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EDITORIAL

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Accessibility to Welfare Services and Communities: Enabling Integration and Human Rights

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Abstract

This thematic issue discusses the accessibility of welfare services and communities, emphasising its role in enabling integration and the realization of human rights. Accessibility research is positioned as a vital tool for identifying social problems and inequalities and fostering inclusive services and communities. The thematic issue presents current accessibility research and its results conducted in different contexts. Accessibility is conceptualized as the ease of obtaining services, resources, and participation opportunities, particularly for individuals and groups in marginal societal positions. Accessibility is approached through different dimensions, including institutional, informational, economic, physical, experiential, interactional, and relational dimensions, to highlight how various factors shape access in society. For example, this thematic issue addresses access barriers confronted by adults and families experiencing poverty, marginalisation, harmful drug use, immigration, disabilities, and LGBTQI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex). This editorial underscores that accessibility is not a neutral concept but a politically and ethically charged phenomenon, often constrained by exclusionary mechanisms and service system limitations. It calls attention to the importance of trust-based relationships and interactional practices in promoting accessibility. This issue advocates for transformative approaches to reconfiguring welfare systems and communities so that they become inclusive and responsive to individuals' diverse circumstances and needs.

Keywords

accessibility; human rights; integration; interaction; marginalisation; social problems; welfare services

1. Introduction

Accessibility touches many aspects of life by enabling integration to services and communities as well as the realisation of human rights, especially for those in marginal societal positions. Thus, accessibility includes the profound objective of integration and ensuring everyone's right to a dignified life. More precisely, accessibility means that services and resources are easily available to all people who need them, considering their physical environment, transportation, available information, and public facilities and services (United Nations Enable, 2007). Thus, services and other resources should be easy for individuals and groups to find and apply to; this ensures they are treated equally and that their human rights, such as the right to social security and participation, are fulfilled. For instance, criteria that justify the use of services, geographical distances, and service fees should be reconsidered to facilitate accessibility. As seen in the thematic issue, access to cultural and linguistic resources in addition to services and benefits is vital for individuals' realisation of their human rights and integration into communities (Huang & Zhao, 2025).

This thematic issue introduces the results of current accessibility research conducted in different contexts, producing new knowledge about (in)accessibility and how it relates to other social problems. As accessibility research is widely distributed across different research fields (Fargion et al., 2019), this issue brings together studies addressing this important research topic and demonstrates how accessibility can be approached from various perspectives. The consensus drawn from the results of the studies in this thematic issue is that accessibility requires strong agency from all stakeholders as it is dependent on enabling service systems' policies, practices, and interactions.

However, efforts to promote accessibility are complicated by the fact that facilitating access for some often weakens access for others. For example, many services are currently being provided online; for some people, online services are their only opportunity for access because they are unable to engage with physical services due to their complex and possibly illegal situations (Ranta et al., 2024; Thell, 2025). Yet, at the same time some people are excluded from online services due to for instance insufficient IT skills.

Earlier research (e.g., Fauk et al., 2021; McWilliams et al., 2022; Paradis-Gagné et al., 2020), as well as articles in this thematic issue (e.g., Kantsila-Korhonen, 2025; Lammers, 2025; Nowicka et al., 2025; Söderström, 2025; Vanjusov & Saurula, 2025; Zitting et al., 2025) recognise various barriers to accessibility. Conversely, obstacles are often used to determine what promotes accessibility. For example, service users' previous treatment and support experiences play a major role in their intentions to seek help, benefits, and engagement with services. Experiences of poor treatment, losing independence, and useless services cause people to avoid them until the last moment (Maeseele et al., 2013; Nadai et al., 2025; Paradis-Gagné et al., 2020; Ranta et al., 2024; Räsänen, 2025).

In this editorial, we present the various definitions and approaches to accessibility to demonstrate its manifold nature. We then review the contexts in which accessibility is studied in this thematic issue, which highlights the flexibility and versatility of the concept for studying various social issues. Thirdly, we reflect on the ethical considerations and implications of studying and enhancing accessibility. To conclude, we highlight the interconnections between (in)accessibility and (mis)trust in the different societal and interactional contexts explored in this thematic issue.

2. Various Definitions and Approaches

Accessibility has been examined both as an independent phenomenon and by focusing on many parallel and closely related discussions, such as help seeking and service choices (Fargion et al., 2019). The overlap between help seeking, service choices, and accessibility is indicated, for example, when individuals recognise that they need help but decide not to apply for services or support and, as a result, are excluded from services and communities (Zitting et al., 2025). Claims of access are also discussed in relation to human rights, autonomy, participation, exclusion, and inequality (e.g., Jensen et al., 2025). Hence, accessibility has been defined and approached in various ways depending on the focus and objectives of the particular studies (Anderson et al., 2016; Fauk et al., 2021).

Accessibility is affected by many structural, institutional, individual, and situational factors (Nowicka et al., 2025). In many of the Finnish contributions to this thematic issue (Kantsila-Korhonen, 2025; Vanjusov & Saurula, 2025; Zitting et al., 2025), accessibility is perceived as consisting of the following dimensions originally presented in Vanjusov's (2022) Finnish language dissertation: institutional, informational, economic, physical, and experiential. When focusing on the institutional dimension, attention is paid to the guidelines, practices, and policies of institutions that affect individuals' ability to receive services and benefits. When concentrating on the delivery of information and access to the functionality of communications, we are interested in informational (in)accessibility. Financial status and wealth have a major impact on individuals' societal opportunities and ability to use services. Thus, economic factors are essential when individuals' abilities to access and participate in services and communities are at stake. The physical dimension underlines the importance of easily accessible facilities for individuals who experience mobility difficulties. Geographic distances and the ability to travel are also relevant when people consider engaging with services or communities, and the ability to move, change places, and travel increases individuals' opportunities to participate and integrate with communities (e.g., Casas, 2007). Access also includes the right to enter places and locations and to avoid others. As Clarke (2004, p. 218) aptly observed: "Questions of access imply spatial arrangements—in which people are located in places, or demand access to other—more privileged—spaces." Claims of who has access to where make the political dimension of accessibility visible.

Experiential (in)accessibility is a result of interactions and encounters that either meet people where they are, as they are, and invite them in, or impose different demands and distrust on people and exclude them, leading to bad experiences (Lammers, 2025; Ranta & Juhila, 2025; Räsänen, 2025; Vanjusov, 2022). As Fargion et al. (2019) demonstrate, (in)accessibility factors are oriented to and negotiated in actual encounters between service users and practitioners , which makes examining interactions and communication practices important when accessibility is a concern (Ranta & Juhila, 2025; Räsänen, 2025).

Vanjusov and Saurula (2025) recognise the need to add relational accessibility to the dimensions of accessibility, as it emphasises other people's pivotal role in enhancing accessibility. That is, it is often from other people that we learn about the potential opportunities for help and support. Although other people are often valuable in breaking the accessibility obstacles, they are also uncertain and unreliable resources, as perceived by Huang and Zhao (2025), as well as Nowicka et al. (2025). Relational accessibility is based on the willingness and skilfulness of other people to act as intermediaries (Lammers, 2025). Ranta and Juhila (2025) demonstrate how (in)accessibility is not only connected to human relations but also to the places where these relations and encounters take place. Ranta and Juhila (2025) state that the situational and individual meanings attached to places have great importance in outreach work by playing a key role in promoting various dimensions of accessibility. Hence, both making service facilities accessible and supporting subtle multi-placed and place-sensitive work orientation are essential for enhancing accessibility for all.

Accessibility research includes efforts to differentiate various accessibility policies and strategies (e.g., Cortis, 2012; Grymonprez et al., 2017). For example, Lammers (2025, p. 3) uses Clarke's (2004) divisions to discuss "liberal-passive, conservative active-outreach, and transformative forms of access policy" (see also Fargion et al., 2019). These policies vary according to the types of welfare systems they support and who is seen as responsible for making access achievable. Liberal-passive policies place responsibility for active efforts with the individual, whereas conservative active-outreach policies promote active efforts by institutions and professionals to remove barriers and reach people who are assumed to have specific needs (Cortis, 2012). This approach, however, keeps the institutional practices and social norms of inclusion unchanged. Truly transformative policies develop from the premise that welfare services and communities (and not individuals or groups in marginal societal positions) must change to be reachable and inclusive for the heterogeneous "all." Thus, the essential question is who or what needs to change for the welfare services and communities to be accessible, safe, and inclusive for everyone? Claims to provide access should be about social transformation rather than individual adaptation (Clarke, 2004; Urek & Jurček, 2025).

3. Studying Accessibility in Different Contexts

Accessibility research often scrutinises various demographic groups or individuals who are seen as being in marginal societal positions and confront more access problems than comparatively better-off groups or individuals with more power and status (e.g., Casas, 2007). Therefore, accessibility studies often focus on exploring the disadvantages and hardships in individuals' lives and communities in different contexts. For example, articles in this thematic issue address access barriers confronted by adults and families living in poverty (Nadai et al., 2025; Zitting et al., 2025), illicit drug use (Ranta & Juhila, 2025), immigration (Nowicka et al., 2025; Terrefe, 2025), disabilities (Jensen et al., 2025; Lammers, 2025), and LGBTQI$^+$ (Söderström, 2025). Similarly, the articles herein examine accessibility from the perspectives of various stakeholders, such as professionals, interpreters, managers, and service users (Urek & Jurček, 2025).

Difficulties related to accessibility make visible the diversity, intersectionality, and special needs of individuals and groups. As Casas (2007, p. 462) observes: "This holistic perspective allows the use of accessibility as a tool to identify disadvantaged groups." When considering accessibility under certain specific contexts, such as supported housing (Jensen et al., 2025), accessibility is balanced against the conflicting rights and responsibilities of different stakeholders. Access is accepted or denied at the intersection of institutional intake criteria, obligations, and resources, in addition to personal needs, wants, and problem formulations. Access is often negotiated according to the expectations of who should be considered eligible for social support (Casas, 2007; Clarke, 2004; Fargion et al., 2019).

Accessibility research has significant potential for studying various societal issues in global contexts. This thematic issue examines accessibility in China, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, and Switzerland. The articles use the conceptualisation of accessibility to examine legislation (Vanjusov & Saurula, 2025); the take-up of benefits, grants, and food aid (Nadai et al., 2025; Zitting et al., 2025); social exchanges and trust issues (Huang & Zhao, 2025; Terrefe, 2025); realisation of human rights (Jensen et al., 2025); multi-placed outreach work (Ranta & Juhila, 2025); and non-profit organisations' efforts to bridge service gaps (Rape Žiberna et al., 2025). In addition, peer support and counselling (Lammers, 2025) as well as co-production (Terrefe, 2025) are recognised as important practices in overcoming inaccessibility. Räsänen (2025) also examines accessibility in the context of service integration and multi-professional collaboration, which are seen as ways to reduce the boundaries between different service sectors and thereby prevent service users from being excluded (e.g., Juhila et al., 2021a). The objective of integration is acted out during grassroots-level encounters between service users and different professionals. When integration and collaborative goals fail, these encounters can become a battlefield of power and knowledge (Hall & Dall, 2021; Juhila et al., 2021b; Räsänen, 2025).

4. Ethical Implications and Reflections

Researching and managing accessibility raises various ethical concerns and viewpoints. Accessibility is not a neutral phenomenon but is loaded with values and standpoints. For example, allowing access to support and resources can be justified as the ethical duty and responsibility of social workers and other welfare professionals (Fargion et al., 2019; Kantsila-Korhonen, 2025; Urek & Jurček, 2025). Western states have committed to supporting human rights, including the right to a decent quality of life, in addition to accessible housing and health care. Legislation is a crucial precondition for successful service provision and access to services and other resources. However, legislation does not guarantee that the provided services are accessible at the local level (Kriisk & Minas, 2017; Vanjusov & Saurula, 2025). Accessibility requirements are complicated due to their different exclusion mechanisms, which are often purposely built into service systems to curb and control demand, such as applying selection criteria for service users, setting prerequisites and rules for the use of services.

Accessibility research can be seen as a form of disadvantage study that involves many ethical issues and risks. For example, there is the risk that groups' and individuals' own agency and rationales can be undermined and bypassed in research and welfare work. Furthermore, these groups and individuals can be depicted as activity targets; that is, they are patronised and observed from a distance without achieving their agency, reality, experiences, or reasoning of (in)accessibility. An important ethical question is who has the responsibility for enabling accessibility and in what circumstances? When allocating responsibility to individuals and groups in marginal societal positions, there may be various conflicting consequences, such as (dis)respecting individuals' agency and freedom of choice, neglecting the duty of care, or "blaming the victim" (Jensen et al., 2025).

Terms in accessibility research, such as "hard-to-reach," "care avoiders," and "service refusers," are often used without reflecting on them any further. These terms refer to individuals and groups who are considered (e.g., by professionals or researchers) to be in need of resources, care, and support but are not covered by services, do not seek services, or do not find or want services. Therefore, professionals have a hard time engaging with these individuals or groups, who have also been described as "revolving-door clients" who sporadically use different welfare services without benefiting from them in the long term. Although the above-mentioned concepts are descriptive, they can also be problematic in terms of their ethical implications (Andersson, 2013; Cortis, 2012; Duvnjak & Fraser, 2013; Maeseele et al., 2013; Ranta et al., 2024; Saario et al., 2021). When using these concepts, there is a risk that service users are seen as responsible for both their enduring difficulties in life (such as homelessness) and their failure to access and fit into existing forms of assistance (Maeseele et al., 2013). Given this, Grymonprez et al. (2017) noted the value of shifting the focus from individual characteristics to the rationales used by welfare services and the way workers perceive service users. It is essential to analyse what makes services and communities themselves “hard to reach” for people in marginal societal positions and to work to eliminate these obstacles.

5. Conclusion: Accessibility and Trust-Based Relationships

Finally, access to welfare services, resources, and communities, and thus to integration and human rights, is an outcome of the complex interplay between various stakeholders with different expectations, obligations, and rights, which can be impeded by various obstacles (Kriisk & Minas, 2017). The interactional and human-related aspect of accessibility makes it a context-bound, sensitive, and alternating phenomenon with strong interconnections to societal and institutional factors. Accessibility can be promoted in one moment, situation, and for a specific person, but weakened in other circumstances. At the grassroots level, accessibility is based on trustful communication, interactions, and encounters (Huang & Zhao, 2025; Ranta & Juhila, 2025; Räsänen, 2025).

Different stakeholders can either prevent access or act as mediators or facilitators of accessibility. For instance, McWilliams et al. (2022) stressed the importance of nurses’ interactional skills, such as engendering trust in engaging people experiencing homelessness (see also Urek & Jurček, 2025). When studying and enhancing accessibility, it is important to focus on “relationship-building and trust-building activities between practitioners or employees and clients” (Fargion et al., 2019, p. 632; see also Huang & Zhao, 2025; Ranta & Juhila, 2025; Räsänen, 2025; Terrefe, 2025). Thus, a common thread in the articles in this issue is the theme of (mis)trust towards institutions, professionals, individuals, and groups by those in marginal societal positions and, specifically, (mis)trust-based relationships between these stakeholders. Hence, interactional (in)accessibility and (mis)trust deserve more attention in the future.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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