

BOOK REVIEW

Disabled people and housing: choices, opportunities and barriers

Laura Hemingway

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Mariela Gaete Reyes*

King's College London

The quality of housing influences an individual's well being and life experiences. Yet, for disabled people, their accommodation circumstances can be especially difficult, as they do not have many options to choose from because impairment is not considered to be "part of domestic habitation" (Imrie, 2004: 687). With some exceptions, the subject of housing and disability has not featured in mainstream social research, and, as Imrie (2004: 688) suggests "there is a need for housing studies to take more seriously the interrelationships between disability, impairment and dwellings than has hitherto been the case" (also, see Allen, 1999; Oldman and Beresford, 2000; and the Special Issue of *Housing Studies*, 2004). Hemingway's book takes up this challenge by exploring issues relating to disabled people's access to and experiences of housing and, in particular, she considers the "physical, financial, attitudinal and communication" barriers which limit their accommodation choices and opportunities (p. 15).

The book is divided into seven chapters and is organised around three objectives. The first is to highlight the relevance of the social model of disability in the production of knowledge in the field of housing research and also in policy and practice. This model understands disability as socially produced disadvantage, or as the "result of social, environmental and attitudinal barriers experienced by the individual" (pp. 53-54). Hemingway devotes chapter three to justifying the use of the social model of disability as the underpinning for the book, and she does so by discussing it in relation to the individual and the bio-psychosocial understandings of disability. In chapter two, the author argues that the medical, or individual, model of disability, which understands disability and disadvantage as caused by the dysfunctions of the body and/or mind, has underpinned much housing policy and provision for disabled people leading to segregated, and 'special needs' solutions that tend to isolate them from the community. Based on secondary

sources, in this chapter Hemingway produces an historical analysis of the key policy developments relating to housing and disability such as the Disability Discrimination Act, Part M of the building regulations, and the Life Time Homes Standards. Here, she highlights the relevance of the "understandings of disability for policymakers and service providers" (p. 19).

Also, in chapter two, Hemingway explores the potential effects of welfare policy changes promoted by the Coalition Government in the housing opportunities and living conditions of disabled people (see also Brown and Patrick's editorial in this issue). These include plans to cut public expenditure that may diminish the income of disabled people, such as closing down the Independent Living Fund, and reductions in housing benefits and in the Disability Living Allowance. The latter, as the author asserts, is likely to be implemented by "the introduction of a tougher medical assessment...aimed to determine those who 'really need' the benefit" (p. 41). Such changes are related to the re-moralisation of welfare by the Coalition Government, its conception of fairness, and the reworking of the boundaries between the 'deserving and undeserving, citizens and non-citizens', and 'workers and non-workers', with the emphasis being on remunerated work as the determinant of citizenship (see Brown and Patrick's editorial in this issue, p.3). This, as Hemingway suggests, is reflected in the Government's intention to support all unemployed individuals in going back to the labour market and to "re-assess all current claimants of Incapacity Benefit for their readiness to work" (p. 41; HM Government, 2010: 23). It is early days yet to know the impacts that the new welfare policies may have on the housing conditions of disabled people, but it would be valuable to include an assessment perhaps in a later edition of the book.

The second objective of the book is to bring together findings of earlier research on housing and disability, with insights from empirical research conducted by the author. The findings of Hemingway's empirical research are outlined and discussed mainly in chapters four to six (and to a lesser extent in chapter seven). These offer a thorough insight into the interlocking structural variables influencing disabled people's housing circumstances. Chapter four focuses on physical barriers within dwellings and neighbourhoods. Hemingway suggests that the stock of accessible properties is insufficient and this, potentially, promotes dependence of disabled people on third party assistance. However, it ought to be noted that some disabled people have to rely on assistance for everyday activities even when they live in accessible housing, due to the nature of their impairments, and this influences their relationships with their home environments. For Hemingway, physical barriers shape inhabitants' experiences of dwellings and these are the result, in part, of a lack of consultation with disabled people about their housing needs. Chapter four also explores communication barriers relating to poor information about accessible housing stock affecting, for instance, people with sensory impairments.

Chapter five, which is an engaging piece of writing, examines financial barriers constraining the access of disabled people to suitable housing. These include socio-economic conditions such as unemployment and low incomes. Such conditions not only influence the house buying power of disabled people directly, but also the risk assessment practices performed by the mortgage industry, limiting further disabled people's access to the owner-occupied market. As Hemingway observes, lenders conduct risk assessments to evaluate potential clients' likelihood of failing to repay loans, and they perceive disabled people as a risky group and discriminate against them on those grounds. Here, "disabled people's circumstances (in relation to employment and income) may be viewed in a negative light" (p. 108). Moreover, as Chapter six suggests, people with specific

impairments can be categorised as 'higher risk', facing further institutional discrimination. In this context, "attitudes and assumptions held by housing providers and institutions can be as 'disabling' as the physical and economic environment" in affecting the opportunities of disabled people (p. 129).

The third and final objective of the book is to engage with the different dimensions of housing need regarding disabled people. In doing so, Hemingway links the notion of housing need with the meanings of the home (see Chapter seven). Specifically, she analyses the ways in which the barriers explored throughout the book impact negatively on disabled people's sense of home. Drawing on a range of authors, Hemingway reflects on how "interactions with professionals, providers of support and neighbours may...affect meanings of home for disabled people" in relation to feelings of privacy, control and safety (p. 165). However, she does not support this claim with empirical material, in particular, with reference to the relationships between disabled people and support workers within the home. Also, in chapter seven, Hemingway introduces a new theme that seems at odds with the general focus of the book on structural barriers. Here, she devotes a subsection of the chapter to explore the ways in which the personal experience of impairment influences the meanings of the home for disabled people. While this focus is relevant, and worth developing further, the book would have been improved by including it in a more substantial and detailed way in earlier chapters.

By including issues relating to impairment, such as pain, within the disabling factors that may "affect the way in which disabled people use, and feel about, their homes", Hemingway is using, implicitly, an interpretation of disability that not only considers structural but also personal aspects (p. 171; also, see Shakespeare, 2006). However, throughout the book Hemingway stresses her commitment to the social model of disability, which differentiates impairment from disability, equating the latter with structural barriers. In order to defend her use of the social model, Hemingway distinguishes between the 'explanatory powers' and the 'action purposes of the model', highlighting the political relevance of the latter (p. 59). Nevertheless, to leave the 'explanatory powers' of the social model unchallenged is problematic as the explanation of what disability is constitutes the basis for the development of knowledge. If disability is interpreted only as structural disadvantage, the impairment related dimensions, revealed by Hemingway's empirical evidence, would be lost. This contradiction is perhaps not fully addressed in the book. It might be worth developing, in a later edition of the book, a more critical examination of the social model of disability and/or adopting a disability perspective that explicitly acknowledges personal and social dimensions to contribute to a richer understanding of disability.

In spite of this, the book is an important contribution to the subject of disability and housing as it puts together a critical evaluation of a varied range of research on the subject. Also, it is innovative in unraveling the ways in which institutional barriers impact differentially on people with a diversity of impairments in the context of housing provision. I would recommend this book to undergraduate and postgraduate students, policy makers and practitioners involved in matters relating to disability and housing. The book is accessible in its reading and it constitutes a useful resource to reflect on institutional practices and other structural barriers limiting the access of disabled people to suitable accommodation in the social and private rented sectors, and the owner-occupation market.

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* Correspondence address: Department of Geography, King's College London, Strand, London WC2R 2LS. Email: mariela.gaete_reyes@kcl.ac.uk

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