Housing and Society

ISSN: 0888-2746 (Print) 2376-0923 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rhas20

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To cite this article: Edith England, Josie Henley & Emma Sheppard (29 Apr 2025): Housing as a site of epistemological injustice: how can research policy advance neurodivergent inclusion?, Housing and Society, DOI: 10.1080/08882746.2025.2488643

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08882746.2025.2488643

Published online: 29 Apr 2025.

HOUSING AND SOCIETY
https://doi.org/10.1080/08882746.2025.2488643

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Housing as a site of epistemological injustice: how can research policy advance neurodivergent inclusion?

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ARTICLE HISTORY Received 31 March 2025; Accepted 01 April 2025

Access to good-quality housing is essential to wellbeing, supporting psychological, emotional, social, and physical quality of life (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998). Neurodivergence,[1] used here to refer to natural variations in how humans think, perceive and experience the world, and including traits such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, and Tourette's, has, over recent years, been the subject of increasing public and academic interest (Brown et al., 2024; Chapman, 2023; Dind, 2021; O'Dell et al., 2016; Olund, 2024; Rosqvist, Chown, et al., 2020). We argue here that there exists a significant gap in knowledge and understanding of the housing issues faced by neurodivergent individuals such as to constitute an epistemological injustice, which maintains their marginalization and exclusion, and that, consequently, there is an urgent need for solutions-focused research, structured by meaningful involvement from neurodivergent people themselves. To evidence this we draw on both existing scholarly literature, particularly from the emergent, neurodivergent-led, field of Critical Neurodiversity Studies, and upon a series of consultations with 115 neurodivergent adults conducted in summer 2024 with the aim of informing and improving housing research into the experiences of neurodivergent individuals.

Critical Neurodiversity Studies provides an important, if highly under-utilized, starting point for appraising and addressing epistemological gaps within social policy. Emerging from both academic and community analysis and activism,[2] alongside Critical Disability Studies (Chapman & Carel, 2022; Rosqvist, Chown, et al., 2020), Critical Neurodiversity Studies (CNS) challenges the individualistic, deficit-focused narratives that have historically dominated medical and policy discourses around neurodivergence, and which position it as a deviation from an assumed norm (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist , Botha et al., 2023, Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Hultman, et al., 2023a; O'Dell et al., 2016). Rather, CNS reframes neurodivergence as a valid and valuable way of being human, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and addressing the socio-cultural and structural barriers that contribute to the marginalization of neurodivergent individuals (Rosqvist, Chown, et al., 2020; Rosqvist & Stenning, 2021). These narratives are especially helpful in addressing the deficit-focused discourses that can underpin exclusionary practices in

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institutional policy, which often reflect neuronormative assumptions about how individuals live, communicate, and engage with their environments marginalizing those whose experiences and needs deviate (Brown et al., 2024; Draper et al., 2024; Jurgens, 2020; O'Dell et al., 2016).

The significance of adequate housing, and its recognition as a fundamental right, is firmly established in both international and national legal frameworks. The UN Declaration on Human Rights (Article 25) affirms the right to housing as integral to an adequate standard of living, emphasizing its importance for health and wellbeing. Furthermore, housing and homelessness laws internationally center provision not only of physical shelter but also ensuring safety, security, and stability, recognizing homelessness as the absence of these critical elements (Fitzpatrick & Stephens, 2007, 2014). These frameworks, for the most part, acknowledge that the right to housing must address both individual and community needs; housing must be both appropriate and accessible, taking into account the specific characteristics and requirements of the individual or community in question. However, despite these legal and moral recognitions of housing as a fundamental right, the specific needs and experiences of neurodivergent individuals have remained largely unexamined within housing research and policy. As a whole, this research almost exclusively considers autistic individuals, with limited work on those who are divergent in other (or additional) ways. The few studies that do exist on neurodivergent housing tend to focus on three areas. First, there is growing interest in the design of sensory-friendly housing environments (Kinnaer et al., 2014; Mandell, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2024; Rispoli & Criado, 2024). This offers useful insights into the ways to meet the needs of those from certain neurodivergent groups, with especial relevance to autistic individuals with defined sensory profiles, and often who are receiving intense, around-the-clock support. However, because it tends to focus upon bespoke initial design, and structural and costly adaptations, findings tend to be limited in terms of accessibility for the wider neurodivergent population. Given growing evidence that neurodivergent individuals are at greater risk of financial exclusion (Bangma et al., 2020; Beauchaine et al., 2020; Koerts et al., 2023; Pellicano et al., 2024), there is an urgent need for solutions which are feasible without costly individual investment. This research is also largely limited to specific neurodivergent subgroups, mainly autistic individuals, and so may be of limited use in addressing the needs of other neurotypes. Second, in recent years there has been a substantial growth in research into the experiences of autistic individuals facing homelessness.

First, with the caveat that most studies are limited by small sample sizes and convenience sample (especially over-sampling from those already engaged with homelessness services, or data collection with staff rather than homeless individuals themselves), these studies do collectively suggest that autistic individuals may be over-represented in homeless populations internationally (Osborn & Young, 2024). Collectively, they suggest that some of the drivers of homelessness among autistic people are likely to be similar to those in the wider homeless population – notably relationship breakdown and lack of wider support structures (Stone, 2019, 2022). This research also highlights a number of areas where autism interacts with social structures to produce specific barriers.[3] One issue is an identified lack of awareness and training among frontline workers themselves, meaning that they do not feel able to provide useful, effective support to autistic people facing homelessness. This also reflects a wider lack of targeted housing support for autistic

individuals. A related, emergent, issue is that formal, medical, diagnosis is often necessary to secure access to services (Osborn & Young, 2024), reflecting wider evidence that frontline workers tend to place considerable value on medical knowledge (Bretherton et al., 2013). Privileging of formal diagnosis is likely to create barriers to support for autistic homeless people. Diagnosis can be both highly contested and suspect among autistic individuals themselves (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2013; Orsini, 2016). Additionally, a formal medical diagnosis may involve long waiting periods, access to financial resources (for instance, for a private diagnosis) and cognitive resources (Goodley, 2016; Zener, 2019), which collectively may make diagnosis especially inaccessible for those facing homelessness. Existing research on autistic experiences of homelessness has, so far, largely operated with a medical diagnostic paradigm, either including only those with a formal diagnosis, or using diagnostic tools to identify those believed likely to be autistic. A particular concern with this approach is that it risks overlooking those who are harder to diagnose, including women and girls (Zener, 2019). Additionally, without disregarding the importance of making visible the experiences of this highly marginalized group, this body of research largely describes the issue of neurodivergent (or more specifically, autistic) homelessness, without advancing potential solutions to address or mitigate it.

Bacchi (2009) argues that policy problems are neither neutral nor objective, but rather actively and politically constructed through the dynamics of power which, in turn, produce and reinforce culturally, socially and locationally specific understandings of truth and reality. To meaningfully address a policy issue – such as the absence of research in a particular area, or the framing of a group or issue in a specific way – we need to interrogate the deeper structures, discourses, assumptions and narratives that underpin it. This requires not only identifying research gaps but also ensuring that the research produced is meaningful, relevant, and useful to the communities it seeks to serve. Without this reflexivity, research risks becoming an exercise in othering, advancing epistemological injustice rather than addressing it, further entrenching the problems of exploitative disability and neurodiversity research (Minich, 2016; Price and Kerschbaum 2016). Within neurodivergent communities, a "façade of tokenistic inclusion" (Thom-Jones & Lowe, 2024, p. 161) within research has been heavily criticized, with objections especially directed at participatory and co-produced research which does not address deeper epistemological and ontological power imbalances (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2023, Botha et al., 2022; Rosqvist et al., 2023). One repeated criticism has been around the framing of research questions themselves, and specifically whether they are designed to produce useful, meaningful answers to problems faced by neurodivergent individuals (Chapman & Carel, 2022). We start from the premise that an epistemological injustice exists within housing research in terms of knowledge of neurodivergent needs, with likely tangible impacts on equitable access to services, support, and quality of life. However, reflecting the activist-academic standpoint of Critical Neurodiversity Studies – which challenges deficit-based, individualistic narratives of neurodivergence by reframing it as a valid, socially situated, and structurally constrained way of being – we propose that addressing this injustice is not simply a matter of doing more research. Rather, it requires designing and conducting research that centers the priorities of neurodivergent people themselves.

As a group of neurodivergent scholars, we have been keen to conduct research which brings the insights of Critical Neurodiversity Studies to bear upon social policy and

especially housing. This has been based largely upon our own anecdotal knowledge of high prevalence of housing and welfare issues among neurodivergent individuals. However, we also recognize that academic research carries considerable risk of being both extractive, and furthering othering and marginalization. This risk is especially associated with research which is done without considering the needs, wishes or interests of communities themselves into account. For this reason, before we started work, we decided to ask neurodivergent individuals and communities themselves what they saw as the priorities for social policy research.

In this research we attempted to be mindful of critiques of social research as tending to privilege neuronormative ways of being – such as verbal communication, linear, abstract and decontextualized reasoning and an assumption of shared semiotic understandings (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Botha et al., 2023; Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Hultman, et al., 2023a, 2023b; O'Dell et al., 2016; Rosqvist et al., 2023; Rosqvist, Stenning, et al., 2020). A neuronormative methodological approach risks marginalizing neurodivergent experiences and epistemologies. Understanding of how to address these barriers to research participation among neurodivergent people is not yet well established but believed to be improved by enabling people to tailor their research experience as much as possible. For this reason, we used a variety of different methods, both synchronous and asynchronous, verbal and non-verbal, to widen access points. We held five consultations, two online and three face to face, using an online bulletin board (Padlet) during and after the online consultations. We also sought direct, individual feedback (e.g., e-mail feedback). For the face-to-face sessions, participants were provided with creative materials such as pens, colored paper, and card to facilitate non-verbal feedback. 115 individuals attended the consultation sessions. Reflecting significant concern within disabled and neurodivergent communities around the potentially extractive nature of research, we paid all participants for their time to reflect 2 hours at the National Living Wage. The research was funded by the Wales Innovation Network, and ethical approval for the consultation was given by the ethics board of the School of Social Science, Cardiff University, the School of Education and Social Policy, Cardiff Metropolitan University, and the Department of Geography and Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University. For the remainder of this provocation, we discuss three of the main points made by those we consulted with – that research on neurodivergent housing experience is needed, that it should focus on structural and systemic barriers rather than an individualistic deficit approach, and that it should recognize the existing strengths and expertise of neurotypical individuals and communities. We suggest that, if neurodivergent housing research is to be improved, it must be through an approach which integrates these fully.

Epistemological injustice

Epistemological injustice arises when a minoritised community's experiences, needs, and perspectives are excluded or appropriated, limiting their participation in knowledge creation (Fricker, 1999; Mladenov & Dimitrova, 2023; Scully, 2018).Those we spoke to felt strongly that the current lack of research into the housing experiences of neurodivergent individuals was urgent and pressing. They saw the lack of research into their experiences as a reflection of, and contributor to, their marginalization, arguing that its absence perpetrated a failure to consider neurodivergent people as complex social beings. They felt that this lack of research reflected that their wellbeing was not

a priority for policy, legislation or society as a whole, and felt strongly that research needed to explore the structural and systemic obstacles they faced to good housing. Areas they highlighted of particular concern included research into the psycho-social implications, for neurodivergent people, of extended periods of time living in private rented HMO accommodation. Private rented accommodation is strongly associated with reduced tenure stability, lower quality and relative unaffordability (Christiansen & Lewis, 2019; Soaita & McKee, 2019). Higher rates of financial exclusion meant that conditions in the private rented sector were discussed as an area which especially affected neurodivergent people, and which should therefore be a priority area for research.

Those we spoke to also pointed out the ways in which housing quality and adequacy are often framed, and how these reflected neurotypical ideas, priorities and needs. They wanted to see more research into what good housing, housing support and homelessness services might look like from the perspective of enabling neurodivergent wellbeing. Here, the benefits of a Critical Neurodiversity Studies approach in centering neurodivergent thriving, wellbeing and enjoyment were especially apparent.

Structural drivers

Second, those we spoke to wanted research to focus on the structural causes of their housing problems, rather than framing them as inevitable results of neurodivergence. They raised two key concerns. First, they saw research as over-focused on certain kinds of difficulties faced by neurodivergent people – especially those with a medical diagnosis, and with other co-occurring conditions (especially learning disabilities). They were especially concerned about those who had some need for support, but who were able to live on their own, suggesting that there were almost no resources available for this group. They wanted more research to understand how lower level or intermittent support – for instance, tenancy support, or support to help with housing or benefits applications – could be tailored to this group.

Another major concern was that frontline workers were seen as lacking the training and understanding needed to engage effectively with neurodivergent people. They were afraid that workers' decisions might be affected by personal biases, and that research was needed to address this. They especially highlighted a need to better understand interactions and processes required in order to secure and maintain housing as an unresearched area of challenge for neurodivergent individuals. Here, they especially argued that there needed to be a focus on respectful and mutual recognition of communication difference – a recognition that neurodivergent individuals often communicate *differently* to neurotypical people, rather than focusing on neurodivergent ways of communicating being wrong, and suggested that more research was needed to better understand how to help neurodivergent people operate within them. Based partly on lived experience, there was concern that frontline workers lacked the necessary training or understanding to engage meaningfully and effectively with neurodivergent people. They also worried that decision-making by these workers might be shaped by personal biases and subjective perceptions, with stigmatized neurodivergent traits and communication styles putting them at risk (Bretherton et al., 2013; Draper et al., 2024; Jurgens, 2020). They suggested that research might not only help workers and systems to address knowledge gaps, but also address system design to make them more accessible to neurodivergent people.

In terms of structural barriers, they also highlighted the impact of financial exclusion on housing access. They pointed out that neurodivergent financial experiences were likely to be different to those of neurotypical people – that neurodivergent individuals were less likely to be employed, had often had fewer years of formal education, and also often struggled to access welfare support. This is supported by the literature (Grant et al., 2023; Orsini, 2012, Pelham III et al., 2020; Pellicano et al., 2024; Spencer et al., 2022). They suggested that, just as the baseline for good quality housing is derived from neurotypical priorities and needs (see above), so normative housing pathways – largely involving a temporal progression toward greater housing security and quality (Clapham, 2003; Clapham et al., 2014) – may be not only inaccessible, but also undesirable, for or that what is considered "quality" housing might look different to neurodivergent individuals.

Meaningful solutions

Finally, there was widespread frustration at a sense that, within research, there was a failure to recognize the strengths and capabilities of neurodivergent individuals. In research, neurodivergent individuals are seldom considered as resourceful or creative, nor as operating collectively (Cascio et al., 2021; Courcy & Koniou, 2022; Jackson-Perry, 2024; Raymaker & Nicolaidis, 2013). Those we spoke with pointed out that they were *already* addressing housing challenges in various ways, from informal support arrangements, to formal shared housing. This required them to navigate neuronormative legal and policy structures, manage time and energy effectively, and develop a deep understanding of housing systems. This meant that neurodivergent individuals, and their wider communities, often had significant expertise in a range of relevant areas, including housing law, local policies and sympathetic agencies and workers, and that informal mutual aid type networks (Spade, 2015).

There was frustration that research and policy efforts to address housing precarity often ignored this existing community knowledge, leading to ineffective, top-down, solutions. Those we spoke with stressed the need for research to support – rather than replace – what neurodivergent people are already doing. They called for more work to understand how institutions could provide functional and financial support, without undermining neurodivergent autonomy. For instance, they suggested exploring how a housing association might collaborate with a group of neurodivergent individuals to establish a housing co-op, or to develop services, which reflected the ways of working and practices that had already been developed, and shown to work, within the community. However, they were also cautious about involvement from certain agencies. For instance, they saw social care institutions as potentially limiting autonomy, emphasizing that any collaboration needed to be based on mutual respect and understanding.

Conclusion

This provocation highlights the urgent need to address neuronormative epistemological injustices within housing research. Despite the rise of Critical Neurodiversity Studies, which recognizes neurodivergence as a valid and valuable way of being, research on the social and structural experiences of neurodivergent individuals remains either deficit-based, objectifying or absent.

Housing is a fundamental need and a cornerstone of wellbeing, making it key site for social justice. Those we spoke with stressed that gaps in housing research reflect and reinforce their marginalization, perpetuating harmful assumptions about their abilities and framing neurodivergent needs as individual rather than structural ones. They called for a shift in research toward social and institutional drivers of exclusion – such as financial precarity, discrimination, and inaccessible services. They also argued for more work to recognize and build upon the strengths and expertise within neurodivergent communities, both to empower individuals and ensure that solutions are meaningful and effective.

Addressing these neuronormative gaps in housing research provides an opportunity to reimagine housing systems and policies that are truly inclusive and equitable. Research should better prioritize lived experience, avoid sidelining neurodivergent individuals in discussions around their rights, and acknowledge their existing knowledge. This is critical to produce more effective interventions, and challenge wider neuronormative societal assumptions about who is seen as deserving of support and autonomy.

We end with three questions which we propose should structure future research:

(1) How can a Critical Neurodiversity Studies approach – which centers neurodivergent personhood and expertise- be used to produce practical solutions to widespread neurodivergent housing precarity?
(2) How can housing research develop non-exploitative, mutually beneficial, relationships with neurodivergent communities?
(3) What are the differences in experiences of housing precarity and homelessness faced by different neurominorities?

Notes

1. Neurodivergence is currently the generally preferred community term for the umbrella of experiences and traits described and tends to be seen as the least contentious and most inclusive. Within medical literature the term "neurodevelopmental" is often used; this is not preferred because it reifies a focus on children and reinforces an understanding of neurological difference as pathological and related to failure to develop "normally." Other terms are also, at the time of writing, becoming increasingly prevalent in community discourse, notably "neurominoritised." To an extent, neurodivergence, neurodiversity and neurominoritisation are used interchangeably in this paper.
2. The history and development of neurodivergence and neurodiversity as a medical category has been explored in considerable detail elsewhere, notably by, and.
3. We note with reference to the welfare state, early discussion of the challenges of accommodating neuro-difference within fixed national resources and neuronormative policy frameworks.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Edith England is a researcher in spatial social policy, and its intersections with precarious housing and homelessness, especially for minoritised groups. Edith is especially interested in developing methodological approaches to address epistemological exclusion within social research. With Josie Henley, Edith is currently working on a large project looking at housing pathways for autistic/ADHD adults.

Josie Henley's research explores neurodivergence as a biosocial experience, with recent work considering ADHD, autism and dementia. Josie is especially interested in how communities and individuals produce counter-narratives of cognitive difference.

Emma Sheppard is a critical disability and neurodiversity researcher who uses creative methods to explore embodied experience, queer-crip futurity and trauma. Sometimes she gets autoethnographical about it.

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