Introduction to A Research Agenda for Basic Income

Introduction

A Basic Income is an unconditional income paid to every individual within a particular jurisdiction: a country, a region of a country, or a group of countries. The level of the Basic Income might vary with age, but it would not be affected by an individual’s income, wealth, household structure, employment status, or anything else.

Throughout the now two hundred year history of what has become a global debate, research has been essential. It still is. This book will offer some of the history of that research, will outline the current state of research on Basic Income, and will suggest the research that is now required and how it should be done.

Definitions and research: requirements for high-quality debate

As a World Bank report puts it:

Universal basic income (UBI) is a hotly debated idea. In fact, few development topics elicit as much interest and controversy as UBI. There is literally a book published on the subject every month, with the concept being examined across the economics, sociology, governance, philosophical, and political science literature. It is prompting both curiosity and visceral reactions from policy makers in high- and lower-income countries alike, including playing a role in political discourse and elections. (Gentilini et al., 2020: 1)

There are at least two requirements for high-quality debate: clear and agreed definitions of terms; and robust research using the best available methods. Only if definitions are both agreed and adhered to will conversation partners understand each other accurately and will research results be accurately understood; and only if the best available research methods are employed will any
facts being discussed be as accurate as possible. Because of the foundational importance of clear and agreed definitions to the conduct and understanding of research, Chapter 2 of this volume is entirely about definitions. Each subsequent chapter offers a brief history of a particular subfield of Basic Income research; describes the current state of research in that subfield; and makes proposals for future research.

Basic Income’s history

An important research subfield is research into the history of Basic Income. This author has already explored in depth the different ways in which histories of Basic Income have been written (Torry, 2020a: 28–47). He has also written what can probably claim to be the first comprehensive history of Basic Income—being careful, of course, to title it Basic Income: A history, rather than ‘the history’ (Torry, 2021a). A number of more partial histories preceded that attempt at a more comprehensive treatment of the subject (Duverger, 2018; Sloman, 2018; Torry, 2013: 17–47, 65–80; Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017: 51–98; Van Trier, 1995; Widerquist, 2017a; 2019a): and more histories will be needed because the debate changes all the time.

Because this author and several others have already undertaken a significant amount of research on the history of Basic Income, no chapter about research on the history of Basic Income will appear in this volume. However, it might be worth offering brief summaries of conclusions that this author has drawn from both his study of others’ histories of Basic Income and from his own history-writing.

At the end of the chapter about history-writing in A Modern Guide to Citizen’s Basic Income: A multidisciplinary approach (Torry, 2020a) the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Historians of Basic Income employ a variety of history subdisciplines—political, economic, social, philosophical, and biographical.
2. They bring a variety of agendas to their history-writing: academic, philosophical, social policy, and political.
3. Historians of Basic Income are to a greater or lesser extent committed to the Basic Income proposal and this commitment generates significant agendas as they write their histories.
4. A wide variety of different data are employed—primary and secondary literature, archive material, interviews, and personal experience—in dif-
ferent proportions, depending on their availability and on the agenda to be pursued.

5. Each history can be located somewhere along an ideas/practice spectrum. A history might be a history of ideas, a history of events, or both. The agenda pursued by the historian will generally determine where their history lands on this spectrum.

6. A similar spectrum can be drawn between an author providing a history of a country’s benefits systems as a context of the Basic Income debate, and the author telling the story of Basic Income with very little reference to the benefits context. There might be more or less integration between the two stories.

7. Some authors are clearer than others about the definition of Basic Income, and some are more careful than others to use terms consistently and in accordance with normal usage.

8. All of the authors find themselves discussing alternatives to Basic Income, and some are better than others at distinguishing the alternatives from Basic Income and at distinguishing them from each other. A particular problem relates to the way in which Basic Income and Minimum Income Guarantee (with its accompanying means-tested benefits) are not always sufficiently distinguished from each other.

9. Each of the authors that we have studied has in mind some agenda-driven pattern as they write their history, and such patterns, as well as the agendas, will have determined to some extent what is researched and written. So, for instance, a ‘several waves’ structure (Sloman, 2018; Van Trier, 1995; Widerquist, 2017a; 2019a) can lead authors to fill chronological gaps with material that has little connection with Basic Income. (Torry, 2020a: 45–7)

Perhaps the most important conclusion drawn at the end of Basic Income: A history is an understanding that ‘as the world changes, the Basic Income debate will continue to change. What must not change is the definition of a Basic Income’ (Torry, 2021a: 254). And in agreement with Sloman’s conclusions (Sloman, 2019: 230–31), the concluding chapter finds that three arguments for Basic Income have been ubiquitous throughout its history: firstly, that a Basic Income would provide a secure layer of income as other income sources become less secure in the context of a more flexible employment market; secondly, that existing benefits systems [are] degrading, divisive, opaque, and complicated, whereas a Basic Income would carry no stigma, would facilitate social cohesion, and would be simple to administer and easy to understand; and thirdly, that a Basic Income would provide every individual with the freedom to exercise their autonomy and creativity. (Torry, 2021a: 255)
A final conclusion is that ‘the Basic Income debate is not going to go away’ (Torry, 2021a: 258). It is therefore essential that high-quality research should take place, which means that we must discover as much as we can about the current state of research.

A history of Basic Income research

Some of what we have said about the writing of Basic Income history can also be said about the writing of the history of research about Basic Income. We shall bring a variety of subdisciplines to the task; the agendas that we bring to our history-writing will determine the information that we seek and the histories that we write; and we shall need to be clear about the definition of Basic Income, and how it differs from such mechanisms as a Minimum Income Guarantee (Torry, 2020a: 45–7).

Research has been a vital component of the Basic Income debate from its very beginning. When Thomas Spence first described a genuine Basic Income, he offered justifications, implementation suggestions, and discussion of likely effects (Torry, 2021a: 36–43). Spence’s proposal was to some extent a reaction to Thomas Paine’s proposal for one-off capital grants for young adults and annual unconditional payments for elderly people: proposals backed by justifications and by research on their feasibility (Torry, 2021a: 33–6). Throughout the two-hundred-year debate that has followed Paine’s and Spence’s proposals we have seen research into the ethics of paying an unconditional income; into the likely social, employment market, and economic effects; into a variety of financial feasibilities; into implementation options; and much more. Different places have seen different research emphases. For instance: Belgium has seen frequent discussion of ethical justifications for Basic Income (Torry, 2021a: 48–51, 161–3; Van Parijs, 1990; 1995; 1996; 2009; Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017; Van Trier, 1995; 2019), whereas the UK has experienced a significant history of research on financial feasibility (Atkinson, 1995; Martinelli, 2017a; 2017b; 2017c; Milner, 1920; Milner and Milner, 1918; 1920; Parker, 1989; Reed and Lansley, 2016; Torry, 2016a; 2019a; 2020c; 2020d; 2021c; 2022b).

One useful way to understand the research fields to which attention has been paid during the modern Basic Income debate is to read the titles of sessions at Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN) congresses. For instance, the first BIEN Congress in 1986 tackled terminology, objections to Basic Income, Basic Income and women, Basic Income and young people, Basic Income and social change, Basic Income and the claimants’ movement, working time
reduction, unemployment and job insecurity, small businesses, Basic Income’s relationships with a variety of political ideologies, Basic Income and trades unions, Basic Income and the commons, theories of justice, Basic Income as an inheritance, Basic Income’s relationships with existing welfare states, the financial feasibilities and redistributive and employment effects of illustrative Basic Income schemes, and implementation strategies. The BIEN congress in Hyderabad, India, in 2019, discussed employment, freedom and community, pilot projects, political action and the implementation of Basic Income, campaigning for Basic Income, the commons and public inheritance, sovereign wealth funds, blockchain technology, Basic Income and women, post-conflict scenarios, mental health, a caring economy and society, financial feasibility, Basic Income and the environment, modelling of illustrative Basic Income schemes, poverty and shame, definitions, complementary currencies, secular, religious, and other perspectives on Basic Income, and the state of the Basic Income debate in Asia, Africa, North America, and South America. As we can see, not much changed between 1986 and 2019 in terms of research fields and the issues debated. Subjects discussed in 2019 but not in 1986 included pilot projects, ecological concerns, cryptocurrencies, and post-conflict scenarios, all of which are understandable additions (Torry, 2021a: 193–4).

An interesting indicator that Basic Income is now a mainstream element in social policy research is that for the first time the most recent edition of *Understanding Social Security*, published by the Policy Press, contains a chapter on Basic Income (Martinelli, 2018). There is now a significant volume of literature on Basic Income: introductory texts of various kinds, detailed studies of different aspects of the debate, discussions of Basic Income debates in particular contexts, and so on. Much of that literature might be properly regarded as description and evaluation of research on Basic Income. This book will try not to repeat what can be found elsewhere, and in particular it will attempt not to repeat its own author’s contributions to the literature: three introductions to the topic (Torry, 2013; 2015; 2018a); a book relating Basic Income to the Christian Faith (Torry, 2016b); a book specifically about the feasibility of Basic Income (Torry, 2016a); a multidisciplinary study (Torry, 2020a); a comprehensive history of Basic Income (Torry, 2021a); and a collection of previously published chapters and articles and unpublished conference papers (Torry, 2022c). All of these books are research-based, and so between them they offer a fairly comprehensive account of the history of research on Basic Income and also a reasonably thorough description of the current state of research. Working papers published by the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex offer a comprehensive treatment of microsimulation research on the financial feasibilities of Basic Income (Torry, 2019a—which summarizes the findings of several earlier
working papers; 2020c; 2021c; 2022b); and an article written for the LSE Public Policy Review contains a short history of UK research on Basic Income (Torry, 2020d). Particularly significant in relation to the current state of research is the Palgrave International Handbook of Basic Income (Torry, 2019b): a collection of chapters on a wide variety of aspects of the Basic Income debate written by fifty-two authors from around the world. Much of this literature, and much more besides, will be referenced in the current volume, and in particular there will be multiple references to A Modern Guide to Citizen’s Basic Income (Torry, 2020a) and to chapters of the Palgrave International Handbook of Basic Income (Torry, 2019b), not with the purpose of repeating what has previously been written, but in order to draw attention to aspects of the history of research on Basic Income, of the current state of research, and of existing suggestions as to the research now required, to be found in those volumes. However, there will be places where material found in those books will have to be summarized in this book in order to provide a coherent account of the current state of research. Such necessary repetition will of course be fully referenced.

It would be quite impossible in a volume of anything like a normal length to offer a comprehensive description of the history of research on Basic Income and of the current state of research, let alone adequate evaluations of them: there has been too much research, too much reporting of it, and too much evaluation of it, for that to be possible. What the reader will find here will be quite selective, and the most useful elements of the book might be the references and bibliography. Equally important resources for researchers will be the references and bibliographies in each of the chapters in The Palgrave International Handbook of Basic Income (Torry, 2019b), and also the references and bibliographies in A Modern Guide to Citizen’s Basic Income (Torry, 2020a) and Basic Income: A history (Torry, 2021a).

What the book does attempt to do is to provide a brief overview of various aspects of the history of research on Basic Income, and a fairly comprehensive description of the current state of research on those aspects, and on that basis to make some suggestions as to the research that will now be required if the increasingly widespread global Basic Income debate is to be intelligent. Research literature directly about Basic Income will be covered as comprehensively as possible, but as no author can now claim to be aware of all of the available research about Basic Income, readers will inevitably discover omissions, and possibly quite important ones. Also covered will be research literature closely related to the Basic Income debate: but here readers will encounter a significant problem. The Basic Income debate touches so many research fields that it is almost impossible to draw a boundary around the literature that might be regarded as somehow related to that debate: so inevitably
the research that will be discussed here will be the literature that the author has found helpful in his own research on Basic Income. Other authors would have made different selections. Readers who wish to expand their own selection of literature to be studied in relation to a particular aspect of Basic Income research might wish to follow up the references in this volume and then search the bibliographies in the books, chapters and articles that they will then find themselves reading.

The structure of the book

Each of the following chapters tackles a particular subfield of Basic Income research. As already suggested, clear and agreed definitions are essential to the intelligence of the Basic Income debate, and Chapter 2 outlines some of the history of research about such terms as ‘Basic Income’, ‘universal’, and ‘unconditional’; brings the history of Basic Income up to date; and suggests what research might now be required. Subsequent chapters tackle research on financial feasibility, employment market effects, other economic effects, social effects, what people think about Basic Income, ethical justifications for paying everyone an unconditional income, political feasibility, and implementation. Each chapter begins with some background history, and then describes the current state of research, by which is generally meant research conducted since the modern Basic Income debate began about fifty years ago. Discussion of the state of research will lead into suggestions as to the research that now needs to be done and the methods that might best be used to conduct it.

It has not been easy to decide in which order chapters should be placed. As this is a research agenda, the order has to some extent been guided by the order in which feasibilities might be tackled if implementation of a Basic Income were ever to be considered: and so, for instance, financial feasibility is studied first because without that there would be no point in discussing any other feasibilities. Within that general trajectory, the order of chapters is sometimes determined by connections between them: and so, for instance, the chapter on economic effects is placed after the one on employment market effects because it contains a section that refers back to it. No doubt other authors would have ordered the chapters in different ways.

It has also been difficult to divide material into chapters of fairly equal length, with each chapter tackling a reasonably coherent set of material. My last two books for Edward Elgar Publishing reveal two of the problems. In A Modern Guide to Basic Income: A multidisciplinary approach (Torry, 2020a), each
chapter set out from a particular discipline, but then the difficulty arose as to where to place material on a particular aspect of the Basic Income debate when it clearly related to several different disciplines. In *Basic Income: A history* (Torry, 2021a), a basically chronological approach could be taken, but as the Basic Income debate had evolved differently in different places, geographical divisions were also required. Compromises were inevitable. In relation to this book, these problems and others have presented themselves. While it was clear that each chapter would have to be organized into three parts—a brief discussion of relevant history; then the bulk of the chapter on the current state of research; and finally suggestions of research now required—it has been far from easy to divide up the current state of research into coherent chapter sections, simply because there are so many connections between different aspects of the global Basic Income debate and the research related to them. Each chapter has been given a title, and on the whole the background material, material on the current state of research, and suggestions of future research required, will relate to that title, but much of the material in each chapter could easily have been placed in one or more different chapters, and some material so obviously belongs in more than one chapter that a certain amount of repetition has been unavoidable. This has been particularly true of the Basic Income pilot projects and other practical experiments that have been so much a part of recent research activity. Each pilot project and experiment offers evidence relating to many different aspects of the Basic Income debate: employment effects, social effects, economic effects, financial feasibility, the politics of the debate, and so on. For this reason, material about pilot projects and other experiments will be found scattered throughout the book, which is as it should be.

**Conclusion**

Two histories have been entwined in this chapter: the history of Basic Income, and the history of the meaning of ‘Basic Income’. This too is as it should be. Given the importance of the definition of Basic Income to the now global debate about it, it is clearly essential that that definition should be researched, and therefore that both the history of Basic Income and the history of the meaning of ‘Basic Income’ should experience substantial and sustained research effort. Diverse historical methods should be used, and ideally the work should be undertaken by trained historians willing to immerse themselves in the Basic Income debates of the past, the present, and the future, and in the now vast Basic Income literature.
What has also emerged from this chapter is an understanding of the diversity and complexity of the current Basic Income debate, evidenced by the now voluminous literature on the subject: so we can draw the conclusion that any future research will have to take into account that diversity and complexity and the substantial amount of research already undertaken. It must be multidisciplinary and employ a wide variety of research methods, and it will have to understand that research undertaken in one place and time might not be relevant in another. It will also have to know that as soon as a research project has been completed the world will have changed and the results will be out of date.

As we shall see, it might not be quite true that ‘largely unknown is the interplay of UBI with the rest of the policy space’, but there are significant gaps (Crowley and Sevciuc, 2021: 8). The hope is that this book will fill some of them.

One final conclusion: The Basic Income researchers of the future are in for a diverse, complex and fascinating adventure.

The research now required

- Further research into the history of Basic Income, and into the history of the meaning of ‘Basic Income’, is essential, and should preferably be done by trained historians.
- Any future research must be multidisciplinary, must use a wide variety of methods, and must be done in each different context.