

Infrastructural Encounters: Disability in Urban Lives

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Rationale

We seek to fill a gap in the literature where there has been limited engagement between urban studies and disability by addressing the risks and benefits of understanding urban encounter and infrastructure through a disability lens. In doing so, we examine how disabled people encounter the city and its infrastructure, and how disabled people make themselves legitimate users of urban space in and through mundane encounters with other people.

While often described as a space where diverse lives can come together through serendipitous encounters (Amin, 2002; Jacobs, 1961; Sennett, 1996; Tonkiss, 2005), the city's infrastructures, services, exchanges, and rhythms routinely treat disabled people as problematic beings in urban space (Schweik, 2009; Velho, 2017). Despite this, disabled people inhabit the city in situated and concrete ways to legitimise their presence as urban dwellers (Bredewold et al., 2020). Recent research on care in urban contexts (Williams, 2017; 2020) outlines potentialities to inclusion, everyday justice, and the (re-)making of disability as built on mutuality between disabled people and caregivers, travel companions, (non)human assistants, and other inhabitants of the city. Relationality, whether through the roles of others, materialities in the form of technical assistance and infrastructures, or even encounters with strangers, are crucial in the meaning-making of the everyday lives of disabled people. It is here, through an engagement with infrastructure and encounter, that fruitful work can be done.

Urban infrastructure and encounter have been recently criticised as overly romanticised (Horton & Penny, 2023) or euphemistic (Kemmer et al., 2022) and, we argue, somehow detached from the power relations that become apparent in the everyday struggles experienced by disabled people in the city. In understanding encounters and infrastructures as both a source of trouble and opportunity for disabled people, we seek to examine the often-hidden labour that disabled people put into managing their encounters with infrastructure and other city dwellers, as well as recognising the costs and risks that they assume in doing so.

This Special Issue thus seeks to rethink urban infrastructure and encounter through a disability lens bringing into discussion the dis/ability binary, care, agency, power, and subjective experiences. In examining the situated and concrete ways in which disabled people produce themselves as legitimate and proficient urban dwellers, we may not only better understand what is at stake for them in and through these encounters and infrastructures, but also expand and specify contemporary notions of these two key concepts.

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