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**APPLYING THE SOCIAL MODEL IN
PRACTICE: SOME LESSONS FROM
COUNTRYSIDE RECREATION**

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Applying the Social Model in Practice: lessons from countryside recreation

Drawing on my own practical access advisory work, this paper explores some arguments for promoting social model ideas in mainstream settings, and looks at ways of putting this strategy into practice.

Despite criticisms from some quarters that social model ideas are too abstract to be of much practical use in the real world, I wish to argue that actually its focus on removing structural barriers makes it a far more logical and achievable strategy for inclusion than traditional individual model approaches.

This is because, far from further dividing disabled and non-disabled people, the social model's depersonalised focus on overcoming structural barriers offers an opportunity to move beyond the traditional individual blame culture, and to instead offer more potential for disabled and non-disabled people to work together to challenge these externally-imposed barriers.

However, I'm not sure that this potentially unifying aspect of social model ideas has been fully exploited to date.

Understandably, disabled people's primary need has been to explore the potential for change offered by unifying separately around a proud disabled identity. In such circumstances, little has been written about the possibilities offered by developing strategic alliances for change with non-disabled people from the mainstream.

Yet it could be argued that working with selected non-disabled others might be a way of achieving change more quickly, and across a wider range of settings, than can be achieved by disabled people working alone. And in reality, many disabled people already have to engage with non-disabled others in order to influence developments in policy and practice in mainstream organisations.

It might also be argued, however, that to date social model ideas at the theory level haven't fully addressed this area of engagement, or suggested strategies to support disabled people in making such situational alliances for change on the ground.

My own experience of access work suggests that, in seeking to work with non-disabled people, our key task is to challenge the insidiousness of the individual model, which appears to be disabling both to disabled and non-disabled people by setting up artificial barriers between our experience.

In turn, this militates against collaborative working in the way that I'm suggesting. To me, it's a clear example of 'divide and rule'.

Negotiating countryside access: issues and opportunities

In seeking to work with countryside staff to improve access, I often found rangers were afraid to consider making their sites more accessible. Some of the main reasons for this were as follows:

Many had not worked with disabled people before, and so were afraid of inadvertently saying or doing something to upset them.

The pathologising individual model had also led many to wrongly assume that disabled people would need expensive separate special on-site facilities, and that they themselves would need special medical knowledge in order to be ready to deal with any impairment-related emergencies.

Taken together, these factors were actively preventing them from doing anything to open up their sites to disabled people.

In these circumstances, introducing the rangers to the depersonalised social model focus on challenging structural barriers to inclusion proved to be an important way of overcoming their fears.

This approach avoided blaming individuals for existing poor access, and instead freed them up to consider new and imaginative ways of working together to provide access for all.

In bringing disabled and non-disabled people together to develop appropriate design solutions, it also enabled them to identify some areas of commonality in their experience (here, a shared commitment to conservation), whilst at the same time recognising and valuing difference.

Thus the work was never about trying to make everyone the same, but instead attempted to support people to find sufficient common ground that they could work together to improve access.

Beginning to work together like this was an important way of challenging the divisiveness of the individual model.

Instead, the social model enabled the rangers to focus on tackling environmental barriers in the countryside they knew and loved. Working together as equals with disabled people also freed them up to use their pre-existing communication and visitor management skills to new audiences, and offered the possibility of educating more disabled people about what the countryside had to offer them.

In other words, using a social model structural barriers approach simply showed them how to draw on and extend their pre-existing skills and knowledge. It worked precisely because it did not demand a whole new knowledge base of the participants, but instead started with what they knew already, and just stretched it a bit.

Disabled people who were part of such collaborations also benefited, by helping to increase the range of accessible sites in their area.

That's not to say that a collaborative approach to improving access is always problem-free. So few non-disabled people know about the reality and extent of social oppression disabled people face that we may need to educate them throughout the collaboration process. Otherwise some disabling barriers (like lack of transport, childcare or support provision) may continue to prevent our full participation in such projects.

This education process can be boring, and take up time and energy we'd rather be using for other things. Unless the information exchange is two-way, it's also necessary to set limits on the extent of our self-disclosure, so that we don't reveal more personal information than we intended.

Nevertheless, I would argue that working with non-disabled people is one practical way of challenging exclusionary social barriers. I believe that the social model is a highly practical tool around which to structure such collaborations, and one which offers real potential to challenge the divisiveness of the individual model.