

People with Disabilities: Sidelined or Mainstreamed?
by Lisa Schur, Douglas Kruse, and Peter Blank

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Discrimination and stigma against disabled people have resulted in their marginalisation over many hundreds of years. However, the past forty years have seen significant changes in the way society views disabled people. Drawing on international research and US and UK datasets, *People with Disabilities: Sidelined or Mainstreamed* aims to provide an overview of the status of disabled people today. It does so by exploring a number of dimensions: economic inclusion (chapter 2), inclusion in work (chapter 3), political inclusion (chapter 4), and social inclusion (chapter 5). In addition the book explores the experience of disabled people at the intersection of disability and other social and cultural identities, namely gender and ‘race’/ethnicity (chapter 7). The book concludes with a summary of the assembled evidence before presenting commentary on the perspectives of disabled activists and academics.

Before discussing the book in detail, a note is required on the use of terminology. All three authors are from the US and therefore their use of terminology is influenced by US norms. This may at times appear challenging to a UK readership, particularly the use of ‘people with disabilities’ as opposed to ‘disabled people’, which is preferred in UK disability studies (Oliver 1983). The authors address this in their introductory chapter, and while paying homage to the social model (see Thomas 2004 for a discussion of different models of disability) from which the term ‘disabled people’ emerged, argue for ‘people with disabilities’ as having the widest usage both in the US and internationally.¹ This has been a contentious debate in the disabled people’s movement in the UK (Shakespeare & Watson 2001), but the authors’ clearly stated intention to stay out of this debate was well argued and reasonably justified.

¹It will be noted that the reviewer has used ‘disabled people’ throughout this paper. This is partly because this review will feature in a UK publication, but also because of her own positionality as a disabled person and commitment to analysis based on the social model of disability.

The uncritical use of a certain old-fashioned term for describing a learning impairment in chapter 6 was less justified. Such a term may be shocking to a UK audience, as it was for this reviewer.

These comments notwithstanding, in writing this book, the authors address an important question and set down a useful marker of the progress made by the disabled people's movement to date. They draw on an impressive range of evidence and are able to demonstrate significant improvements in the lives of disabled people over the last four decades. The different dimensions are comprehensive enough to enable a thorough analysis of the status of disabled people, and to demonstrate change over time. Importantly they also demonstrate that while there has been much change, disabled people continue to be marginalised.

The authors' treatment of the different dimensions enables analysis of different aspects of inclusion in turn. However, they note in the concluding chapter that the dimensions are not static or independent, but interrelated and interdependent. Progress in one dimension may lead to improvements in another, for example access to employment may open up opportunities for social interaction and reduce isolation. However, the opposite can just as easily be the case. Though this acknowledgement is helpful, the book would have benefited from drawing stronger links between the dimensions in earlier chapters. While the chapter on social integration (chapter 5) does make useful links, the chapters on economic (chapter 2) and political inclusion (chapter 4) might have gained from more consideration of the other dimensions.

The book's greatest strength is undoubtedly in the concluding chapter where interviews with disabled academics and activists are used to interrogate findings from the previous chapters. As the authors themselves state, this enriches and sharpens the analysis. Nevertheless, one cannot help feeling that some of these analyses might have been better integrated throughout the book. The concluding chapter is so vivid in its analysis, that earlier chapters of the book appear somewhat dry in contrast.

A further strength of the book was in considering the interaction between disability and gender and 'race'/ethnicity. As the authors acknowledge, disability studies has been rightly criticised for 'homogenising' the experience of disabled people, and it is to the book's credit to see this addressed here. Unfortunately limitations of data meant that the section on 'race'/ethnicity generalised from the experience of disabled people in only two countries. The section on gender, however, was able to draw on a wider range of examples including some from the Global South.

It was unfortunate too that this section did not consider the intersection between disability and other social identities such as sexuality and gender identity. It is likely that this omission was due to lack of appropriate data on these issues. However, it resulted in a slightly limited discussion.

Similarly, though the book draws on an impressive range of sources, the inclusion of examples from different countries was at times inconsistent. The authors do not explicitly claim that the book aims to give a global perspective; however, the inclusion of international data does simply this. Though the book tried to draw on a range of examples, those from the Global North tended to dominate. As a result meaningful comparison of the experiences of disabled people in the Global North and South was not possible.

Finally, though the scope of the book was comprehensive, there were times where the quality of the analysis felt slightly inconsistent. This was particularly so in the sections on economic inclusion and inclusion in work, where the analysis tended to give greater weight to individual rather than structural barriers to inclusion. This was unexpected in a book that argues that it is discrimination, a structural factor, which lies at the heart of the exclusion of disabled people from mainstream society. This may be an inevitable pitfall of a multi-authored publication, drawing on expertise from three individuals with different analytical styles. It may also have arisen out of a desire to bring balance to the analysis. However, it had the effect of making it unclear what the book was calling for in terms of solutions to the problems it highlighted. While assessing the status of disabled people is a laudable aim, one cannot help feeling it is a limited one if it does not also seek to bring about change.

These criticisms notwithstanding, this is a well-evidenced text that draws on an impressive range of sources, and amply meets its aim of reviewing the status of disabled people (at least in the Global North) after forty years of social change. It will be particularly useful for those looking for an accessible introduction to the barriers faced by disabled people in political, economic and social life.

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