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Supported Housing in Britain and Sweden

BOOK REVIEW: Accommodating Difference: Evaluating Supported Housing for Vulnerable People

David Clapham

Bristol: Policy Press, 2015, ISBN 978-1-44730-634-4

In the continuing British policy context of austerity in which social support for vulnerable people is increasingly curtailed through budget cuts and difficult-to-meet conditionalities, Professor David Clapham's book is both uplifting and disheartening. His comparative evaluation of supported housing in Britain and Sweden is uplifting in that it shows that most models aim at improving individual well-being — as opposed to the old, gloomy institutionalized housing — even though outcomes have seldom been assessed through a residents' lens. By proposing an evaluation framework in terms of subjective well-being defined by residents, the book makes a clear theoretical contribution to social policy and housing studies. But the book is also disheartening by showing that the ongoing retreat of state support, concomitant with the expansion of market provision, has increasingly translated economic inequality into disparities in well-being.

Apart from introduction, the book has nine chapters. Chapter One presents several models of supported housing; according to the ways by which forms of support and accommodation are differently linked, these models can be imagined as being situated along a continuum. At the one end of this continuum, housing tends to be institutionalized and segregated from local communities, offering a shared living of limited individual rights while support is extensive, fixed and linked to the institutional accommodation. Hostels/foyers for homeless people and residential homes for older people are examples of this. At the opposite end, the support is flexible, offered in the resident's home which means supported individuals have higher degrees of personal control while remaining integrated in local communities. Examples of this are domiciliary support and clustered homes linked to a core providing flexible services (e.g. "retirement villages" and "community hubs"). The middle area of this continuum can be

illustrated by supported schemes of self-contained flats linked to additional communal facilities which are particularly common in Sweden but less so in Britain.

Chapter Two (on well-being), Three (on homes) and Four (on neighbourhoods) develop the theoretical framework which is later used in evaluating several models of supported housing. David Clapham intertwines two viewpoints: the socio-psychological perspective of subjective well-being which focuses on the social practices, relations and meanings concerning house and home; and the socio-environmental perspective which focuses on the physical, social and symbolic characteristics of homes and neighbourhoods, and their implications for use by impaired bodies.

The key concept proposed in Chapter Two is that of “difference” as represented by different identities and lifestyles across people within a policy “category” such as “old people”, “homeless people” or “people with disabilities”. The assumption is that people within each category have different needs and lifestyles which require provisions of different models and flexibility within models in order to enable choice and maximize well-being; exercise of personal control is key to maximizing subjective well-being and maintaining a positive identity. Chapter Three reminds us that the full realization of the meanings of home also requires the exercise of personal control, expression of identity through personalization, and preservation of self-esteem through a sense of personal progress. But homes are also material artefacts. They are characterized by *affordances* that is to say by physical properties that have different uses and meanings relative to particular persons (and bodies). Affordances are therefore dependent “on the objectives, identities and lifestyles of the individual concerned” (p 81). Chapter Four applies the concept of affordances to the neighbourhood; the discussion of what is a neighbourhood and why neighbourhoods still matter is particularly appealing. The author emphasizes that the affordances of home and neighbourhood increasingly reflect broader socio-economic inequalities — particularly in Britain where the housing stock is older and of lower quality and where neighbourhoods are more segregated than in Sweden. The historic roots of these differences become clearer in Chapter Five which presents an overview of social and housing policies in both the countries.

Chapters Six, Seven and Eight evaluate models of supported housing for older people, homeless people and people with disabilities, respectively. These very informative chapters are each structured in four sections: the public discourses shaping and shaped by the perceived identities and lifestyle of each group; dedicated models of supported housing in each country; the evaluation of these models in terms of home and neighbourhood affordances and well-being;

and a concluding section reflecting on the most appropriate models for maximizing residents' subjective well-being.

Chapter Nine concludes the book. It first shows that the concept of welfare regimes remains relevant in the field of supported housing yet is not static — and this is an important contribution to the ongoing debate on globalization. Both countries have moved towards a more market-oriented system but in a path-dependent way; “the changes are not the same and the starting points are very different” (p 215); marketization has been faster in the housing sector than in the social support field in both the countries and in Britain than in Sweden, overall.

Second, while more flexible and home-based models of supported housing clearly maximize residents' subjective well-being, the author cautions against some important caveats. For instance one's home or neighbourhood may not deliver the appropriate affordances hence a residential move may be preferred to domiciliary support; flexibility and multiple choices remain key in order to accommodate a diversity of needs, identities and lifestyles. The author concludes that the best way forward for policy would be to marry the resource availability of Swedish policy with the personalization agenda of British policy; this seems clearly easier to be achieved in Sweden than in austerity Britain.

Lastly, David Clapham reflects on the relevance of well-being as an evaluation criterion. In agreement with the author, I believe residents' subjective well-being in any form of housing — and particularly its components of personal control and self-esteem — should concern policy makers; but I am less convinced by an exclusive emphasis on identity and lifestyle. I have reservations regarding “identity” seen as a personal “project of becoming” (p 41) for I believe one's *identities* constitute a messy, fragmented assembly being often difficult to negotiate but to plan purposefully. More importantly, I believe the exclusive emphasis on lifestyle and “lifestyle statuses” is unfortunate. As the author has been concerned throughout the book with how economic inequality affects well-being, it is surprising that he refrained from conceptualizing “inequality in resources” beyond a view of non-hierarchical statuses of different lifestyle. This has led him to dismiss in just one paragraph the competing concept of social class and produced some regrettable expressions such as “an absence of resources through contextual factors such as poverty can have a major impact [on identity]” (p 46). Social class theorists of many persuasions have shown that poverty and life chances are seldom contextual but, just as wealth, are structurally transmitted through a lack of (or privileged) access to education, employment and networks of power.

By its theoretical contributions and well-informed material, *Accommodating Difference* will interest any scholar and practitioner in the field of housing and social policy. But I believe

the merits of this book are broader than that given its ethics on difference, well-being and self-esteem which may be awakening for many readers and certainly formative for students.

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