

*DISABLING ENVIRONMENTS: A REVIEW OF
OLIVER'S UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY:
FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE*

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Many behavior analysts work with individuals who have physical, sensory, or intellectual impairments; are involved in services for people with disabilities; or have been exposed to the concept of disability. Michael Oliver's book attempts to analyze the development of the disability concept and show how it has affected, often negatively, the lives of people who have disabilities and the services they receive. As a writer and critic in the field of disability for over 20 years, as well as someone who has experienced spinal injury and its aftermath, Oliver is in a good position to write this book.

In the introduction, Oliver states that his original purpose was to collate his writing on disability into a single publication, but it became an account of the development of the concept of disability. As this development occurred, Oliver has been able to meld his personal experience of disability with his thinking and writing about the concept, and this book is the product.

The book is 192 pages long and has 11 chapters. Chapter 1 presents an account of Oliver's own personal struggle with disability and his development of a political understanding of the way in which people with disabilities are disempowered. Chapter 2 describes the Fundamental Principles Document, which restates the distinction between

impairment and disability and emphasizes the importance of consumer organizations being comprised of and controlled by people with disabilities. Although the points are clear enough, the distinction between commentary on the Fundamental Principles Document and the document itself was not. Chapter 3 compares the social and individual models of disability. The social model highlights restrictions imposed on people with disabilities by externally imposed physical, social, and psychological barriers, and emphasizes justice and rights; the individual model of disability focuses on individual adaptation and resources, and emphasizes the sense of personal tragedy and the caring response of others. Chapter 4 provides an analysis of citizenship and its component political, social, and civil rights, and describes how these concepts can be utilized to enhance the position of people with disabilities. Chapter 5 critiques the notion of professionally assessed need as the basis of service provision and argues for services based on common human needs such as accommodation, transport, work, and so forth. The arguments in these three chapters parallel those of Wolfensberger (1972) and Wolfensberger and Thomas (1983), especially with regard to the adoption of a social model of disability and the upholding of civil rights, despite differences in their evolution. Although Oliver's ideas have been developed through his personal experience of physical impairment and engagement with the broader disability movement as a writer and academic, Wolfensberger's originated in the specific area of intellectual disability and

Oliver, M. (1996). *Understanding disability: From theory to practice*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

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have been developed in their application to other areas of disability and human services generally.

In chapter 6, Oliver criticizes the role that formal education services play in excluding people with disabilities from the education process and from mainstream social life and points to the fact that the proportion of children still educated in segregated special schools has hardly changed in the United Kingdom for 20 years. Chapter 7 provides a comment on the development of services to address disabilities through the example of walking or not walking (from Oliver's own personal experience) and is essentially an argument for consumer input at the individual level by the person receiving services and at the service level by representative consumer groups. Chapter 8 looks at the concept and incidence of disability around the world, points to the universality of impoverishment and political and social disempowerment of people with disabilities, and makes links between the disability rights movement and other movements such as socialism and the peace movement. In chapter 9, under the title "Understanding the Hegemony of Disability," Oliver provides a framework for discussing theories of disability, grouping them into ontological (what is the nature of disability), epistemological (what causes disability), and experiential (how disability is experienced) categories. He then argues that the most useful theories in each area are political economy, social adjustment, and emancipatory explanations, respectively. His purpose is to encourage us to analyze the discourse of disability and to consider how disability is socially produced, and the role that language and theory play in that production. Although the main thesis in this chapter seems sound, evidence and analysis are too selective. Chapter 10 looks at the role of social action such as civil rights movements, consumer groups, and disability

rights groups in changing legislation and defending the situation of people with disabilities. Chapter 11 critiques "intellectuals" who make a living out of disability without fully understanding it from a personal perspective or acknowledging this lack of understanding through dialogue and collaborative work with people who have had this experience. He is especially critical of such intellectuals when they speak for, and assume leadership positions on behalf of, people with disabilities.

The book embraces a broad and difficult area and covers an impressive range of topics concerning the concept of disability. Overall I found the book interesting, readable, and expansive. From a behavioral point of view, the book's major contribution is to reaffirm the importance of environment in determining behavior. It points to the expectations, beliefs, and stereotypes in the environments that surround people with disabilities, and how these can act as barriers to the acquisition of a range of skills and behaviors that may be of day-to-day concern to behaviorists. These behaviors are part of the competencies and roles that allow access to mainstream services, citizenship rights and responsibilities, and full societal membership. The book therefore reminds us to take cognizance of the broader social framework within which we live and work and the importance of dismantling such barriers.

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