduces our families and communities, or as individual beneficiaries of our collectively enforced rights to private property ownership and inheritance, or as recipients of unearned 'rents' we collect through protected first-tier employment, luck-driven endowments at birth, or our places in economic and political power structures. Because our relative incomes and wealth are due at least in part to these forms of free-riding, a 'participation' requirement that is not universal, but selectively imposed on those who require cash assistance to meet their basic needs, improperly implies that high income and wealth is a proxy for 'participation' that obviates the need for any further monitoring.¹³ Once again, a gender perspective makes this problem clear: women are disproportionately represented at the lower end of the income and wealth distributions,¹⁴ and thus disproportionately subject to the conditionality of the PI. Can it really be the case that women as a class contribute less to society than men do and thus require more monitoring of their social contributions than men?

Twentieth century social policy in the twenty-first century economy

The impulse to condition the citizen's income on a work or 'participation requirement' is a lingering artefact of a brief period of

economic history in advanced industrial economies—a period in which industrialisation and limits on capital mobility meant that economic growth was shared between workers and capitalists, and social norms limited the market's tendency toward income inequality. It is ironic that Atkinson maintained his insistence on a participation requirement despite his work on rising income inequality in the post-1970s era. In the 1970s and 1980s there was still little understanding that postwar trends in GDP and wage growth had changed decisively. It had been possible to believe that the wage stagnation of the 1970s, the oil price shocks, the pressures to reduce public spending, and the flow of capital and growth in manufacturing jobs outside Europe and the US were reversible anomalies. Beginning in the late 1990s, and certainly by 2015 when Atkinson published *Inequality: What Can Be Done?*, there was growing evidence that the broadly shared economic growth and expansion of the welfare state in the thirty-year postwar period was the anomaly. Atkinson and economists like him provided that evidence in their empirical work on income inequality. By now it is clear as well that advanced capitalist economies have settled into a two-tier system, with one group of workers enjoying stable employment, income, and employment-based benefits, and another group more precariously employed in work without fixed hours, holding short-term contracts with little job security, and less access to employer-provided or social insurance benefits. The data on increasing inequality of wealth is, if anything, even clearer.

As just one example of the challenges of changing social norms to reducing inequality that Atkinson himself notes, the postwar period was a time in which the constrained earnings opportunities for women limited household income dispersion: women's artificially compressed wages meant that working women contributed proportionately more to household income when married to low-wage men than to affluent men. Now, women's wage (and wealth) dispersion has increased, and assortative mating means that working women contribute to inequality among households.¹⁵ Atkinson suggests that changes like these are outside the realm of what can be affected by policy—but that is

true only if our policies remain those that were designed for a different economy.

Unconditionality makes little sense in an economy in which all have equal pay and capital wealth, equal responsibility for care work, and equal opportunities to tailor the mix of care, work, and leisure they prefer. It only makes sense in an economy which *even when it functions well* leaves some groups with disproportionate responsibility for unpaid labour, and with widely dispersed levels of income and assets due more to institutional economic structures and global economic forces than to different levels of ingenuity or effort. Atkinson is right to say that 'the differentiation involved in the typical social insurance scheme is not arbitrary',¹⁶ but not for the reason he implied: categories of social insurance inclusion and exclusion are not arbitrary because they encode gendered, classist, and racist notions of dependence, independence, contribution, and participation, not because they are determined by different levels of desert.

Conclusion

Unconditionality is superior to conditionality for the citizen's income not just because it is more efficient and effective (although it is), but because it is more *just*, asserting our universal entitlement to an unconditional share of common resources and reminding us that inequalities in access to those resources are tolerated only because, and insofar as, they lead to the common good. The belief in a common good beyond our individual status is one reason women, or caregivers of any gender, often seem to act against their own self-interest by foregoing opportunities to maximise income and wealth. Divisions of labour, including the gender division of labour, help us to achieve more than we could if individually responsible for our own needs and wants. But any division of labour between carers and earners needs to be in the interest of both groups. Otherwise, as Nancy Fraser points out, it is the earners who are the free-riders, not the other way around.¹⁷ By requiring recipients of the citizen's income to qualify for the PI, but not those with enough economic resources to do without it, the PI reinforces and endorses the legitimacy of contemporary inequalities, rather than fighting against them.

Notes

- 1 A. B. Atkinson, 'The case for a participation income', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 67, no. 1 pp. 67–70.
- 2 Note that I do not in this article address the social benefits of promoting a culture of participation and recognition of social contributions, nor what would be required, beyond a conditional or unconditional citizen's income, to promote a truly inclusive society. I limit my comments, as Atkinson did in his 1996 article, to the question of whether 'participation' should be required for access to a citizen's income.
- 3 Atkinson, 'The case for a participation income', p. 68.
- 4 See H. Parker, *Instead of the Dole: An Enquiry into Integration of the Tax and Benefit System*, Abingdon, Routledge, 1989, chap. 14, for Parker's partial basic income proposal.
- 5 A. B. Atkinson, *Inequality: What Can Be Done?*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2015.
- 6 See M. A. Fineman, 'Dependencies', in N. J. Hirschmann and U. Liebert, eds., *Women and Welfare: Theory and Practice in the United States and Europe*, New Brunswick NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2001, pp. 23–37, for a discussion of the inconsistent application of the term 'dependent' to recipients of different kinds of subsidies and tax benefits.
- 7 N. Fraser and L. Gordon, 'A genealogy of "dependency": tracing a keyword of the U.S. welfare state', in N. Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the 'Postsocialist' Condition*, Abingdon, Routledge, 1997, pp. 121–49.
- 8 Atkinson, 'The case for a participation income', pp. 68–9.
- 9 Atkinson, *Inequality*, p. 221 (emphasis added).
- 10 Atkinson, 'The case for a participation income', p. 69.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 12 Atkinson, *Inequality*, p. 219 (emphases added).
- 13 As suggested by R. J. Van der Veen, in 'Real freedom versus reciprocity: competing views on the justice of unconditional basic income', *Political Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1, 1998, pp. 140–63, a universal participation requirement is one way this objection could be addressed.
- 14 This is an area of research to which Atkinson contributed in one of his last papers: A. B. Atkinson, A. Casarico and S. Voitchovsky, 'Top incomes and the gender divide', unpublished paper, August 2016; <http://www.tony-atkinson.com/articles/> (accessed 24 April 2018).
- 15 Atkinson, *Inequality*, pp. 58–62, 159–60.
- 16 Atkinson, 'The case for a participation income', p. 68.
- 17 N. Fraser, 'After the family wage: a postindustrial thought experiment', in *Justice Interruptus*, pp. 41–66.