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Autism, Equity, and How the Journal Came to Be

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Editorial

Autism, Equity, and How the Journal Came to Be

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Over the past year a pandemic has swept across the world and, unsurprisingly, revealed gross inequalities across all aspects of life. We saw this in the constant pandemic media coverage that overlooked the experiences of the disability community and, more specifically, the autism community, at least at first. Furthermore, let us not forget in the early days of the pandemic that in countries such as Italy, people without disabilities were prioritized for life-saving machines (Andrews et al., 2020; Lund & Ayers, 2020), contributing to a culture of fear for the one in five Canadians with a disability (Morris et al., 2018) about what would happen to them here. As COVID-19 reached Canadian shores we saw this pattern of inequity quickly replicated within our society. For instance, Canadians with developmental disabilities, such as autism, living in residential settings did not receive the same level of support as those living in different kinds of residences such as retirement residences (Abel & Lai, 2020). Likewise, the initial claims that only people with 'preexisting conditions' were at risk implied that those at risk were somehow less valuable to society. Nothing has highlighted the very real problem and extent of ableism within Canadian society as a whole more than these injustices arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, and this is what planted the seed for the Canadian Journal of Autism Equity (CJAE).

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As these events unfolded, our organization, the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorder Alliance (CASDA), a national alliance advocating for the rights of Autistic Canadians within federal policy, began its conversation on equity. Employing an “equity mirror”, wherein an organization reflects and evaluates its relationship with equity, CASDA opened a call to its members to look at equity issues within the alliance (Schmitz, 2015). One overarching question was: How can we become more equitable? We think that in utilizing the “equity mirror” approach and in turn recognizing both the conscious and unconscious power systems that exist within our own wall has been the first step of many in addressing how we as an organization can and do perpetuate inequality. Although we have been making efforts to have Autistic and marginalized voices represented within our organization, we still have a long way to go. For instance, at the time of writing, we currently have only one Autistic Board Member. Furthermore, Autistic people were only half of our organization’s speakers at our yearly Canadian Autism Leadership Summit conference, and most of our committees and working groups have only a handful of Autistic people writing recommendations for a National Autism Strategy. Also, at the time of writing, CASDA members are mostly parent organizations and researchers from large cities, and we lack representation of people of colour and LGBTQ2S+ communities in our alliance. Although we are not close to finishing looking into the equity mirror, the alliance has taken its first of many steps towards equity and, in partnership with McMaster University, has created this Autistic-led platform with the goal of Autistic and marginalized voices being heard by the federal government and Canadian decision-makers. In addition to the journal, a series of Equity Toolkits containing pieces from future issues will be released to specific groups, such as employers, on making their spaces more equitable for Autistic Canadians.

In this first issue, we ask why Autistic people are historically ignored by systems like the media, advocacy organizations, governments, and decision-makers. To begin responding to this question, we must recognize that disability in and of itself has a ranking of tolerance and acceptance, namely the pan-disability hierarchy (Deal, 2003; Hayward, 2005). This ranking reflects society’s bias towards disabilities that closely fit its ideal model of an individual (Deal, 2003), for example, people with physical disabilities tend to be generally more accepted by society than those with developmental disabilities such as autism (e.g., consider the differences in accessibility standards for these two groups) (Wilton, 2000).

In addition to this disability hierarchy, we cannot downplay the effects of intersectionality. Each person has many identities, and those identities, whether gender, sexual orientation, race, background, socioeconomic status, or any others, can be an advantage or a disadvantage at different times and in different contexts. The scope of the content in this issue does not give a complete view on equity issues impacting the autism community of Canada. Nor does it give a full view of the effects of intersectionality. Instead, it provides a short sketch and an introduction to the state of inequity in Canada as perceived by each of its Editors.

So that is CJAE - the beginning of what we hope becomes a rooted platform for first- and

marginalized-voiced people to be recognized and heard by decision-makers across Canada. We invite Autistic, racialized, Indigenous, and all Canadians from parents of Autistic people to government to businesses to write, draw, film, and publish with us. A unique platform such as this can add strength and power to Autistic voices and encourage federal policymakers and decision-makers to listen and make changes for a more equitable Canada. Thus, as CJAE opens the floor to voices nationally and beyond, we present to you pieces from the Editors themselves on what equity is, and more particularly, what it represents in the context of autism and Policy. We cannot wait to read, watch, and overall listen to what equity means to you. We are excited to see the change that will be mobilized as a direct result of your contributions to this journal.

With that, let's listen.

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