

Representing Disability in Museums:
Absence and Discourse

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Abstract

Museums have the potential to challenge societal prejudice, presenting new perspectives and counternarratives which support social inclusion and activism (Janes and Sandell 2019, 2019a). However, research suggests that many museums reproduce societal discourses and power dynamics rather than challenge them (Bennett 2020, Roque Martins 2018). This thesis intends to question how museum collections, galleries, and programming interact with societal discourses about disability, in particular. Drawing on Michel Foucault's accounts of discourse (1971, 1972), it explores how historic and contemporary ideas about disability are reproduced and/or contested in museum collections, galleries, and activities.

To this end, it reviews existing literature of representation in contemporary debates in critical disability studies and museum studies; and empirically investigates how meaning is co-created and communicated by staff and visitors in museum spaces and practices. Using Stuart Hall's (1980) 'encoding/decoding' model, it considers how museums use collections and community engagement to produce and communicate narratives about history; and how visitors experience and interpret museum galleries to navigate issues of heritage, identity, and 'fact'. Reflecting on archival research, interviews, and focus groups conducted at Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales, the analysis explores accounts of using museum collections, activities, and galleries to deepen our understanding of issues surrounding disability in the past and present.

It argues that, despite AC-MW's ambition to become an 'activist' museum and challenge prejudice, representations in AC-MW's galleries reproduce societal ideas about disabled people, who are conspicuously absent from Welsh history narratives. It explores how complexity in communication of meaning in museum practice contributes to this obdurate problem. In particular, it argues that meaning is negotiated between museum professionals and visitors, influenced by different perceptions of what it means to be disabled, historical development of collections and documentation, and competing discourses about the nature of expertise.

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Introduction

1. Disability, museums, representation

This thesis is concerned with, on one hand, how museums use collections and community engagement to produce and communicate narratives about history; and on the other, how visitors experience and interpret museum galleries to navigate issues of heritage, identity, and knowledge. Using concepts of discourse and epistemic justice, it explores how historic and contemporary ideas about disability are reproduced and/or contested in museum collections, galleries, and activities.

To this end, it empirically investigates how meaning is co-created and communicated by staff and visitors in museum spaces and practices, and how issues of representation are significant to contemporary debates in critical disability studies and museum studies. Drawing on archival research, interviews, and focus groups conducted at Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales (henceforth AC-MW), the analysis explores accounts of using museum collections, activities, and galleries to deepen our understanding of issues surrounding disability in the past and present.

In line with other studies of disability representation in museums (e.g. Dodd et al 2005, Carden-Coyle 2010, Roque Martins 2018, Hunt 2022), this project found that disabled people were underrepresented in museum galleries, mirroring wider societal discourses which render experiences of disability ‘invisible’. Nonetheless, visitors and museum staff alike felt that museums had the potential, and a responsibility, to challenge societal prejudices, including those experienced by disabled people. What this thesis intends to contribute is an exploration of how museum staff and visitors co-construct meaning about the social world. It explores different ways in which museums provide a forum to constitute and communicate ideas about heritage, community, and identity.

This chapter introduces some societal and academic debates which provide context for this project. It begins with a short account of disability rights activism in the twentieth

and twenty-first centuries, in particular changing ideas of how disabled people can and should be represented in culture and media. It then considers museological trends since the 1970s which have sought to reinvigorate ‘out-of-touch’ museums and address social policy goals, in particular diversifying the communities and cultures represented in collections, exhibitions, and programming.

Following this, it presents a description of the case study. In particular, it introduces the three AC-MW sites included in the study, including brief accounts of their history and content, and the approach taken to data collection with museum staff and visitors. Finally, it concludes with an outline of this thesis.

2. Context

2.1 Disability and representation

In July 1992, disabled people gathered outside ITV’s London studios to protest the Telethon programme being filmed inside. Angry with representation of disabled people in the charity fundraiser, protestors argued that it relied on hackneyed and condescending tropes which depicted them as helpless, pitiable, and incapable of their own agency. Activist Barbara Lisicki recalls wearing one of 100 t-shirts printed for the event emblazoned with the slogan “piss on pity” (Lisicki 2018) to express her anger at these persistent and pervasive tropes.

These protests were part of a long history of activism. In the UK, early records of disability rights activism include advocate groups such as the British Deaf Association, formed in 1890, and the National League of the Blind, formed in 1892, which sought to improve working conditions for disabled people. In the latter part of the 20th century, the movement gathered momentum with protests calling for the removal of barriers to public services and spaces; and questioning contemporary conceptions of what it means to be disabled (Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People 2010, Disability Medway Network 2019). In the 1970s and 80s, groups such as the Union for the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) called attention to prejudicial and exclusionary practices

experienced by disabled people in public transport, employment, care homes, the built environment, and more. Furthermore, UPIAS campaigners drew a distinction between ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’, arguing that while the former was located in individual bodies, the latter should be understood as derived from societal barriers and prejudices.

This activism inspired the development of the ‘social model of disability’, a sociological model which argued that people were not disabled by their medical conditions but by exclusionary practices in society. The social model was influenced by two books entitled ‘*Stigma*’, both published in the 1960s. In 1963, Erving Goffman published ‘*Stigma: the Management of Spoiled Identities*’. He argued that some personal attributes, including disability, identify individuals as different to ‘normal’ people. These individuals are subject to prejudice as society,

“Construct[s] a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents” (Goffman 1963 p5).

In 1966, Paul Hunt published ‘*Stigma: The Experience of Disability*’, a collection of essays presenting autobiographical accounts of living with disability. These accounts expressed dissatisfaction at how adults with disabilities were treated in residential care facilities and called for a new understanding of what it meant to be disabled.

The social model of disability has exerted significant influence in different spheres of culture. For example, UK Government guidance for “portraying disability” calls for depictions “based on the social model of disability” (UK Government 2021); Channel 4’s “Disability Code of Portrayal” recommends that programme makers “apply social model thinking” (Channel 4 2022); and National Trust guidance calls for museums to “apply the social model of disability in the heritage and cultural sector” (RCMG and National Trust 2023). Indeed, changing social and cultural representation of disability is at the heart of the social model, which shifts the location of disability from individual bodies to social prejudices and their associated practices.

Outside of academia, questions of disability representation have arisen in various spheres of popular culture in recent decades. The search term ‘disability’ now returns a significant number of documentaries, comedy shows, and dramas on television platforms such as BBC’s iPlayer and Channel 4’s All4. However, in 2016 the film ‘Me Before You’ sparked criticisms from disability groups for its portrayal of a character with quadriplegia, in part due to its representation of assisted dying, and in part for the fact that nobody involved in the film, or the book it was based on, had lived experience of this kind of disability (Hodges 2016). In the world of television, comedian Rosie Jones’ 2023 documentary courted controversy with its title (*‘Rosie Jones: Am I A R*tard’*), causing several of the shows disabled contributors to withdraw from the project (Rose 2023). These instances highlight a growing, complex, and often conflicted activist movement questioning portrayals of disability on the large and small screen.

2.2 Representation in museums

Museums around the world are increasingly engaging with questions about representation in their practice, such as which communities are represented and which are absent in gallery content and collections; and whose knowledge and world view is represented in interpretations of objects, texts, and historical narratives. In the latter part of the twentieth century, museums faced claims that they were out of touch, elitist, and served only a narrow section of society (Hudson 1977). In his book *‘The New Museology’*, Peter Vergo (1989) argued that scholars and practitioners in the field of museum studies were questioning the nature and purposes of museums, reorientating museum theory and practice towards a focus on visitors and their experiences of engaging with museums.

Government policy in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s also called on museums to reconsider their relationship with visitors and their wider communities (Belfiore 2010, Tlili et al 2007). For example, the 1985 white paper *‘Pleasure, Leisure, and Jobs’* laid out the Conservative party’s intention for museums to contribute to their local economies as sites for tourism, entertainment, and employment; while *‘Centres for Change’*, published in 2000,

described New Labour's call for museums to address social exclusion in their neighbourhoods.

Academic authors have explored different approaches that museums can take to address social exclusion (e.g., Black 2010, Sandell 2002). Some of these approaches derive from museums' educational role, such as teaching skills needed for employment, personal wellbeing, and constructive debate, or raising awareness of important social trends or discussions. Others derive from their historically developed role of tackling issues of social policy, using culture and heritage to represent normative values. Other authors have questioned the relationship between museums and societal discourse: in particular, whether they challenge dominant societal prejudices or reproduce them. For example, Laurajane Smith (2007), Hannah Turner (2020), and Dan Hicks (2020) discussed how museum practice in Australia, the USA, and the UK, respectively, reproduced and legitimated prejudices about race. On the other hand, authors have argued that museums can undermine prejudice by presenting counternarratives (e.g. Sandell and Janes 2019b) or critiquing dominant discourse to reveal stigmas and the power dynamics which characterise them (Lord 2006).

While some voices from academic, government, and museums call for activist practice, using galleries and collections to engage normatively with social debate and represent marginalised communities, others argue that museums have a responsibility to give visitors an 'unbiased' account of history. For example, some sections of the National Trust's membership have criticised the so-called 'politicisation' of exhibitions and programming at its properties, resulting in the foundation of the Restore Trust. This thesis engages with these debates in more detail in chapters two, five and seven; and with concepts of discourse and representation justice which underpin them in chapter three.

2.3 Disability and museums

In the 2000s, mentions of disability in museum policy were generally concerned with physical accessibility of museum buildings and bringing new audiences into the museum (Sandell 2007). Some authors argued that this focus on physical access ignored affective

and epistemic aspects of accessibility, notably representation of disabled people in narratives about history and heritage (Majewski and Bunch 1998). Studies in the UK and Portugal suggested that disabled communities were underrepresented in museum collections, galleries, and exhibitions; and that when they were represented, the way they are catalogued and interpreted reflected negative stereotypes and tropes from wider society (Delin 2002, Dodd et al 2005, Roque Martin 2018, 2023, Hunt 2022).

Recent research carried out by the University of Leicester's Research Centre for Museums and Galleries and the National Trust has sought to address this issue. The 'Everywhere and Nowhere' project explored how museums can produce more nuanced representations of disabled people and their experiences, developing a framework for practice and ten case studies of historical figures in the National Trust's collection (RCMG and National Trust 2023). Similarly, the Museum Association has identified "exploring anti-ableism" as one of the major themes of its 2023 conference, with sessions exploring how museum representation can address societal conversations and contemporary prejudices (Museum Association 2023).

2.4 Contribution

These debates are discussed in more detail in chapter two and are also reflected in analytic themes explored in chapters five, six, and seven. Furthermore, this thesis intends to contribute to this literature by exploring processes of communication in museums and their implications for representation of disability. In particular, it uses Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model and Michel Foucault's accounts of discourse to explore how curators use museum collections and community engagement practices to create messages about experiences of disability in the past and present (chapter five); and how visitors use societal and personal discourses about disability to interpret gallery content (chapter six). It questions whether museums reproduce discourses from wider cultural milieux or challenge them to address prejudicial ideas about disability (chapter seven). Drawing on accounts from staff and visitors at AC-MW, it contends that community engagement work has become increasingly important in processes of encoding but divides opinion regarding the relative merit of professional and community

authority; and that galleries at AC-MW currently reproduce wider discourses about disability.

3. Introducing Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales

This thesis focuses its attention on collections, galleries, and practices at AC-MW, in particular three of its seven sites: the National Museum Cardiff, St Fagan’s National Museum of History, and the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea.

3.1 History of the three sites

While public museums proliferated in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, transforming earlier private collections into new public institutions (Bennett 1995, Hooper-Greenhill 2000), the proposal of a national museum for Wales was initially contested by UK government. Growth in coal, copper, and associated industries fed the development of a Welsh middle class keen to establish their social and economic status (Mason 2007a). As such, the call for a national museum was part of a wider campaign aimed at creating,

“A greater space of self-representation and self-governance for Wales” (Mason 2007a p109).

Welsh MPs began a parliamentary campaign in 1892 with the National Institutions Bill (Bassett 1982); and continued to make persistent requests almost every year between 1892 and 1903 (Mason 2007, Morgan 2007). The response within parliament was derisory, with critics arguing that Wales had no capital city to host such a museum and that the British Museum already served Welsh history (Bassett 1982). The National Museum Wales finally received its charter in 1907. Its first foundation stone was laid in central Cardiff in 1912 (Mason 2007) but work was discontinued between 1916 and 1918 as a consequence of WW1, as well as ongoing budget concerns. The museum finally held its formal opening in April 1927 (Bassett 1982). The site is now home to the museum’s natural history and art galleries as the National Museum Cardiff.

The museum expanded into a second site in 1948: the National Folk Museum. Influenced by Scandinavian folk museums such as Skansen in Stockholm, Sweden, Cyril Fox (then director of AC-MW) and Iorwerth Peate (first curator at the National Folk Museum) developed the new museum in grounds donated by the Earl of Plymouth (Philips 2014). The museums comprised a contemporary building for its social history gallery and parkland populated with historical buildings re-erected from around Wales. Peate described his intention to create,

“A truly national folk collection representing every possible aspect of Welsh culture and tradition” (Peate 1971).

However, the museum was criticised in the latter twentieth century for providing a romanticised view of the past which ignored difficult truths of rural Welsh life and the significance of industrial and urban history in Wales’ development (Gruffudd 1994). The museum has since sought to address these claims with buildings such as the Rhyd-y-car Ironworkers’ terraces from Merthyr Tydfil, re-erected on site in 1986, representing industrial history in the South Wales valleys (Thomas and Williams 2017), and the Nantwallter Cottage erected in 1993, which was the first of the site’s buildings to illustrate the life of the rural poor (AC-MW, no date). Since its opening in 1948, the National Folk Museum, now St Fagan’s National Museum of History, has grown to include three social history galleries and over forty buildings re-erected from around Wales. It underwent an extensive redevelopment between 2012 and 2018 (Hughes and Phillips 2019).

The third of the three case study sites, the National Waterfront Museum, Swansea, is the newest of AC-MW’s sites, opening in 2005. Following the closure of the Welsh Industrial and Maritime Museum in Cardiff Bay in 1998, AC-MW called for bids for a new museum to take its place. The winning bid was made by Swansea council; indeed, the site is still funded and run in partnership with the council. Augmenting the existing Swansea Maritime Museum (housed in a disused tram shed in the city’s docklands), Wilkinson Eyre architects were commissioned to create,

Figure 1.1: National Waterfront Museum, Swansea (AC-MW, no date a)



Figure 1.2: National Museum Cardiff (AC-MW 2021)



Figure 1.3: St Fagan's National Museum of History (RIBA Journal 2019)



“An icon... something that the people of Swansea could be proud of” (Dr Richard Bevins, keeper of collection services for AC-MW, in Melvin, 2006 p117).

The new museum was surrounded on all sides by regeneration developments including new housing and culture schemes and redevelopment of the existing city centre (Tallon et al 2005). Its façade is shown in figure 1.1. The National Waterfront Museum was the fourth and final part of AC-MW’s strategy to explore Wales’ industrial heritage, alongside the Welsh Slate Museum in Llanberis, the Welsh Woollen Museum in Llandysul and Big Pit National Coal Museum in Blaenavon. As the Welsh Folk Museum had sought to bring rural, Welsh-speaking communities into AC-MW’s representation of Welsh history, this strategy brought industrial communities into the museum’s narrative of Wales’ development (Mason 2007).

The three sites are very different in terms of their physical presence. The National Museum Cardiff occupies the original premises of AC-MW in Cardiff’s civic centre (figure 1.2), with little change to the interior or exterior of the building. However, in 2021 the Rural Office for Architecture presented a winning bid to develop a masterplan for a redevelopment of the building (AC-MW 2021). Notably, in 2023 a ramp was installed on the exterior stairs leading to the museum’s entrance to improve access to the site. All interviews were completed before this change.

The ‘Wales is’ and ‘Life is’ galleries at St Fagan’s National Museum of History were created as part of a radical redevelopment of the existing entrance building between 2012 and 2018, along with a restaurant, formal learning spaces, and a temporary exhibition space. A third gallery, the ‘Gweithdy,’ is located in the museum’s open space along with buildings from across the geography and history of Wales. This gallery was not included in the study because the gravel paths leading to the Gweithdy were not wheelchair accessible. However, many of these paths have since been resurfaced.

The three sites follow a common policy structure provided centrally by AC-MW and there is some mobility in staff between sites, especially between St Fagan’s National Museum

of History and the National Museum Cardiff, which are geographically proximate. However, they are characterised by different working cultures, which will be explored in chapter seven.

3.2 Representation at AC-MW

AC-MW's current strategy document, Strategy 2030, states that,

“We must also show leadership in challenging the impacts of poverty and injustice, and in removing the systematic exclusion, over many years, of communities who experience inequalities or racism” (AC-MW 2022 p13).

This quote represents the museum's commitment to activist practice, expressed elsewhere in its policy and online presence. For example, in response to Black Lives Matters protests around the UK, the museum stated on its website,

“We are working to build a museum sector that stands up for equality, human rights and anti-racism,”

and developed a '*Charter for Decolonising Amgueddfa Cymru's Collection*'. These principles inspired the '*Reframing Picton*' project which used community engagement practices to reinterpret a portrait of Thomas Picton which had been on display at the National Museum Cardiff. The project culminated in an exhibition at the site between 2022 and 2025.

'*Strategy 2030*' expresses six 'commitments' guiding its vision for AC-MW's future:

“To make sure that everyone is represented; to inspire creativity and learning for life; to protect and restore nature and our environment; to support well-being through inspirational spaces and experiences; to discover and explore the museum digitally; and to build global connections” (AC-MW 2022 p7).

The document argues that community engagement work, collecting practices aimed at increasing diversity, and new recruitment methods are at the heart of this goal. It draws on a logic of cultural rights to argue that,

“Everyone has the right to experience and enjoy the museum, collection, and services” (AC-MW 2022 p14).

Indeed, the museum has hosted conferences on cultural rights and cultural democracy in the heritage sector in 2019 and 2022. Furthermore, AC-MW’s 2022-2025 Equality Plan argues that museums play a significant role in Wales’ cultural milieu with its objective:

“We recognise our unique role in representing and celebrating the histories and creativity of Wales’s diverse communities” (AC-MW 2022a p9).

Again, this document argues that co-production practices and a collection strategy aimed at increasing diversity are key to this objective.

The museum also has a Disability Equality Action Plan published in 2009. This document includes ‘internal’ and ‘external’ considerations, with the former addressing the recruitment and support of disabled staff and the latter addressing exhibitions, events, and learning programmes. It suggests that more disabled people should be included in the co-curation of displays and exhibitions, and that,

“Events, displays and programmes [should] have disability issues included” (AC-MW 2009 p11).

This thesis intends to contribute to this body of work by exploring how curatorial and community engagement staff at the museum account for disability representation in their work, and how disabled visitors to the museum experience the representation of disabled people in gallery spaces.

4. Thesis structure

Chapter two presents a review of academic literature concerned with issues of representation in the study of museums and disability. It begins with academic accounts of how museums have engaged with representations of disability to date. It then turns to literature discussing representation in museums more generally. Authors Tony Bennett (1987, 1995) and Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2000) argued that museums have engaged with societal discourses and values since they became public spaces in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Since then, academics, museum professionals and government policy have explored potential roles for representing marginalised communities and challenging social exclusion. Finally, the chapter considers literature from disability studies and sociology of disability which engage with issues of representation, including engagement with activism in the latter part of the twentieth century and questions of heterogeneity and intersectionality in disabled communities.

Chapter three presents, and brings together, academic literature used to develop the analytical framework for this project. This includes Michel Foucault's writing on discourse and the relationships between knowledge and power associated with them (e.g., Foucault 1972, 1977, 1982). It considers the related concept of heterotopia, and accounts of how museum practice can reproduce dominant discourse or challenge them. This is brought into dialogue with Stuart Hall's work on communication and the co-construction of meaning, in particular his encoding/decoding model. The chapter explores the model in its original context, representing communication through the medium of television; and how it has been applied in museum contexts.

Chapter four presents the methodology used to gather and analyse data. It introduces the research questions framing this project, the participants who co-created interview and focus group data, and frameworks used for data analysis. It also considers the importance of reflexive practice in this work, in particular conducting research with disabled participants as framed by my own lived experiences of disability.

Chapters five, six, and seven present the analysis of the empirical data. Chapter five begins with staff accounts of how meaning is negotiated, mediated, and disseminated in their work with collections and community engagement. Using Hall's concept of 'encoding', it explores how staff use the museum's collection and accompanying documentation to understand and express meaning about different communities and historical narratives – experiencing them as both a productive resource and a constraint on the stories they can tell. It also considers two accounts of using the AC-MW's collection to represent disability history; and explores different opinions about the role of community engagement work expressed by museum staff and ideas of power and expertise which underpin them.

Chapter six turns to visitor accounts of visiting AC-MW's galleries and their reflections on disability representation. Using Hall's idea of 'decoding', it considers the broad range of responses inspired by a display including a prosthetic leg; and reflects on the co-creation of meaning in museum spaces, and different understandings of disability and its relevance to their lives expressed by participants. It also explores visitors' reflections that disability was "conspicuously absent" from some parts of the museum in terms of the exclusion of disabled people from historical narratives and the affective impact of accessibility issues in the physical environment of museum galleries.

Chapter seven describes different ideas of how museums can combat social equality and play positive roles in their communities, based on the analysis and findings from this research. In particular, it engages with differences in approach at two different sites within AC-MW (the National Waterfront Museum and St Fagan's National Museum of History) and how they understand their role within their locality. It also explores questions about museum activism and neutrality which arose in the data, and different expectations of how museums should engage with contemporary and historical issues shared by staff and visitors.

Finally, chapter eight presents conclusions from across the project and the thesis, including identifying recurrent themes and addressing research questions posed in chapter four.

**Literature review:
Museums, disability, and representation**

1. Introduction

This chapter reviews academic writing which informed this study in order to provide context for the methodological and analytical chapters which follow. It explores two main themes. First, it is concerned with representation in museums: in particular, practices which seek to increase the visibility of previously underrepresented social groups in galleries, exhibitions, and programming. Second, it considers movements in disability scholarship and activism which emphasise changing representations of disabled people in social and cultural discourses.

This discussion begins where the two literatures intersect: a relatively small body of work exploring museum engagements with representation of disability. For example, research in the 2000s found that mentions of disabled communities in museum policy were usually limited to concerns about physical access (Sandell 2010); and that representations of disabled people were notably absent in UK museums (Delin 2002, Sandell et al 2005). This section presents examples of authors who have explored this absence; and action research which represented disabled people in museum exhibitions.

With these arguments in mind, the chapter then turns to existing literature discussing issues of ‘representation’ and the ideas which underpin them. In particular, it explores Nancy Fraser’s (1995, 2007) accounts of ‘misrecognition’: forms of injustice which occur when an individual or community is routinely silenced or disparaged in dominant representations of their identity, experiences, and culture; and Miranda Fricker’s (2007, 2017) descriptions of ‘epistemic injustice’, which occurs when an individual or community is “ingenuously downgraded and/or disadvantaged in respect of their status as an epistemic subject” (Fricker 2017 p53). This section presents some foundational concepts for how ‘issues of representation’ have been understood in this project.

Following this, the chapter turns to existing literature regarding representation in museums to address two questions: why are issues of representation relevant to museums, their history, and their practice? And how have they been incorporated into existing work? It considers arguments that public museums have worked alongside government policy since their inception in the late eighteenth century, representing societal ideals and influencing social behaviour (Bennett 1995, 1999); and that this role evolved in the latter part of the 20th century to reflect changing governmental agendas, notably attempts to address 'social exclusion' (Tlili et al 2007). Indeed, authors have argued that museums have the potential to reduce experiences of social exclusion through the representation of diverse communities in their collections, displays, and programming, as well as other community engagement and outreach practices (Sandell 2002, Black 2010). This section explores the historical and contemporary role of public museums as an institution for social governance, and the implications this literature holds for 'representation'.

Section four considers the importance of representation in contemporary understandings of disability. It begins with a review of influential sociological works on disability, in particular works which have engaged with perceptions and representations of disabled people in society. Notable examples include Talcott Parsons's 'sick role', Erving Goffman's 'stigma', and the development of the 'social model of disability'. It also reviews work which addresses the complex nature of representing disabled experiences, which are constituted by a wide range of impairments, personal interpretations of 'disability', and social contexts. As such, this section explores how issues of representation are experienced by disabled individuals and communities.

Finally, section five presents some reflections on these discussions, and introduces chapter three.

2. Disability in museums

Writing in 2002, Annie Delin argued that disabled people were conspicuously absent in museum content in the UK. Furthermore, her research found that when disabled people

were present in museum galleries and exhibitions, their representation was in line with negative and reductionist stereotypes. She observed,

“Any casual visitor to museums in Britain would assume that disabled people occupied a very specific range of roles in the nation’s history. The absence of disabled people as creators of art, in images and in artefacts, and their presence in selected works reinforcing cultural stereotypes, conspire to present a narrow perspective of the existence of disability in history” (Delin 2002 p84).

She suggested three reasons for this phenomenon. First, that disabled people in history were employed in a limited range of roles due to historical prejudices, with prevalent examples including recipients of charity or members of freak shows. As such, narratives about disability history can seem to lack variety and prominently feature these occupations. Second, present-day prejudices can prevent curators from engaging with disability in their work due to fear of causing offence, resulting in their absence from museum content. In particular, Delin considered the example of historical figures who chose to hide their impairments during their own lifetime (she cited writer Alexander Pope, who asked artists to conceal his disability in his portraits). She argued that curators may feel that discussing disability in these cases disregards the wishes they stated in their lives. Third, Delin suggested that biographical accounts of and by disabled people have been lost over time, leaving behind more durable records and objects. This has resulted in an overemphasis on medical treatments of disability in museum collections due to the sorts of extant artefacts available for interpretation and display.

Delin suggested that this lack of representation impacts upon public perceptions of disabled people. In particular, it supports the prevalent societal trope that disabled people are passive in society and less likely to contribute to significant historical events. Furthermore, she argued, it can make disabled people feel excluded from shared heritage and culture.

Between 2003 and 2004, the ‘Buried in the Footnotes’ project, carried out by Leicester University’s Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG), investigated how artefacts related to disability were stored, displayed, interpreted, and made accessible

to the public in UK museums. This work included a questionnaire completed by 73 museums, and collections reviews and interviews in ten case study museums (Dodd et al 2004). Richard Sandell et al (2005) reflected that while the project team (consisting of Richard Sandell, Jocelyn Dodd, Annie Delin, and Jackie Gay) expected to encounter material in medical, military, and industrial collections, in practice they found extensive material held in collections across different types and departments of museums. Some of this evidence was identified by curators in their questionnaire responses; but considerably more was found by the research team, working in collaboration with these curators at case study sites. This material was for the most part held in storage, infrequently displayed, with their link to disability not stated in their interpretation. They concluded that the museums they worked with held substantial material related to the lives of disabled people but rarely displayed them as such.

The project also concluded that interpretations of these artefacts often reproduced common cultural stereotypes about disabled people (Sandell et al 2005). They identified three stereotypes which recurred across the study: disabled person as 'curio' or 'spectacle', object of the public gaze; as 'supercrip', remarkable individual who transcends their disability to achieve great things in their field, in spite of barriers presented by their impairment; and as objects of charity. This reflected stereotypes which had been identified in studies of other spheres of culture, such as Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's (1997) review of disability representation in literature and Colin Barnes' (1992) review of TV and film media.

Curators involved in the study expressed anxiety around how to interpret and display material about disability, which led them to inaction (Dodd et al 2004). They were fearful of causing offence or making a mistake which would reflect badly on the museum. In particular, the history of the freakshow cast a long shadow over contemporary practice, with curators worried that displaying disabled lives would feel like putting difference on display (Sandell 2007). They also raised a number of questions about how to interpret complex, emotional narratives like asylums, freakshows, and personal experiences of pain. With no consensus and little precedent on how to approach such issues, curators ended up leaving material in storage to avoid mistakes (Dodd et al 2004).

The findings emerging from the Buried in the Footnotes project informed ‘Rethinking Disability Representation’, a collection of action research projects at nine museums across England. These projects were initiated and managed by RCMG, in collaboration with staff at the museums and a think tank of disabled activists, artists, and cultural practitioners (Dodd et al 2010). These case studies included exhibitions at Colchester Castle Museum, the Museum of Transport, Glasgow, Northampton Museum and Art Gallery, Stamford Museum, Tyne and Wear Museums, and Whitby Museum; new audio-visual interpretation at Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, and the Royal London Hospital Museums and Archives; and educational sessions with secondary school pupils at the Imperial War Museum, London (University of Leicester, no date). Using the social model of disability as an analytical framework, the project explored:

“What happens when visitors to museums and galleries encounter displays, educational programmes and other interpretive projects that are designed to offer and elicit support for new ways of understanding disability?” (Dodd et al 2010 p92).

Within this project, Jocelyn Dodd et al (2010) explored visitor responses collected across the nine case study sites, consisting of 1784 feedback cards and 43 interviews. They argued that their analysis of this data revealed fundamental shifts in visitors’ perception of disability and its socio-cultural context. However, some visitors complained that the exhibitions felt confrontational, and served primarily to emphasise difference. Others expressed pity for disabled people, reproducing the sorts of stereotypes which the project had sought to confront. As such, the authors reflected that while some visitors engaged with the ‘social model’, adopted across the project as a way of understanding disability, others used medical or individual-centric ‘tragedy’ approaches to accounting for disability.

Emma Shepley and Bridget Teller (2018), who were involved in the project as audience development coordinator and curator, respectively, at the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) reflected on their experiences. In particular, RCP reinterpreted historical portraits held in their London collection, working in collaboration with a focus group of 27 disabled people. Teller and Shepley (2018) discussed reactions from disabled participants and

curators which arose from engaging with these images. Several of the disabled people involved in the project criticised the collection for foregrounding medical aspects of disability. One participant reflected,

“From really early on in our lives we have this love/hate relationship [with the medical profession] (Shepley and Teller 2018 p40).

While they understood that the collection had been developed by the RCP, and as such reflected a medical lens on history, they still expressed discomfort at understanding the lives of disabled people in history through their medical encounters. Nonetheless, another participant described their “sense of relief” at seeing disabled people in “generations gone before”. They recalled feeling that,

“Because I didn’t know any small adults, I found it almost impossible to imagine myself in a future”.

As such, they described the positive affect of seeing themselves reflected in historical portraits (Shepley and Teller 2018 p49).

As part of her studies at the University of York, Kathy Allday (2009) carried out interviews with curators at Colchester Museums Service, Thackray Medical Museum, Leeds, and York Castle Museums to explore the impact of disability legislation on curatorial practice. She was particularly interested in how curators approached representing learning disability in collections and displays. She explained that Colchester Museums Service was chosen due to its participation with the ‘Rethinking Disability Representation’; while Thackray Medical Museum had strong connections with histories of learning disability at the site, and York Castle Museums had not previously engaged with issues of disability representation. She found that,

“Relatively few of my interviewees exhibited confidence and knowledge about the issue of learning disability. Most regarded the issue as difficult, challenging, sensitive, an unknown and were unsure how to address it or where to find advice on the subject” (Allday 2009 p44).

As such, she argued that learning disabilities in particular, and disabilities more generally, were underrepresented in the case study museums due to anxiety and inertia.

She found that the Thackray Museum, Leeds, displayed one object relevant to learning disability in its permanent displays: a 19th century photograph of female inmates of the Leeds Union Workhouse, some of whom had learning disabilities. The museum also held an historical Down's syndrome testing kit, but this was held in store. Staff expressed interest in finding out more about the disabled inmates in the photograph but explained that they did not want to display the testing kit. It was felt that the object represented stigmatising medical practices and did not fit well in the museum's overall narrative of medical development and its positive contributions to society (Allday 2009). Like Teller and Shepley (2018), Allday's research found considerable complexity in representing disability through medical objects, images, and accounts.

Ana Corden-Coyle (2010)'s work explored representation of disability in war museums in the UK, US, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Rwanda. She found that,

“Despite the fact that wounding and physical and psychological disablement remain legacies of war, museum often avoid discussing this impact” (Corden-Coyle 2010 p64).

Reflecting on her ethnographic research at museum exhibitions and galleries, she argued that in the rare instance that disabled people were pictured in displays, they were represented as “remnants of war” rather than people (p71). Citing the example of photographs in the Vietnam War Remnants Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, she observed that interpretation did not attend to their identities or experience, instead displaying them as “symbols of government ‘anti-imperial’ discourse” (p71). As such, she argued that disabled people were not represented as part of the reality and legacy of war.

Between 2021 and 2023, the ‘Everywhere and Nowhere’ project carried out research into notable figures connected to National Trust properties in the UK. The project developed interpretations of ten objects, stories, and sites related to disability, disseminated through a public facing film; and a guidance framework for researching and interpreting

disability stories (RCMG and National Trust 2023). Through an exploration of ten historical figures, the project addressed complexities in interpreting and displaying disability history. For example, their account of Sarah Biffin, a disabled artist born in 1784, argued that Biffin's legacy is often reduced to her physical difference, but an alternative reading of her life and work shows disabled women in history were able to succeed in their chosen fields (MacLeod 2023).

Jennifer Hunt's (2022) doctoral thesis engaged with representations of disability in three case studies: 'Wounded', an exhibition at the Science Museum, London; 'Pioneering People and Places: the Blind School' at the Museum of Liverpool; and the National Disability Arts Collection and Archive. She argued that bringing narratives about disabled people into museums can show that disability is a part of wider human experiences, past and present, challenging stereotypes which portray disabled people as 'other'. As such, disability representation provides new perspective and nuance in museum content; and contributes to social activism goals. However, she found that disability representation was often limited to specialist exhibitions which engage with particular topics (for example, 'Wounded' was concerned with acquired disability during WW1 and 'Pioneering People and Places' was concerned with the Liverpool Blind School). This practice runs the risk of delineating disabled people as 'separate' from more general historical narratives.

Outside of the UK context, Patricia Roque Martins' (2018, 2023) doctoral work explored the representation of disability in fifteen museums which comprised the Directorate General of Cultural Heritage, Portugal. Her analysis considered the interpretation and display of artworks representing disabled people and objects associated with disability in these museums; and found that they reproduced popular tropes about disability, in particular those which emphasise the 'inferiority' of disabled people. For example, she described a photograph of Jose Carlos dos Santos, a blind actor in the nineteenth century, held at the National Theatre and Dance Museum, Lisbon. Information accompanying the photo explained that he retired in 1877 when he lost his sight; but that he continued to perform. This interpretation reproduced the trope that disabled people cannot contribute to the labour market, despite evidence that he continued to work in his

chosen profession. She also discussed a Roman statue of the god Vulcan held at National Archaeological Museum, Lisbon. While the statue depicted the deformed foot characteristic of descriptions of the deity, its interpretation did not engage with this trait. Roque Martin argued this reproduced societal taboos about discussing impairment and disability (Roque Martin 2018). She argued that it is time for museums to reconsider their collections, identifying relationships with disability and reconsidering what they represent (Roque Martins 2023).

3. Representation and injustice

Why is this lack of representation important? While section four considers representation in museums in particular, this section reviews work on the social justice implications of mis- and underrepresentation more broadly. It is intended to address the question of how representation of disability can impact on experiences of social exclusion and marginalisation.

Portrayals of difference play a significant role in constructing and communicating meaning (Hall 2013b). For example, meaning can be expressed by exploring the relationship between categories to illustrate the differences between them. Stuart Hall (2013b) argued,

“We know what black means...because we can contrast it with its opposite — white. Meaning... is relational. It is the ‘difference’ between white and black which... carries meaning” (p234).

He argued that displaying difference is one of the ways in which media and culture depict meaning about individuals and communities. These oppositions provide a shorthand for navigating society; but at the same time over-simplify and reduce complex social relations to a binary. They can foster prejudice and oppression when people feel they have been ‘categorised’ or ‘represented’ inaccurately; or when uneven power dynamics emerge between groups (Hall 2013b).

‘Epistemic injustice’, coined by Miranda Fricker (2007, 2017), describes,

“A distinctive class of wrongs, namely those in which someone is ingenuously downgraded and/or disadvantaged in respect of their status as an epistemic subject” (Fricker 2017 p53).

Fricker suggested two types of epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutic. Testimonial injustice occurs when an individual or community are wrongly perceived as less credible in holding or expressing knowledge on a given subject due to prejudice. The result is a targeted decrease in trust in the accounts or claims from members of a particular societal group (Scully 2018). Hermeneutical injustice is caused by unequal access to resources needed to understand or express a concept (Fricker 2017). This occurs when particular societal groups experiences barriers to access for collective epistemic resources, such as shared vocabularies, concepts, or narratives. As a result, they may find themselves unable to interpret some accounts of the world or express their own in a credible way (Scully 2018). Fricker’s theory provides a framework for understanding how some individuals and communities are excluded from contributing to or accessing shared representations of society. Societal prejudices and unequal distribution of epistemic resources provide barriers to comprehending or communicating certain ways of knowing the world.

These categories have been applied to the study of healthcare systems, and epistemic injustice suffered by patients, by Havi Carel and Ian Kidd (2017). They argued that healthcare institutions rely on complex structures of epistemic norms and expectations which create power asymmetries. In particular, they afford authority to medical professions and diminish the agency of patients in talking about their experiences. In these circumstances, testimonial injustice occurs when patients are assumed to know ‘less’ about their health experiences and conditions because scientific and medical accounts are presumed superior to anecdotal or experiential knowledge obtained through lived experience. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when, for example, patients are excluded from meaning-making processes which are dominated by the epistemic resources and practices of biomedical science. As such, patients are considered less credible than doctors in representing their disability or chronic illness.

Similarly, Teodor Mladenov and Ina Dimitrova (2023) applied Fricker's work to their study of disability. They defined epistemic injustice as,

“Oppression through silencing or appropriation of their voices... which prevents the person from participating in legitimate practices of describing and making sense of the world” (Mladenov and Dimitrova 2023 p1149).

They argued that mechanisms in medical practice deny or displace patients' voices. In particular, they contended that patients' testimony is silenced by institutions and norms which privilege forms of knowledge held by physicians – objective, third person, grounded in empirical study – over those held by patients – anecdotal, lived experiences of health and disability (Mladenov and Dimitrov 2023).

Similarly, both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice have been identified in research with disabled people applying for social support (Scully 2018). In her study of UK disability benefits procedures, Jackie Scully observed that to prove the validity of their claims to the satisfaction of relevant authorities, applicants must augment their own accounts with supporting documents from social or medical care professionals. As such, they experience testimonial injustice as their descriptions of their experiences are often treated as less credible than those provided by medical professionals; and hermeneutic injustice since the concepts, vocabulary, and narratives which they use to make sense of their lives are pushed aside to make way for others drawn from professional and academic practice. Scully argued that this illustrates how social positions and power affect how knowledge is accumulated, acknowledged, and disseminated across society; and how epistemic injustice is a powerful tool in pushing marginalised communities to the edges of social life (Scully 2018).

'Misrecognition' describes a category of cultural and symbolic injustices,

“Rooted in patterns of representation, interpretation, and communication”
(Fraser 1995 p71).

Nancy Fraser (1995, 2007) used the term to explore relationships between power and representation. Misrecognition includes being rendered invisible in authoritative

representations of one's culture; and being routinely disparaged in hegemonic cultural representations. For example, Fraser argued that women experience misrecognition as a result of androcentric value patterns which pervade society, including trivialising, objectifying, and demeaning depictions in media; sexual harassment or disparagement in everyday life; exclusion or marginalisation in public spheres and institutions; and denial of equal rights (Fraser 2007).

Fraser suggested two approaches to addressing misrecognition: affirmative approaches, which aim to correct inequality within the underlying framework which generates them; and transformative approaches, which aim to promote radical, structural change (Paquet Kinsey 2016). Rose Paquet Kinsley (2016) explored these ideas in her study of museum practice. In particular, she was concerned with how museums in the UK and US have responded to government policy encouraging them to reduce barriers preventing people from accessing museums resources; and furthermore, to tackle problems of health, crime, educational attainment, and unemployment in their locales. She argued that, to date, museums had mostly adopted affirmative approaches, for example using temporary exhibitions to represent marginalised communities, their cultures, and their accomplishments. These exhibitions sought to combat prejudicial discourses regarding marginalised groups – but did not address structural change in the way that they were represented across the museum's permanent galleries or collections. Consequently, they did not address the barriers which kept some communities from using the museums and marginalised communities remained absent from narratives about shared heritage. However, Paquet Kinsley suggested that the growing importance of community engagement practices in museum work had the potential to create transformative change, unsettling traditional understandings of curators as expert and supporting more collaborative models of meaning-making and interpretation.

These accounts of representation characterise misrecognition – having one's experiences disparaged or trivialised, or being omitted from national or historical narratives – as a form of injustice enacted against an individual or community. The repercussions of such injustice include exclusionary barriers in engaging with governmental processes (as in Scully's study of disability benefits), negative experiences

in social interactions (as in Fraser's account of prejudice against women), and feelings of social exclusion (as in Paquet Kinsley's work in museums). Influenced by this work, this study is interested in how depictions of difference (in particular, 'disabled' as opposed to 'not-disabled') and representations of disability in museum practice affect visitors who consider themselves to be disabled.

4. Representation in museums

4.1 Representing cultural values

Public museums have played a part in social policy and governance since their inception in the late eighteenth century (Bennett 1995, 1998). In *'The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics'* (1995), Tony Bennett argued that public museums, as we understand them today, emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as part of a transition from early private collections of artefacts held in elite spaces to grand public places with a public remit. He argued that these early public museums played an important social role as a new sort of governmental institution. During this period, government came to consider culture a vehicle for new forms of governance which endowed individuals with the capacity and appetite for self-monitoring and self-regulation. While private museums had previously been intended to instil wonder into guests and display private wealth, their public successors were reimagined as spaces of education for citizens, teaching contemporary ideas about science and art; but also principles of behaviour and moral values.

Bennett developed this argument further in *'Culture: A Reformer's Science'* (1998), tracing the relationship between museums and changes in governmental discourses in the nineteenth century. Whilst he noted the importance of forerunners such as the South Kensington Museum in the 1840s, he argued that a more significant period of expansion for public museums occurred between 1870 and WW1 alongside a shift to a more interventionist, welfare-orientated state. The proliferation of museums in this period was characterised by an emphasis on its educational functions and responsibilities; and its capacity to shape social values and behaviour.

Referring to the work of Michel Foucault, Bennett drew comparisons with penal institutions arguing that museums, likewise, have a mission to regulate and discipline the public, albeit through different methods (Bennett 2020). Writing in 2020, Bennett sought to clarify that his goal had never been to suggest museums regulated public values and behaviour in the same way as the penitentiaries of *'Discipline and Punish'* (1977) – but to compare them as institutions which impose disciplinary power. He wrote,

“My chief contention, then, was not that museums should be approached as sites for the exercise of a disciplinary knowledge/power relations but as sites for knowledge/power relations whose field of application was that of free subjects and whose modus operandi was orientated towards the production of a population that would not only be governable but would freely assent to its governance” (Bennett 2020 p4).

Bennett argued that government policy enlisted culture as a new, different way of governing (Bennett 1995, 1998, 2020). Museums, which had historically been a largely private space, were recruited into the public domain and put to the task of meeting state objectives. Museums became,

“Cultural technologies which inducted their visitors into new ways of acting on and shaping the self” (Bennett 1998 p153).

In the context of large-scale social change driven by the Industrial Revolution, they were intended to promote ‘modern’ behaviours and social cohesion (Bennett 1995, 1997).

The creation and development of AC-NMW, in particular, played a role in the political movement to develop a distinctive Welsh identity in the late twentieth century (Mason 2007a, 2007b, Morgan 2007). In 1893, Welsh MP Herbert Lewis asked for Wales to receive a share of the Museum Grant afforded to Scotland and Ireland but reportedly,

“Had to become extremely thick-skinned to endure the loud laughter of English MPs” (Morgan 2007 p16).

Nonetheless, persistent campaigns by Welsh MPs in parliament, and a political lobby beyond its walls, meant that the National Museum Wales received its charter in 1907. Prys Morgan (2007) argued that this movement was strongly tied to a wave of Welsh patriotism which called for a new, distinctive approach to Welsh culture and history; and a protest to a “British neglect of all things Welsh” (p20) in the wake of the 1848 Blue Books crisis. Rhiannon Mason (2007a, 2007b) suggested that the argument for a Welsh national museum was so fiercely contested because it challenged the idea that Wales’ capital was London, and its national museum the British Museum. Indeed, the new museum was intended to represent Wales as its own state within the UK (2007a) and its history as distinctively Welsh (2007b) – part of the construction of a Welsh national identity and sense of place. These accounts from Bennett, Morgan, and Mason suggest that representing cultural values and governmental priorities has been part of the public museum since their inception.

4.2 Addressing social exclusion

In the latter part of the twentieth century, museums were faced with widespread critique: for being elitist, out of touch, and serving a narrow section of society (Hudson 1977); for focussing overly on museological methods and not enough on the ‘purpose’ of museums (Vergo 1989); and for not providing ‘value for money’ on public funds (Scott 2002). As a result, museums sought to find new direction, including a shift in focus which centred communication as one of the main aims of museum practice, alongside traditional roles of collecting, preserving, and interpreting; and emphasised the need to diversify museum visitors (Tlili et al 2007). Alongside this, government policy prescribed roles for museums in supporting economic development and social inclusion (Tlili et al 2007).

Research carried out by Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Richard Sandell, Theano Moussouri, and Helen O’Riain on behalf of the Group for Large Local Authority Museums resulted in a report entitled ‘*Museums and Social Inclusion*’ (Hooper-Greenhill et al 2000) which reflected on these social policy influences. The report argued that museum projects to date engaged with seven key areas of impact: personal growth and development, community empowerment, tackling crime and unemployment, promoting health and

lifelong learning, and representing inclusive communities. It defined 'representing inclusive communities' as,

“The impact that museums have had, through representing diversity and celebrating plural identities, in challenging negative attitudes towards minority or marginalised communities and in providing a sense of place and enhanced community identity for groups at risk of exclusion” (Hooper-Greenhill et al 2000 p23).

The report concluded that many local authority museums were already addressing social inclusion goals in their work; but “fuzziness” (p53) around definitions of social inclusion and a lack of policy framework impeded recognition of museums' contribution in this area.

Similarly, Anwar Tlili et al (2007) suggested that museums can,

“[Go] some way towards countering silences, prejudices, misrepresentations, and groundless devaluations of minority cultures” (p283).

However, they argued that representing marginalised communities in exhibitions and events aimed at the “celebration of cultural identity” (p283) did not necessarily engage with the societal prejudices and power differentials which devalue these groups. Indeed, Rose Paquet Kinsley (2016) shared similar findings in her account of misrecognition in museums, discussed in section two.

Furthermore, they argued that governmental policy instituted under New Labour (1990s and 2000s), which called for museums to tackle 'social exclusion', amounted to a “re-working” (p285) of roles afforded to Victorian museums by the state. Museums were tasked with engendering feelings of self-esteem and 'belonging' in visitors; and providing individuals with the skills needed for engagement in social life. This included discursively recreating excluded groups as 'communities' and communicating shared societal values. Like Bennett, Tlili et al (2007) observed that museums played a role in shaping social values and behaviours as part of an assemblage of governmental institutions; and like Hooper-Greenhill et al (2000), they argued that museums have the potential to foster

social inclusion in their local communities and wider society. However, they contended that, at the time of writing, ‘fuzziness’ in government policy and frameworks impeded their ability to do so.

A related body of work explores how museums can contribute to social inclusion. For example, Graham Black (2010) suggested museums can act as “memory institutions”, collecting, conserving, documenting, and representing diverse cultures and lived experiences. This supports the creation of inclusive civic environments by constructing and communicating ideas of a shared heritage. They can also be “learning institutions”, providing individuals with skills and experiences which support their participation in democratic structures. As such, they equip individuals to engage in constructive social debate and decision-making processes. In doing so, they contribute to the development of a cohesive, inclusive society by sharing skills and values in line with ‘social inclusion’ agendas. This is reminiscent of Bennett’s (1995) account of governmentality, in which visitors are inducted into ways of thinking and acting which support state goals and ideals.

Similarly, Richard Sandell (2002) addressed this question by identifying three potential ‘levels’ at which museums can affect their visitors and wider society: individual, community, and societal. At the individual level, outcomes range from enhanced self-esteem to the acquisition of skills for employment. These sorts of benefits are generally brought about through face-to-face interaction between museum staff and the individual themselves, typically in community engagement projects. At the community level, they contribute to regeneration or renewal initiatives, and act as a forum for community action and debate. They can also identify how museums, themselves, are complicit in silencing some communities and representing stereotypes in their displays and collections; and seek to better represent diversity. At the societal level, they can seek to promote equality and pluralist values. This account suggests that museums have the potential to identify and evaluate dominant narratives in society; and further, reproduce or challenge them in their displays and programming. This is reminiscent of Michel Foucault’s discussions of ‘heterotopias’ (Foucault 1970, 1982a), which is discussed in chapter three.

Sandell and Black's work share commonalities as to how museums can contribute to social inclusion. First, they can build capacity for civic dialogue and participation by developing skills and confidence in individuals; and providing a forum for diverse voices and perspectives. Second, they can represent diverse cultures and pluralist values in their collections and displays; and contest negative ideas of difference underpinning exclusionary practices and prejudices. Similarly, Kevin Coffee (2006, 2008) argued that museums affect social ideologies and ideas about the past and present. He suggested they can act as,

“Repositories for normative examples of artistic expression, history, ideology, and taste” (Coffee 2008 p266) and “define and control visual expressions of major social narratives” (Coffee 2006 p435).

Given authority as spaces of culture and education by their history and status as a public institution, museums are able to challenge or reinforce social relationships and ideologies. This ability – to contest or reproduce dominant ideas from society through which objects are collected and how they are interpreted – suggests that museums hold significant cultural power (Brekke 2018). Some museum studies authors have questioned how this power should be exercised. For example, Robert Janes and Richard Sandell (2019b) have called for ‘activist’ practice in museums, using museum spaces and activities as a platform to address important social issues.

However, research has suggested that many visitors expect to encounter impartial, ‘neutral’ information in museums (Cameron 2008, Wray 2019). Reflecting on interviews and exit surveys with over 500 visitors to museums in Australia and Canada, Fiona Cameron (2008) concluded that,

“Participants identified museums as places that present trusted and reliable information, predicated on the belief that a museum’s voice is impartial and value neutral” (p6).

Respondents suggested that taking a political stance made the museum seem less credible and less like a “safe place” (p7); and that museum’s should offer purely factual

information and represent different values and perspectives equally. This argument is predicated on a belief in ‘facts’ which exist independent of different perspectives and experiences; and the ability of curators to represent all parts of society equally (Wray 2019). It contrasts with arguments that,

“Selecting which objects to collect and whose memories to preserve—or not, deciding whose stories will be told—or not, and not least, defining which voices are worthy of being heard” are inextricably political acts (Brekke 2019 p268).

Indeed, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2000) described museum collections and galleries as “sites of contention” (p21) where meaning is negotiated, mediated, and disseminated. In her influential work on the development of modern museums, she argued that early public museums sought to develop and share grand narratives regarding history and the natural world (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 2010). In the latter part of the twentieth century, museological theory and practice challenged this approach, arguing that communication and education in museum spaces cannot be considered as a linear process with information passing from curator to visitor; and contending that museum staff do not hold a monopoly on authority, problematising interpretation, understanding, and the construction of meaning (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, 2010). Hooper-Greenhill’s work emphasised visitor agency in the generation and communication of knowledge; and the recognition that there are multiple ways of understanding and representing artefacts and historical narratives.

Several authors have explored how museums have played a part in representing and reproducing societal ideas of difference. For example, Hannah Turner (2016) argued that museum collections privilege some perspectives while silencing others by recording, and so making prominent, some types of information and omitting others. Drawing on her doctoral work at the Smithsonian’s National History Museum, USA, during which she reviewed ledger books, card catalogues, staff oral histories, and institutional archives, Turner argued that collections and their documentation are often assumed to be neutral in outlook – but are in fact both contextual and historical in the way they record the past (Turner 2021). Museum collections are constructed over time by interactions between custodial collecting practices and specific research epistemologies; and the

documentation accompanying them are organised according to sets of professional, institutional, and individual standards, vocabularies, and assumptions about material heritage (Turner 2016). Collections and catalogues become sites of performance and negotiation, as curators discursively produce and reproduce different ways of knowing an object (Turner 2017). As a result, power relationships are embedded into the systems, taxonomies, and technologies used to build museum collections and catalogues. Her work explored the consequences of “existing and invisible information infrastructures” (p476) which privileged Western, Eurocentric ways of understanding objects over Indigenous American ways of knowing them; and argued that these infrastructures have resulted in a discourse which constructs Indigenous American culture as oppositional to Western culture, with the latter afforded privilege as a more authoritative way of knowing (2017, 2021).

Dan Hicks (2020) described how interpretation and exhibition of artefacts stolen from the Kingdom of Benin in the nineteenth century – and still displayed in museums across the UK – represented societal ideas about racial difference. He argued that Victorian museums played a significant role in legitimating colonial expansion, acting as a,

“Device for the production of alterity... to do the work of creating difference between the Global North and the Global South” (p182).

By presenting the Global South, and Africa in particular, as less civilised than its Northern counterpart, museums supported acts of great violence and theft carried out by British armed forces. Of present-day museum collections, Hicks stated,

“The enduring colonial violence of displaying loot is not just collateral damage, but an endurance of anthropology’s period of being put to work for an ideology of white supremacy” (p236).

He argued that historical processes of collection and interpretations, and their continuing influence in current UK museums, act to embed representations of institutional racism into their displays.

In their research on community archives, Michelle Caswell et al (2017) explored the concept of ‘symbolic annihilation’: the absence, under-representation, maligning and trivialisation of marginalised communities. In interviews with founders of community archives focussed on the collection of material regarding marginalised groups, respondents felt that their communities were excluded or misrepresented in mainstream media; and furthermore, from mainstream libraries, archives, and museums. Based on this work, Caswell et al (2017) identified ontological, epistemological, and social impacts of absence and representation in archives and museums. They defined ontological impact as,

“Ways in which representation changes how community members exist in, interact with, and move through the world” (p17).

They described how seeing themselves represented in archival material built self-esteem in participants and empowered them to imagine alternatives to current systems of oppression. They conceptualised epistemological impact as,

“Change in the nature of what can be known about a community’s history and how it can be known” (p18).

They described participant’s positive reactions to recognising parts of their own identity in historical accounts and evidence of a community’s existence in the past. Finally, they argued that representation has social impact by promoting ideas of social cohesion and intersectionality which benefit society as a whole.

These accounts illustrate how the way that artefacts are collected, interpreted, and displayed in museums can reproduce and legitimate social discourses about identity and difference. Caswell et al (2017), in particular, suggested a role for museums in addressing discourses associated with social inequality and marginalisation.

4.3 Community engagement

Processes of capacity building, civic debate, and representation are not confined to collecting and curating practices. They also occur in museums’ community outreach and

engagement work. Indeed, writers like Jennifer Hunt (2022) and Rose Paquet Kinsley (2016) have argued that community engagement is crucial to promoting change by displacing power inequalities between curators and the people they are seeking to represent.

Similarly, Bryony Oncuil (2018) suggested that,

“Museology has shifted away from the curator as lone expert and voice of authority towards facilitating community engagement and collaboration” (p159).

‘Community engagement’ is commonly used to denote programmes which invite individuals or groups who do not routinely visit museums to take part in a range of activities connected to museum displays and collections (Morse and Munroe 2018). Outcomes can include co-produced exhibits and events, participation in panels or forums, and volunteering opportunities. These practices can be understood as a way of delivering positive impacts to local communities and developing new audiences. For example, Nuala Morse and Ealasaid Munroe (2018) described how community engagement staff at case study museums in northern England and Scotland endeavoured to make participants from marginalised communities feel welcome and comfortable in museum spaces and build positive relationships with their local communities; and to facilitate participants in becoming more confident expressing themselves and their opinions. They can also bring new perspectives to the development of collections, exhibitions, and events. For example, Oncuil (2018) explored how engagement with Indigenous groups enabled curators at Head-Smashed-In heritage site in Buffalo, Canada, and Glenbow Museum, Calgary to use non-Western approaches to heritage as a way of representing Indigenous culture and history. However, other authors have argued that many museums do not engage with power dynamics in community engagement work: criticisms include over-emphasis on reaching consensus and avoiding conflict in perspectives (Lynch 2013); and reducing community impact to ‘tokenism’ while perpetuating structures which privilege the museum’s authority (Morse 2018).

Thus far, this chapter has argued that museums have a long history of trying to encourage social cohesion through their representation of societal ideals and behaviours: from ‘civilising’ influences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to present-day attempts to address marginalisation and prejudice experienced by particular communities of people. However, these processes of representation are characterised by complex power dynamics incorporating curators, visitors, government, and societal ideologies and discourses.

5. Disability and representation

5.1 Cultural Representations of Disability

In 1992, the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People commissioned Colin Barnes to carry out a review of the representation of disabled people in UK media. The resultant report found that,

“Stereotypes which medicalise, patronise, criminalise and dehumanise disabled people abound in books, films, on television, and in the press” (Barnes 1992 p19).

These included portrayals of disabled people as pitiable and pathetic; sinister and evil; an object of ridicule; a burden on others; and sexually abnormal. Finally, Barnes identified a “stereotype of omission”, arguing that the absence of disabled people in media not directly concerned with impairment reinforced a stereotype of disabled people being unable to participate in society. He argued that such portrayals were reductionist and dehumanising and served to create distance between disabled characters and audiences (Barnes 1992, Shakespeare 1994). Writing in 2022, John Aspler et al argued that while television shows now include a greater number of disabled characters, their representation is still heavily influenced by reductionist stereotypes. For example, they found that TV shows included more autistic characters than in the past, but their representation was dominated by,

“Tropes of the autistic person as a savant, a burden, and at times as creepy, dangerous, or rude” (Aspler et al 2022 p343).

Drawing on a review of UK newspapers in the 2010s and a series of focus groups, Emma Briant et al (2013) identified negative stereotypes that disabled people were lazy or 'scroungers'. They argued that disabled people were portrayed as a "folk devil" (Briant et al 2013 p880) in relation to discourses about austerity policies, and changes to the UK benefit payment system which accompanied them. In particular, they suggested that portraying disabled people as fraudulent 'scroungers' legitimated changes to the benefit system. Furthermore, data from their focus group sessions suggested that these articles had impacted on popular perceptions of disabled people, playing on historical tropes of the deserving and non-deserving poor.

However, some writers have described positive changes in disability representation. Beth Haller and Lawrence Carter-Long (2022) began a special issue of *The Review of Disability Studies* with the observation that,

"So much mass media representation of disability for generations has reverberated with an ableist and inauthentic tone; many television shows and films still do. But authentic and empowering representations are beginning to take hold" (Haller and Carter-Long 2022 p2).

Similarly, in his analysis of interviews with parents of children with Down's syndrome, Gareth Thomas (2021) found that,

"Parents recognised that there is, broadly speaking, a more positive, rounded, and visible account of Down's syndrome (DS) in media content" (Thomas 2021 p697).

In Thomas' research, respondents generalised this change in representation of Down's syndrome to include disability in general. Nonetheless, Thomas' analysis highlighted continuing tensions in disability representation. Notably, he argued that there is a tension between challenging feelings of 'pity' levelled at disabled people and remaining authentic to experiences of impairment and oppression.

5.2 Sociology and disability

With some significant exceptions, the concept of disability was relatively neglected by sociology and its academic literature until the latter part of the twentieth century (Barnartt 2017, Mauldin and Brown 2021). Laura Mauldin and Robyn Brown (2021) suggested that this could be because disability activism and government policy (such as the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995) have come to resonate in society relatively late compared to issues of equality around race, gender and sexuality; or, alternatively, that disability has been considered by sociologists to be an issue of health in “a way that precludes discussing it as a matter of identity or culture”. Where sociologists have written about disability, it has largely been conceptualized in terms of its relationship with doctors and medicine (Welch 2017, Mauldin and Brown 2021).

Where sociology did engage with ideas of disability, it was framed as type of social deviance (Thomas 2007). Influential examples include Talcott Parsons’ (1951) ‘sick role’ and Erving Goffman’s (1963) ‘stigma’.

In *‘The Social System’* (1951), Talcott Parsons argued society is constituted by networks of actions and interaction by social actors; and described different social roles that individuals can assume within this system. Amongst these, he described a ‘sick role’ for disabled and chronically ill people:

“The sick role involves a relative legitimacy, that is so long as there is an implied ‘agreement’ to ‘pay the price’ in accepting certain disabilities and the obligation to get well” (Parsons 1951 p211).

Parsons argued that illness provides an individual with a legitimate reason to cease conforming to institutionalized expectations and behaviors – or at least to pause them. Individuals in the ‘sick role’ are obligated to seek medical advice and follow it to minimise the burden placed on society and maximise the benefit accrued through their labour (Parsons 1951, Thomas 2007).

Critics argued that this obligation to ‘get well’ did not engage with the chronic nature of many disabilities and health conditions. Parsons defended his model by arguing that,

“Recovery is the obverse of the process of deterioration of health, that is, level of capacities” (Parsons 1978 p19).

As such, an individual either remains in the sick role for an extended period; or finds a way of returning to their previous level of capacities in spite of their condition(s). In order to regain independence and agency in society, they must navigate a path to leaving the sick role (Parsons 1975, Varul 2010).

Erving Goffman considered disability in his book, *‘Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity’* (1963). In this volume, Goffman is concerned with how society,

“Establishes the means of categorising people and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories” (Goffman 1963 p3).

He described how individuals use these attributes and categories to navigate social interactions, shape expectations of encounters, and make sense of the social world. ‘Stigma’ occurs when an individual observes “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (p4) and uses this observation to shape their behaviour. In particular, they,

“Exercise varieties of discrimination, through which [they] effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances. We construct a stigma-theory, an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents” (Goffman 1963 p5).

Furthermore, individuals in possession of such attributes may internalise these experience of discrimination,

“Inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be” (p7).

Goffman identified three categories of stigma: physical disability or “abominations of the body” (p3); “blemishes of character” (p3) such as weak will, dishonesty or mental illness; and associations with particular race, religions, or nationalities. As such, *‘Stigma’*

provides an account of how disabled people, as a particular type of marginalised community, experience prejudice, exclusionary practices, and loss of self-esteem in their social interactions.

Goffman's work has been described as,

“One of the most cited and influential works in the field [of disability studies]”
(Brune and Garland-Thompson 2014).

For example, his distinction between ‘normal’ and ‘stigmatised’ has underpinned explorations of disability representation (e.g., Garland-Thomson 1997, Shakespeare 1994). However, critics have argued that his focus on relational and performative aspects of prejudice mask structural forces which underpin societal prejudice and stereotypes (Griner 2020); and that his use of pejorative and dehumanising language in regard to disabled people (and other ‘stigmatised’ individuals) can make for unpleasant reading (Barnartt 2017).

In his essay *‘Medicine as an Institution of Social Control’* (1972), Irving Zola argued disability is derived not from scientific fact but social values (Welch 2017). In particular, he argued that medical expertise, constructed in the social imagination as value-free and objective, is increasingly employed to control lifestyles and even political decisions (Zola 1972). This is in line with Goffman's (1963) account that the production of ‘disability’ as an identity occurs in social interactions; and that this ‘stigmatised’ identity results in prejudicial treatment. Zola's work is influential in its own right in presenting a critique of medical expertise and its role in defining ‘disability’ and shaping the lives of disabled people. Furthermore, he argued that while experiences of impairment differed across individuals, interactions with social structures and cultural representations which devalued disabled people amounted to a shared experience across different impairments, illnesses, and individuals (Maudlin 2021). This observation was influential in disability rights activism and the development of disability studies as an academic discipline.

5.2.1 Disability activism and the social model

In the UK, one of the rallying cries of disability activism was a rejection of expectations that individuals who required assistance in their day to day lives should live in residential care facilities, handing much of the control over their lifestyles to medical and care professionals (Barnes 2019). For example, Paul Hunt, an influential disability rights activist, collected autobiographical accounts of people living in care facilities and published twelve accounts under the title, '*Stigma: The Experience of Disability*' (1966). In his introduction to the volume, Hunt argued,

“The problem of disability lies not only in the impairment of function and its effects on us individually but more importantly in our relationship with ‘normal’ people” (1966 p146).

Despite significant commonalities in their subject matter, Hunt makes no reference to Goffman’s work of the same name. Susan Schweik (2014) suggested that this was a “purposeful and political omission”: a response to Goffman’s identification of author and reader as ‘normal’ and the descriptions of disabled people Goffman used to illustrate his argument, which are widely perceived as dehumanising, lacking in empathy, and undermining the agency of disabled people (Love 2014, Brune 2014).

Building on this work, Hunt was one of the founding members of the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS), who argued that disability should be understood as a form of social oppression similar to that experience by women, ethnic minorities, and gay and lesbian people (Barnes 2019). This argument was formalised in a 1976 booklet entitled '*Fundamental Principles of Disability*', which drew a distinction between impairment and disability, which would become a central tenet of disability studies:

“‘Impairment’ denotes ‘lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb or mechanism of the body’ but ‘disability’ is ‘the disadvantage of restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little

account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities” (UPIAS 1976 p14).

While their early work maintained a focus on physical impairments, UPIAS went on to drop this distinction, adding that sensory or neurological impairments affected an individual’s relationship with and experience of society in many ways (Barnes 2019).

This work influenced the ‘social model of disability’, first formalised by Mike Oliver (1983) (Shakespeare 2013). Writing about the nature of social work, Oliver argued that disability could be understood as a social problem arising from hostile physical and social environments; or a societal problem arising from how society treats disabled people (Oliver 1983). This model was further developed throughout the 1980s and 1990s by authors from fields of sociology, social policy, and education (Goodley 2017). The social model argued that disability is distinct from ‘impairment’. Impairment refers to the symptoms experienced as a result of a medically recognised condition and is considered an attribute of the disabled individual. On the other hand, disability is a structural problem rooted in societal barriers to inclusion. The goal of disability activism and policy should be to shift focus away from impairment towards disability; and to address these societal barriers. Advocates of the social model distinguished it from individual or medical ways of understanding disability; in particular, they emphasised its focus on disability as a social construct as opposed to an individual deficit (Shakespeare 2013).

The social model became an important part of the UK disability rights movement (Shakespeare 2013, Goodley 2017). Its arguments suggested that disability was a public problem which required public solutions; and that disabled people shared common experiences and challenges despite their different impairments (Oliver 2013, Shakespeare 2013). It also challenges the popular narrative of disability as a ‘personal tragedy’, which was prominent in disability representation (Shakespeare 1994).

Despite its popularity, the social model has been criticised for neglecting the importance of impairment in lived experiences of disability. For example, Liz Crow (1996) argued that impairment was an integral part of living with a disability and cannot be separated from the ways in which disabled people experience society. Similarly, Tom Shakespeare (1994)

suggested that impairment played a significant role in shaping the historical development of societal barriers to access. As such, both authors dispute the model's distinction between impairment and disability and contend that taking impairment out of analysis hides many of the struggles faced by disabled people. Despite these criticisms, the social model has become influential in government policy and societal approaches to representing disability people. For example, UK Government guidance for "portraying disability" calls for portrayals "based on the social model of disability" (UK Government 2021); Channel 4's "Disability Code of Portrayal" recommends that programme makers "apply social model thinking" (Channel 4 2022); and National Trust guidance calls for museums to "apply the social model of disability in the heritage and cultural sector" (RCMG and National Trust 2023).

5.3 Intersectionality

Crow (1996) and Shakespeare's (1994) work observed that while the concept of a disabled 'community' provides a productive tool for understanding social dimensions of disability and rallying calls for change, it disguises the varied and heterogenous nature of 'disability' as a category. Elizabeth Crooke (2006) observed that,

"Community is a word that alters in different contexts in an almost chameleon-like fashion" (p173).

She argued that 'communities' can be bound by many shared attributes ("thick" ties) or a small number of shared characteristics ("thin" ties) (p172). They are constituted by heterogeneous individuals who differ from one another in a variety of ways. Nonetheless, they are connected by the development of social networks and recognition of shared characteristic(s) (Crooke 2006). As such, the 'disabled community' includes a range of people living with different impairments brought upon by different circumstances, who experience and understand disability in very different ways (Anderson and Carden-Coyle 2007). This section reflects on two factors which complicate a single, unified understanding of a disabled 'community': the blurred boundary around the definition of disability, and the concept of intersectionality.

The Equality Act 2010 defines disability as,

“A physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long-term’ negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities (UK Government no date).

In line with Parson’s (1951) and Goffman’s (1963) arguments, this definition understands disability as an antithesis to ‘normal’ ability. Various authors have questioned this approach to defining disability and emphasised its ambiguity. For example, John Swain and Sally French (2010) have argued that impairment cannot be equated with disability since many people with impairments, for example those with short or long sight, are societally accepted as ‘not-disabled’. As such, not all types of impairment are considered to be ‘stigmatising’ attributes. What is the difference between using glasses as a seeing-aid and a prosthetic as a walking-aid? In *‘Stigma’*, Goffman (1963) argued that stigmatising attributes are contextual to particular social relationships and interactions. Reflecting on the example of physical disability, he argued that this attribute would be stigmatising in the context of joining the army but not in the context of a hospital. He concluded,

“A stigma, then, is really a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype” (Goffman 1963 p4).

As such, not all impairments can be categorised as disabilities. The line between a disabling impairment and a ‘normal’ one has no clear definition and is constituted in social interaction.

Similarly, Michael Bury (1991) argued that popular definitions of chronic illness and disability are socially constructed and dynamic in nature. He observed,

“The meaning of chronic illness can also be seen in terms of its significance. By this I mean that different conditions carry with them different connotations and imagery” (p453).

As such, popular definitions of chronic illness and disability are socially constructed and dynamic in nature. These definitions coalesce around stereotypes; but are influenced by

social relationships and interactions. It is not possible to discern one encapsulating understanding of disability – because such a thing would be fluid in nature and dependant on social and cultural context. As such, while many of the attributes associated with disability – physical characteristics of impairment, for example – are physical in nature, the meaning underlying the label ‘disabled’, and the line between a disabling and non-disabling impairment has discursive aspects as well as a material ones.

Individual experiences of impairment are influenced by a wide range of factors. For example, social status and access to resources affects how people are able to adapt to impairment (Swain and French 2010). The concept of intersectionality offers a lens to explore how different aspects of an individual’s social identity, such as race, class, sexuality, and so forth, interact to upon one another. Christopher Bell (2017) argued that studies of disability had, to date, neglected analyses of intersectionality, with a corpus of mainly white scholars and activists dominating the discussion. While many authors recognised the influence of academic literatures and civil rights movements led by people of colour, often referencing similarities between structures of disability oppression and racism as a more widely recognised form of inequality, it has not paid sufficient attention to the experience of black disabled people (Bell 2017, Shifrer and Frederick 2019).

Some authors have drawn other academic literatures into their work to improve its intersectionality. For example, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2002) argued that feminist and disability literatures share their interest in the politics of lived bodies and the “cultural fantasy of the body as a neutral vessel for our will” (Garland-Thomson 2002). As such, combining feminist thought and the topic of disability can,

“Strengthen our understanding of how [race, sexuality, ethnicity, and gender] intertwine, redefine and mutually constitute one another” (Garland-Thomson 2002 p4).

Following Goffman’s account of ‘stigma’, she argued that feminist disability studies would explore how society develops,

“An imaginary norm and structure[s] the relations that grant power, privilege, and status to that norm” (Garland-Thomson 2002 p4).

Similarly, Robert McRuer (2006) identified common ground between studies of disability and studies of LGBTQ+ communities. He argued that homosexuality and disability have both been construed as stigmatised identities to reproduce discourses of the able body and heterosexuality as ‘normal’. Inspired by movements to reclaim the word ‘queer’, he uses the word ‘crip’ to resist negative connotations of disability.

Age is another point of intersectionality for many disabled people. For example, in a study of attitudes to disability held by disabled people, Rosalyn Darling and Alex Heckert (2010) found that older respondents were more likely to consider their disability to be a negative part of their lives, while younger respondents were more likely to express pride at their disabled identity. Those born with a disability spoke more positively about its impact on their lives than those who acquired a disability in later life.

These discussions highlight the broad range of individuals who constitute the ‘disabled community’. In particular, attributes such as race, gender, and sexuality contribute to complex relationships of intersectionality in experiences of stigma and prejudice. Furthermore, characteristics such as age and financial resources affect experiences of impairment and change personal and societal perceptions of disability.

5.4 Disability and identity

Some writers have explored the impact of disability and impairment on self-identity. For example, Nick Watson (2002) contended that the majority of respondents in his study (twenty-eight interviews with people recruited from organisations and sports groups for disabled people) chose to frame their self-identity in ways which side-lined their experiences of impairment. He argued that,

“Despite daily experiences of oppressive practices, only three of the participants incorporated disability within their identity” (Watson 2002 p514).

While participants discussed the changes that impairment and adaptations and changes had made in their lives, changing their daily practices and interactions with others, they said it had not affected their identity. One participant, explained,

“The only difference is I’m in a wheelchair, and I try not to think of that as a difference” (Watson 2002 p514).

In these accounts, disability has brought about changes in individuals’ circumstances, but not the attributes which define them.

Conversely, Michael Bury (1991) argued that onset of disability or chronic illness leads to significant changes in one’s sense of self (Bury 1982, 1991). Also drawing on interview data, he observed that individuals must draw on social practices and societal discourses to constitute new identities and represent them to themselves and others.

Like Bury, Cathy Charmaz (1983) argued that acquired disability induced significant changes in self-identity. She suggests that self-identity is constituted through social interaction and relationships; and that impairments or illnesses which isolate people from broader society impair these lifelong processes of self-constitution and representation. As such, the individual experiences a crisis of self-identity, compounded in the US context by societal discourses which champion independence and autonomy as indicators of personal success (Charmaz 1983). This echoes Goffman’s work, in particular:

“The standards he has incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failing, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he ought to be” (Goffman 1963 p7).

Indeed, in more recent work Charmaz (2019) provided examples of this phenomenon. Based on ethnographic and interview accounts, she argued that participants often reflecting on their ‘stigmatised’ identities. For example, one participant described how,

“I kind of became a pariah in my family” (Charmaz 2019 p28).

In particular, she described how changes in her relationship with her family made her feel disenfranchised and dehumanised.

Furthermore, Charmaz (2019) argued that dominant neoliberal discourses which champion autonomy and independence as signs of a 'good' person shape state provision of welfare support. As a result, disabled people face societal barriers not only in navigating the built environment, but in applying for income support and other resources if they are unable to work.

Similarly, Rose Galvin (2005) identified the "social and provisional nature of identity" (p394) as it related to experiences of disability and chronic illness. Reflecting on twenty-four oral and twelve written autobiographical accounts of disability, she argued that societal discourses and changes in social interactions significantly impact on disabled people's self-identity. However, this did not always result in feelings of inferiority. One participant recalled,

"So, if someone looked at me and sort of had an unpleasant look on their face, I'd think, what's wrong with me? But now I don't . . . It took quite a bit of getting used to, but, instead I think, what's wrong with them? Now I never worry about other people's opinions" (Galvin 2005 p399).

In Bury (1991), Charmaz (1983, 2019), and Galvin's (2005) accounts, disability is constituted as a 'stigma' through social interactions. In turn, individuals adapt their sense of self-identity to reflect these experiences. All three accounts illustrate how societal perceptions of disability impact upon disabled people's experiences and self-identity.

Yet, as Galvin (2005) observed these impacts are not necessarily negative. John Swain and Sally French (2000) further argued that identifying as 'disabled' can result in feelings of pride and belonging. They suggested that disability rights activism has developed a collective identity to which disabled people can ally themselves; and consequently resist dominant narratives which associate disability with otherness and tragedy (Swain and French 2000). Their research pointed to how positive representation of disabled people

in media, culture, and society can empower individuals as they navigate questions of self-identity.

6. Conclusion

In reviewing existing literature, this chapter illustrates that representation is a topic of significant discussion in both museum and disability studies. In museum studies, this includes questions about why and how museums should represent different cultures and communities within society; as well as reflections on museums' own historical development and how this has shaped power relations in the objects and interpretations held in store and on display. In the sociology of disability and disability studies, representation relates, on the one hand, to societal stigmas and prejudices; and on the other, to changing ideas of self and community held by disabled people. These discussions provide the theoretical context in which this thesis unfolds.

Chapter three continues to explore academic literature. In particular, it turns to theoretical work which has inspired the analytical framework used to collect and analyse data – Michel Foucault's work on discourse and heterotopia and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

1. Introduction

This chapter explores the academic literature used to develop the analytical work presented in chapters five, six, and seven. As such, it bridges the gap between the more applied literature discussed in chapter two and the methodology in chapter four. In particular, it explores two bodies of work: Michel Foucault's work on discourse, knowledge, and power, and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model. These models were chosen because they explore how meaning is co-constructed and shared in social interactions. This study intends to use the analytical tools provided by these frameworks to question how meaning is interpreted and shared during interactions between museum staff and visitors. This includes face to face communication, for example community engagement; and indirect communication through galleries. It also includes external influences like prevalent stereotypes drawn from cultural milieu beyond the museums' walls.

Section two discusses Michel Foucault's conceptualisation of discourse: "the practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972 p54). It explores how societal discourses constitute bodies of knowledge, induct individuals and communities as subjects, and reciprocally reproduce relationships of power and governance. This section describes how these concepts have been applied in the study of museums and disability. These ideas are used in chapters five, six, and seven to explore how communication in museums relates to wider societal discourses, either reproducing prevalent ideas about disability or challenging them.

Section three considers Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, which illustrates the processes of interpretation, meaning making, and communication undertaken by creators and audiences of television programmes. It discusses how the model describes co-creation of meaning and negotiation of complexity; and then how it has been applied

to study museum practice. These ideas are applied in chapters five and six as a framework to understand the co-construction of meaning in museums galleries.

Finally, section five reflects on key themes from across the chapter and how they have been applied in data analysis presented in chapters five, six, and seven; before introducing chapter four.

2. Michel Foucault

2.1 Foucault and discourse

In general use, the word ‘discourse’ describes any written or spoken communication – any use of language to connote meaning. It has a more specific meaning in Foucault’s work. In this context, a discourse is constituted by culturally and historically specific relationships between bodies of knowledge and disciplinary practices which endorse them (McHoul and Grace 2015); or

“A group of statements which provide a way of talking about – a way of representing knowledge about – a particular topic” (Hall 2013a p29).

It is an assemblage of texts, institutions, and practices which dictate how one can write, speak, or think about a particular social topic, prescribing some ways of knowing and excluding others.

Foucault explored ‘discourse’ in *‘The Archaeology of Knowledge’* (1972). He wrote,

“By discourse, then, I meant that which was produced by groups of signs. But I also meant the acts of formulation” (p120).

He explained that ‘discourse’ is constituted by groups of statements, distributed across texts from a particular culture and time, which assume a common position with regards to a topic and communicate a certain type of knowledge about it. It is also constituted by the social institutions and interactions which produce and disperse these statements and the societal norms and rules which govern these processes.

'The Birth of the Clinic' (1973) applied this concept to scientific and medical practices in the eighteenth-century. Here Foucault argued that discourse(s) about the human body and its clinical treatment re-constituted previous understandings of disease and illness; and in doing so, produced and dispersed new ways of knowing and talking about them. Reflecting on analysis of philosophical, scientific, and political texts and practices, he contended that,

“What has changed is the silent configuration in which language finds support: the relation of situation and attitude to what is speaking and what is being spoken about” (Foucault 1973 pxi).

New discourses about the ‘healthy’ or ‘normal’ body, rooted in empiricism and clinical observation, came to define what it was to experience and respond to illness. This knowledge was bound up in social practices, relationships, and institutions. Foucault observed,

“For clinical experience to become possible as a form of knowledge, a reorganization of the hospital field, a new definition of the status of the patient in society, and the establishment of a certain relationship between public assistance and medical experience, between help and knowledge, became necessary” (Foucault 1973 p196).

As such, knowledge was deeply embedded in practices and relationships which situated statements in their wider societal context. These institutions and social norms produced, communicated, and enforced information, rules, and categories which come to define a given topic (Hook 2001). For example, Foucault illustrated how professional norms and practices in hospitals and scientific experimentation played a significant role in establishing the authority of doctors, establishing doctors as the appropriate port of call for those experiencing illness or disease.

Foucault argued that people are transformed into ‘subjects’ of discourse in two ways: by relationships of control and dependence (‘technologies of power’); and by negotiating different ways of understanding their own identity (‘technologies of self’) (Foucault 1982,

1988). For example, he argued that individuals and communities are divided into categories which locate them within a discourse, with examples including the mad and the sane, the healthy and the unhealthy. Social institutions, practices, and norms serve to,

“Categorise the individuals, mark him by his own individuality, attaches to him his own identity, impose a law of truth on him which he must recognise, and which other have to recognise in him” (p212).

‘The Birth of the Clinic’ (1973) illustrated how changing discourses about the body produced ‘doctors’ and ‘patients’ as ‘subjects’. Foucault wrote,

“What is modified in giving place to anatomo-clinical medicine is not, therefore, the mere surface of contact between the knowing subject and the known subject; it is the more general arrangement of knowledge that determines the reciprocal positions and the connection between the one who must know and that which is to be known” (Foucault 1973 p137).

As such, changing discourses about the nature of illness and the education of medical professionals created a new relationship between doctor, the one who must know, and the patient, that which is to be known. This relationship is characterised by patterns of interaction and associated power dynamics.

Subjects also draw on societal discourses to define themselves and their place in social interactions. In *‘Subjectivity and Truth’* (2017), a set of lectures presented at the College De France between 1980 and 1981, Foucault contended,

“It is a question of the experience we may have of ourselves, the field of subjectivity which may be open to the subject for himself, when there exists in fact, historically, in front of him, in relation to him, a certain truth, a certain discourse of truth, and a certain obligation to be bound to this discourse of truth” (Foucault 2017 p26).

He argued that the subject constituted itself – that is, an individual defines their own identity and place in society with regard to the discourses they are situated in. Moreover, the subject constituted itself in different ways in different contexts, using a variety of practices and claims to knowledge (Kelly 2013). As a result, our experiences of ourselves and our lives are dynamic and context-specific; and products of the discourses which structure our understandings of society and reality (Fadyl and Nicholls 2013).

In the *'The Order of Discourse'* (1971), Foucault explored how discourses entail 'rules' for talking about a topic. Foucault stated,

“We know well that we do not have the right to say everything, that we cannot speak of just anything in any circumstances whatever, and that not everyone has the right to speak of anything whatever” (Foucault 1981 p52).

Mechanisms include systems such as taboo subjects, i.e., formal or informal rules against talking about some subjects, or talking about them in a certain way; accepted schema about which pieces of information can be considered true and which are false; and privileged, authoritative positions within society from which one can communicate ideas as 'knowledge' (Hook 2001). As such, discourse has the capacity to privilege certain perspectives over others, to prohibit certain ways of speaking or thinking, and to privilege some speakers over others. These power relations are pervasive but rarely noticed, hidden by their ubiquity.

While certain discourses may be identified as dominant in a society, they are not absolute. Counter-discourses, associated with different degrees of power, circulate alongside them. As such,

“Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile” (Foucault 1978 p51).

Discourse and power are inextricably linked as social institutions, practices, and norms exert power to define what is true or false; and furthermore, justify themselves by reference to 'true' discourse (Simons 2013, Hook 2001). Power is distributed, permeating

all levels of social organisation and interaction (Hall 2013a) and dispersed throughout society in patterns of control and resistance. For Foucault, power is everywhere,

“Not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another” (Foucault 1978 p93).

As such, power is created and enacted through interactions and relationships between individuals, groups, and institutions at all social levels.

Discourses are bound to a cultural and historical context and will be discontinuous over time. Foucault (1971) illustrated this with an example of the work of nineteenth century biologist Gregor Mendel on hereditary traits in the field of botany. He observed that Mendel’s work was refuted as untrue at the time of its publication because he was,

“Speaking of objects, applying methods, and placing himself on a theoretical horizon which were alien to the biology of his time” (Foucault 1971 p16).

Mendel was presenting ideas which would become the foundation of a new formation of discourse, discontinuous with those that came before. The period of time in which a discourse is dominant is its ‘episteme’. Foucault presented his treatise on epistemes in ‘The Order of Things’ (1970), in which he proposed distinct periods of discourse in the history of Western culture. He stated,

“The order of the basis on which we think today does not have the same mode of being as that of the Classical thinkers... quasi-continuity of the level of ideas is doubtless only a surface appearance; on the archaeological level, we see that the system of positivities was transformed in a wholesale fashion” (Foucault 1970 pxxiv).

In particular, Foucault identified three ‘epistemes’: the renaissance, the classical era (beginning roughly halfway through the seventeenth century), and the modern era (starting at the beginning of the nineteenth century). These periods of time are characterised by distinctive ways of interpreting the world and identifying statements of

‘truth’ (Foucault 1970), illustrating that discourses are tied to particular historical (and cultural) contexts.

As such, different discourses can be characterised by differing ways of understanding and evaluating what can be considered ‘true’. A topic is,

“Constituted by all that was said, in all the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it...” (Foucault 1972 p35).

This discussion has raised a number of concepts which framed the analysis presented in chapters five, six, and seven. In particular, it introduced ‘discourse’ as an assemblage of statements and practices which constitute ‘what we know’ on a particular topic. Furthermore, it has shown that particular discourses dominate the social and cultural milieux of particular historical contexts, privileging some ‘ways of knowing’ over others and affording some social actors more authority than others. This informs the analysis throughout, for example the discussion of community engagement and associated discourses of expertise in chapter five.

2.2 Discourse in museums

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill applied the concept of ‘epistemes’ to her history of museums in *‘Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge’* (1992). Her account begins in fifteenth century Florence at the Medici Palace, which she characterised as the,

“Origin for European ‘museums’ (Hooper-Greenhill 1992 p23).

She argued that the palace combined older practices of gathering treasure with new practices of collecting Classical sculptures, manuscripts, costs, etc. as popular scholarly interest turned its attention to Ancient Greek and Roman history. Furthermore, the palace stood as a testament to the Medici family’s power and influence: “a technology of space” (p24) to emphasis their newly acquired status within the city-state. By the end of the sixteenth centuries, this sort of collection was commonplace in the homes of the wealthy. These ‘cabinets of curiosity’ were “intensely personal” in their contents and layout but had a shared objective:

“Bringing together a number of material things and arranging them in such a way as to represent or recall an entire or partial world picture (p78-79).

Hooper-Greenhill identified these private collections of ‘treasures’ as part of a ‘Renaissance episteme’ in the history of museums.

The seventeenth century, Hooper-Greenhill argued, ushered in a ‘Classical episteme’. While collections of plants, animals, and objects were not new to this period, they became subject to new ideas about arranging and ordering material:

“A new way of connecting things to the eye and to discourse” (p140).

‘Museums’ of this period consisted of collections held by learned societies. These institutions were understood to contribute to the development of knowledge for public benefit, ordering the natural world according to new systems of classification.

Hooper-Greenhill suggested that it is during the ‘Modern episteme’, beginning during the last years of the eighteenth century, that collecting institutions began to resemble present-day public museums. In particular, she pointed to the opening of the Louvre in Paris in 1793. Artefacts were once again reorganised, this time in line with contemporary fields of natural history and anthropology. Furthermore, museums were afforded a new role in governing civic behaviour. Museum galleries were reimagined as spaces where collections could be used to influence public values and behaviour: a new type of institution which encouraged citizen to govern their own conduct. A division was drawn between producers and consumers of knowledge, since collecting and curating objects and art was no longer a private practice – but one carried out by museum professionals, who acquired expert knowledge through scholarly study and research. Knowledge was created by these professionals in the hidden spaces of the museum, and then offered for consumption in public galleries and exhibitions.

Reflecting on this transition from cabinets of curiosity, to learned societies, to public institutions, Hooper-Greenhill (1992) wrote,

“There is no essential museum... its identities, targets, functions, and subject positions are variable and discontinuous” (Hooper-Greenhill 1992 p191).

As societal discourses changed over time, so did the rationales by which collections were accumulated, interpreted, and presented.

Henrietta Lidchi (2013) used the concept of discourse to explore practices of interpretation and display in the British Museum. In particular, she considered the “relationship between discourse and exhibiting” (p159) in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, when it opened in the nineteenth century. Her account began with the private collection developed by Augustus Henry Lane Fox, donated to the University of Oxford on the condition that it would be exhibited in a manner he determined. Lidchi argued that Lane Fox’s approach to classification and display,

“Spoke volumes about the determination of its founder to promote a particular strand of anthropological inquiry, and therefore knowledge and discourse (Lidchi 2013 p161).

While most ethnographic collections of the time were organised according to geographical principles, Lane Fox endorsed an approach based on natural history classifications. This approach selected artefacts for display and interpreted them according to contemporary discourses about race and culture: artefacts were collected, interpreted, and arranged according to a narrative of human history which,

“Accord[ed] different cultures different places on the evolutionary ladder” (p162).

In doing so, the museum reproduced prevalent discourses from academic research for public consumption; and legitimated these discourses using its authority as a part of the state’s educational apparatus.

Lidchi argued that Lane Fox (who became known as Pitt Rivers later in life) felt strongly that museums should exist for public education and social benefit. His collaboration with Oxford University reflected contemporary discourse that museums could, and should, be a tool of government, promoting the importance of public education and the civilising

effects of culture. Lidchi highlighted how the museum reproduced societal discourses about natural history, race, and pedagogy in the way it selected artefacts, interpreted their meaning, and displayed them to visitors.

Annie Coombe (2013) explored how discourse shaped interpretation of the Benin 'bronzes' acquired by UK museums in the last years of the nineteenth century. After British troops sacked the city and royal court of Benin, West Africa, in 1897, objects were acceded into museum collections including the Liverpool Mayer Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, the Horniman Free Museum, London, and the British Museum. These acquisitions prompted academic inquiry into the artefacts' origins and significance (Coombes 2013).

Like Lidchi, Coombe argued that developments in the interpretation of these objects reproduced contemporary discourse about race and culture. Curators at the British Museum (in particular Charles Hercules Read and O. M. Dalton) stated that the sophisticated and detailed artwork on the bronzes must surely be European in origin. This was contradicted by H. Ling Roth, director of the Bankfield Museum in Halifax, who argued that the bronzes pre-dated Portuguese colonisation of Africa and as such were the product of African craftsmanship. Over time and academic discussion, Read and Dalton came to agree that the artefacts were pre-colonial in origin, comparing them to Italian Renaissance works; but dismissed the craftsmanship as of inferior quality to European examples. Coombes argued that this process of disputing and negotiating claims as to the artefacts' provenance illustrates the ability of discourse to adapt to counter-narratives in order to sustain power. When Ling Roth's research challenged dominant discourses regarding the superiority of European art, Read and Dalton were able to reorientate the discourse to incorporate new evidence provided by the 'bronzes'. This process allowed the power/knowledge relations inherent in this discourse to simultaneously change and remain obdurate (Coombes 2013).

Dan Hicks's (2020) *British Museums: the Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* similarly presented a discursive account of the theft, interpretation, and exhibition of the Benin 'bronzes'. He explored the role that ethnographic museums played

in (re-) producing and legitimising discourses about racial difference and colonial expansion. He argued that,

“The Kingdom of Benin... was exhibited alongside non-European antiquities in order to reinforce the image of a future-orientated European victory over ‘primitive’, archaeological African cultures” (Hicks 2020 p185).

Like Lidchi and Coombe, Hicks described how British museums displayed artefacts from Benin in such a way as to support dominant colonial discourses. In doing so, they provided legitimacy for colonial violence in Africa by discursively creating expansion of Britain’s empire as ‘progress’ (Hicks 2020).

Patricia Roque Martins (2018) identified a similar dynamic in representations of disabled people in her analysis of fifteen museums comprising the ‘Directorate General for Cultural Heritage’ (DGCH) in Portugal. She argued that interpretations of artworks and artefacts representing disabled people, including paintings, photographs, sculptures, and pottery, reproduced dominant discourses about disability. For example, she described a photograph of Jose Carlos dos Santos, a blind actor in the nineteenth century, accompanied by text explaining,

“Although the actor went blind in 1877 and then retired, he continued to perform” (Roque Martins 2018).

She argued that this interpretation reproduces the trope that disability people cannot to the labour market, despite evidence that he continued to work in his chosen profession.

These analyses share a common argument that public museums have historically played a role in re-producing and legitimating dominant cultural discourses. In particular, they highlight distinctive ways in which museum practice can interact with discourse such as, for example, processes of classifying and interpreting collections, and material organisation of artefacts. They also illustrate how these practices can contribute to social prejudices and stereotypes by displaying some cultures or communities as ‘other’ or ‘inferior’.

2.3 Governmentality and the museum

In a series of lectures at the College de France in the late 1970s, Foucault described governmentality, a neologism of 'government rationality'. It consisted of a set of processes,

“Resulting on the one hand, in the formation of a whole series of specific governmental apparatuses, and, on the other, in the development of a whole complex of *savoirs*¹” (Foucault 1978a p103).

These lectures explored the discursive practices and rationales which characterised different approaches to rule and government. Foucault argued that in medieval and preindustrial societies, government was enacted by a ruling class with a monarch at its head, with power radiating outwards from a sovereign. However, this model of government did not reflect modern society; instead of a centralised seat of power, government can be considered as a set of practices distributed across society (Miklaucic 2003).

On the subject of governmentality, Tony Bennett (2003) wrote,

“It is through the deployment of particular forms of expertise in particular relations of government that particular ways of speaking the truth and making it practical are connected to particular ways of acting on persons – and of inducing them to act upon themselves” (p54).

In *'The Birth of the Museum'* (1995), Tony Bennett applied these ideas to his study of public museums. He argued that as the museums of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century transformed from private collections into new public institutions, they became part of an assemblage of governmental bodies developed to exercise new forms of state power. In particular, museums were tasked with encouraging socially desirable ways of thinking and acting. Alongside their traditional role in collecting and

¹ Savoir being the French for 'to know'.

displaying artefacts, museums now served new roles in governing social values and behaviour. As such, they became responsible for,

“Exhibiting artefacts and/or persons in a manner calculated to embody and communicate specific cultural meanings and values” (Bennett 2003 p6).

In this way, museums changed from elite spaces which displayed private wealth to educational spaces which displayed social mores. Similarly, in ‘*Culture: A Reformer’s Science*’ (1998), Bennett emphasised the relationship between growing numbers of public museums and shifts in government to a more interventionist, welfare-orientated state between 1870 and World War 1. Bennett drew on Foucault’s work to examine the museum’s new role in the business of government, in particular his analysis of the prison complex presented in ‘*Discipline and Punish*’ (1977). He suggested that museums, like prisons, are state institutions intended to impose order on and govern the population. In particular, museums sought to create a self-regulating population which organised itself according to the principles of order, conduct, and knowledge on display in its walls (Swift 1996). His later work stressed the different logics of ‘governmentality’ used by museums as opposed to prisons:

“My chief contention, then, was not that museums should be approached as sites for the exercise of a disciplinary knowledge/power relations but as sites for knowledge/power relations... orientated towards the production of a population that would not only be governable but would freely assent to its governance” (Bennett 2020 p4).

Nonetheless, he argued that from the nineteenth century onwards, new logics of the state incorporated culture as a novel way of exercising power and governing citizens (Bennett 1995, 1998, 2020). The museum, which had to date been a largely private space, was recruited into the state and put to the task of meeting state objectives. Bennett stresses that museums were not,

“Containers for ideologies performing a legitimation function”; but “cultural technologies which inducted their visitors into new ways of acting on and shaping the self” (Bennett 1998 p153).

Power is enacted by encouraging visitors to emulate social values and behaviours through the reproduction and display of socially desirable discourses.

While he did not cite Foucault as an influence, Anwar Tlili et al (2007) argued that New Labour’s museum policy, focussed on fostering social inclusion and neighbourhood regeneration, was a “contemporary re-working” (Tlili et al 2007 p287) of the social reform role played by Victorian museums. Like Bennett, they suggested that museums were part of a diverse assemblage of governmental institutions used to shape public behaviour.

2.4 Discourse, governmentality, and disability

In the field of disability studies, Dan Goodley (2017) and Shelley Tremain (2001, 2015) have argued that societal understandings of disability are constituted through discourse. For example, Goodley (2017) defined disability as “a sign system differentiating bodies and minds” (2017 p129). He argued that different types of disability and chronic illnesses are comprised of particular ways of knowing the body, its form, and its capabilities. Considering the example of Down’s syndrome, Goodley argued.

“In order to become Down’s syndrome, the labelled subject is socially coded by the related discourses in a way that limit – that is, dis-able, their subjectivities” (Goodley 2017 p136).

Fievel Tong (2022) explored the example of Down’s syndrome in more detail. In particular, he described how nineteenth century physician John Langdon Down drew on contemporary discourses to develop his classification of Down’s syndrome, published in 1866. In this document, Down engaged with ‘scientific’ discourses about race and intellectual disability to characterise people with Trisomy 21 as less civilised than their peers. In particular, the document stated that,

“The ‘disease’ of ‘idiocy’ causes an ethnic ‘Caucasian’ to become, degenerate into, and to display the characteristic features of, the lower, inferior ‘races’” (Down 1866 in Tong 2022).

The discourses espoused in Down’s work went on to be reproduced in institutional practices and doctor-patient relationships, in no small part due to his own role as superintendent of the Asylum for Idiots in Earlswood, Surrey. For example, practices of institutionalising people with Down’s syndrome produced particular forms of relationship between patients and clinicians. Patients were understood as passive participants in clinical exchanges, while clinicians held agency not only over their medical treatments but their wider lives.

Krzysztof Pezdek and Lotar Rasinski (2017) referred to disability more generally when they stated that,

“Since the World Health Organization defined impairment in 1980, it has been understood consistently as a deviation from the biomedical norm” (p6).

They argued that contemporary definitions of disability are constructed by power-knowledge relationships which identify ‘disabled’ as different to ‘normal’. For example, they suggested that institutions like hospitals and insurance companies construct,

“A hierarchy of values that fixes the status of disability in many spheres of social practice” (p8).

Shelley Tremain (2001, 2015) applied the concept of governmentality to the study of disability. She argued that since the eighteenth century, an array of institutions, such as medical care, education programmes, income support systems, and more, have codified, classified, and controlled physical and mental difference into types of disability (Tremain 2015). In particular, she identified these developments as an example of ‘bio-power’, Foucault’s term for,

“The endeavour to rationalise the problems... of health, sanitation, birth-rate, longevity, and race” (Tremain 2001 p618).

Tremain contended that ideas about the ‘body’ expressed in clinical discourse included dividing practices identifying ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’; and the creation of subjects like ‘doctors’ and ‘patients.’ Amongst these categorisations were concepts of ‘disability’ and ‘disabled people’.

Tremain’s (2006) work challenged the distinction between ‘impairment’ and ‘disability’ drawn by the social model of disability. She argued that this analytical division shifts disability to the purview of emancipatory politics but leaves impairment to the domain of medicine. In doing so, it ignores the discursive construction of impairment, constituted through discourses about the body, its capabilities, and its ‘abnormalities’ – and how this is employed to legitimate current social arrangements. Similarly, Dan Goodley (2017) wrote that definitions of impairment were socially constructed as,

“Body/minds have histories and are experienced, performed and institutionally located” (Goodley 2017 p36).

As such, impairment and disability alike can be understood as discursive constructs. Following Foucault, this means that they are socially constructed by statements, practices, and power dynamics particular to their historical and cultural context.

Discourses also impact how disabled people are treated in institutions and everyday interactions. For example, Cathy Charmaz (2019) argued that the neoliberal discourses which dominate the USA’s political landscape identify ‘independence’ and ‘autonomy’ as indicators of personal success and worth. These discursive formations shape the provision of welfare support to disabled people who are unable to work or have extra needs for support in day-to-day life. Following Erving Goffman’s (1963) work, Charmaz argued that disability becomes ‘stigmatised’; which is used to legitimate the persistence of income and opportunity inequalities.

2.5 Heterotopia: museums as ‘other spaces’

Foucault referenced museums in his lecture, ‘Of Other Spaces’ (1982a), describing them as a type of ‘heterotopia’. Heterotopias are spaces where,

“Other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 1982a p24).

By presenting objects, individuals, and relationships outside of their usual contexts, heterotopias can reveal the rules which bind them together discursively. In the introduction to *‘The Order of Things’*, Foucault wrote,

“Heterotopias are disturbing probably because they undermine language ... because they destroy syntax in advance, and not only the syntax with which we hold together sentences but also that less apparent syntax, which cause words and things to hold together” (Foucault 1970 xviii).

Museums and libraries, in particular, are described as heterotopias of,

“Indefinitely accumulating time... in collecting and displaying artefacts from across history, they constitute[e] a place of all time that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages” (Foucault 1982a p26).

Products of western culture in the nineteenth century, museums (and libraries) accumulated and organised artefacts from across time and geography to display ‘natural laws’ which governed human experiences. This reflected prevalent contemporary discourses about science, history, and the natural world.

Beth Lord (2006) critiqued Foucault’s characterisation of the museum as a heterotopia, arguing that his analysis is overly concerned with the form of museum in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and doesn’t allow for more contemporary developments in museology. She contended that museums should be understood as heterotopias for a different reason: they display the difference between objects and ideas, opening them up for public inspection and contest. They present difference, not just between objects, but between objects and concepts. Lord argued that the discourses on display in museums have changed over time with the cultural context in which they are entrenched. As such, while early public museums can be considered,

“Monuments of the nineteenth-century drive to categorize, classify, and order the world into a totality universal in scope and universally intelligible” (Lord 2006 p2);

Modern museums have the potential to be post-modern spaces which critique discourses from the past and present (Lord 2006).

Eduardo Barrero and Mary Trejo (2000) applied the concept of heterotopia in their study of the Columbus Historical Museum in the town of Columbus, New Mexico, exploring how museums can reveal and question prominent discourses. Located only miles from the US-Mexico border, Columbus was the site of a 1916 confrontation with Mexican revolutionary General Francisco ‘Pancho’ Villa. This event is memorialised outside of the museum with commemorative plates at sites of interest, and within the museum by captioned photographs and audio-visual witness accounts.

Barrero and Trejo reflected on the complexity of popular discourses around Villa, who has long been a polarising figure. Some narratives portrayed him as a folk hero, a “bandit with a heart” (p711), while others presented a violent invader. In their analysis of the museum, they identified a narrative focused on the violence perpetrated on the town in 1916, portraying Villa as a villainous raider and the town of Columbus as a peaceful community. They argued that displays and interpretations employed markers of ethnic difference to constitute Villa as ‘alien’ or ‘other’. For example, interpretation panels referred to the raiders by their nationality. This implied a false dichotomy, since there was a significant Mexican population living in Columbus at the time of the raid.

However, they found that photographic displays introduced complexity to this narrative. While some showed Villa in uniform, most showed him in everyday clothes with his wife. These images were humanising and even nostalgic. Trejo and Barrero contend that these photographic displays invited the visitor to question popular narratives about Villa’s life, identity, and role in Columbus’ history. In this way, the museum acted as a heterotopia, presenting dominant discourses as artefacts to be studied and questioned.

These analyses suggest that museums have the potential to challenge dominant discourses and the power dynamics which underpin them. This contrasts with Hooper-

Greenhill (2000), Roque Martins (2013), Hicks (2020) and Turner’s (2020) observations that museum collections, interpretations, and displays reproduce and legitimate dominant discourses; and raises questions about museums’ relationship with wider social, political, and cultural contexts in which they are situated.

2.6 Summary

This section has reviewed key concepts from Foucault’s work: discourse, epistemes, power/knowledge, governmentality, and heterotopia; and explored instances in which they have been applied to the study of museums and disability. In doing so, it has sought to reflect on changing social roles and goals in museum practice – such as the history of public museums as sites of governmentality and the exercise of power/knowledge; and a potential role for collections, galleries, and exhibitions as places which reveal social discourses and negotiate meaning. It has also reflected on how disability and impairment can be understood as discursively constituted concepts, produced, and reproduced in social institutions, relations, and practices.

These ideas have influenced analyses throughout chapters five, six, and seven. For example, chapter five engages with different discourses about the nature of expertise which underpin community engagement at AC-MW; and chapter seven explores different discourses about AC-MW’s social role expressed in the interview data.

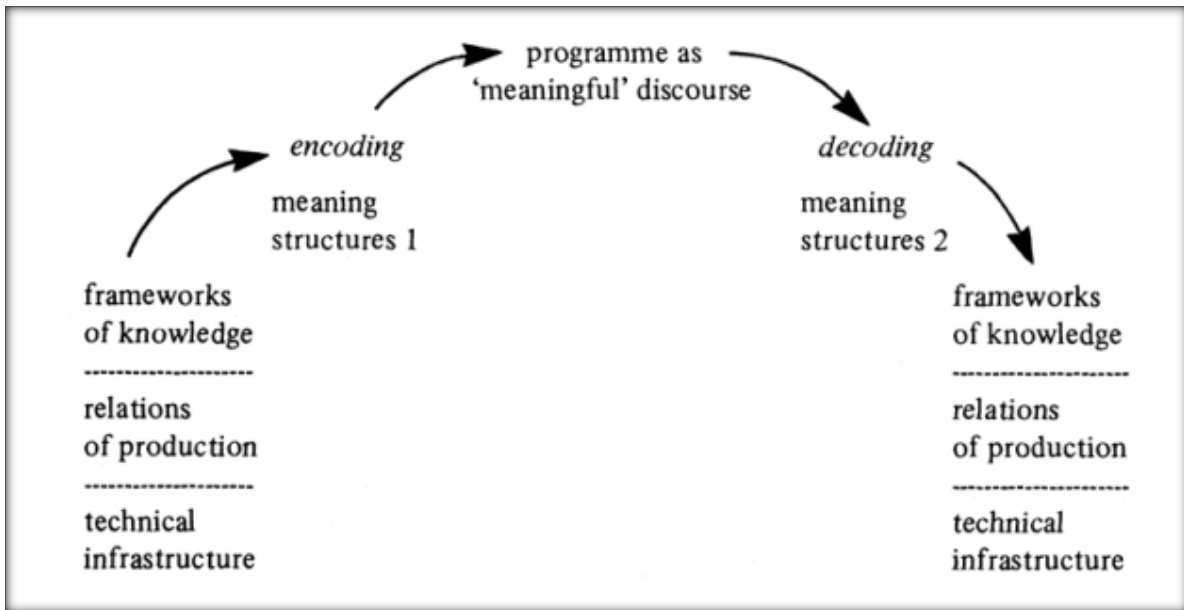
3. Stuart Hall

3.1 *Encoding/decoding and co-constructing meaning*

Stuart Hall developed the ‘encoding/decoding’ model in the 1970s and 1980s to explore communication through the medium of television. The model is underpinned by his argument that,

“A ‘raw’ historical event cannot, in that form, be transmitted by, say, a television newscast... the event must become a ‘story’ before it can become a communicative event” (Hall 1980 p137-138).

Figure 3.1: Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (Hall 1980 p139)



Ideas and events must be transformed into a “message form” (p138) in order to pass from source to receiver. Focussing on the context of television studies, Hall argued that these messages are co-constructed by producers of television content and viewing audiences. This process is illustrated in figure 3.1. The process ‘begins’ with a set of statements about an event or topic, which the various professionals involved in producing a television broadcast would like to communicate. These messages are transformed into a message at the point of ‘encoding’. ‘Meaning structures’ – i.e., the message as it is understood by its producers – are constituted by complex interactions between practices and networks of production, the relationships by which they are institutionally organised, and the technical infrastructure required to create television content. In turn, these factors are informed by an array of factors including historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, assumptions about audiences, and discourses presented in other forms of culture and media. Hall explained,

“They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnels, images of the audience, ‘definitions of the situation’, from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure” (Hall 1980 p138).

As such, encoding is not the start of the process at all, but part of an ongoing cycle of creating and communicating meaning in a wider cultural context. The culmination of these factors is a television broadcast which seeks to present a certain way of thinking or talking about a subject or event.

At the point of 'decoding', audiences pick apart the programme to construct their own understanding of the subject. They, too, draw on their own relevant frameworks of knowledge and socio-cultural discourses. The product is a (set of) message(s), which has been "appropriated as a meaningful discourse" (p138). In this model, the 'codes' used at the points of encoding and decoding may not be symmetrical: that is, producer and audience may draw on different experiences, discourses, and social symbols to make sense of the programme. A high degree of asymmetry will result in distortions or misunderstandings in the communicative process, with the audience interpreting the programme's message in a different way to those who produced it.

Reflecting on this, Hall proposed three hypothetical positions from which audiences can decode the message. This process is a "struggle in discourse" (Hall 1980 p144), with both producer and audience exercising agency and power in the construction of meaning. Firstly, he described the 'dominant-hegemonic' position², in which the viewer uses the same terms of reference as the producer. This results in

"Perfectly transparent communication – or as close as we are likely to come to it"
(Hall 1980 p142).

Secondly, he described the 'negotiated' position, in which the viewer acknowledges the codes used by the producer but adopts a mixture of oppositional and adaptive techniques to situate the message in their lives. Hall used the example of a worker who supports the concept of lower wages to address inflation but opposes a reduction in their own wage. Thirdly, he suggested the 'oppositional' position, in which the viewer recognises the codes used to encode the messages but chooses to reconstitute it according to their own frame of reference.

² Also called a 'preferred' response in Hall's 1973 paper.

David Morley, Hall's colleague at the Centre for Mass Communications Research, Leicester University, used the encoding/decoding model in his study of the TV programme 'Nationwide', a BBC current affairs show which ran between 1969 and 1983. In '*Television Audiences and Cultural Studies*' (1992), he reflected that this approach,

“Poses our activity in our sitting-rooms, watching the television, as an active process of decoding or interpretation” (p76).

It also afforded a role for discursive formations in wider culture and society:

“We all bring to our viewing those other discourses and sets of representations with which we are in contact in other areas of our lives” (p77).

As such, programme producers must share power in a collaborative process of co-creating a message with viewers and their wider socio-cultural context.

Responding to criticism of the encoding/decoding model, Hall reflected on its intended purpose, explaining,

“[It] wasn't a grand model... it doesn't have the theoretical rigour, the internal logical and conceptual consistency for that. It suggests an approach; it opens up questions” (Hall 1994 p255).

As such, the model is not intended to present a complete theory of television communication, but instead provide a framework for exploring themes about agency and power in communicating meaning through mass media.

3.1.1 Encoding/decoding model and Foucault's discourse

These processes of encoding and decoding unfold within a wider context of discourse. For example, Hall wrote that “discursive formations” (Hall 1980 p138) from social and cultural milieux influence processes of encoding and decoding.

Furthermore, Hall suggested that the messages encoded into television programmes are most likely to reproduce dominant social discourses. He argued that hegemonic

discourses regarding world events are generally produced by social and cultural elites; and are subsequently encoded into programmes for broadcast. As such, content creators operate within both “relatively autonomous codes of their own” and “the hegemonic signification of events” (Hall 1980 p143). As such, dominant discourses, and their associated power relations, play a role in shaping the frameworks of knowledge and technical infrastructures employed at the points of encoding and decoding.

Hall clarified this claim in a 1994 interview, where he acknowledged that some parts of the media complex seek to contest hegemonic discourse with their ‘preferred’ readings. He cited the example of Channel 4 which “is institutionally dedicated to minority voices” (Hall 1994 p263). Nonetheless, he argued that,

“On the whole, over the output of a long period, you would tend to get the hegemonic message more frequently” (Hall 1994 p263).

3.2 Encoding/decoding in museum contexts

Bella Dicks (2000) used the ‘encoding/decoding’ model as a framework to explore communication between museum creators and visitors in the context of the Rhondda Heritage Park in South Wales. She described how heritage texts displayed at the site were produced by processes of negotiation in relations of production and frameworks of knowledge in the museum’s development; and how visitors used their own lives to interpret messages about the past.

Opened to the public in 1988, Rhondda Heritage Park occupies a former Victorian colliery and offers underground tours led by ex-miners alongside more traditional gallery spaces. Dicks began her analysis with processes of ‘encoding’ in the development of these gallery spaces. Based on interviews with consultants, local authority officers, councillors, curators, and local enthusiasts, alongside documentary analysis of consultant reports, meeting minutes, and published documents, she identified conflict and negotiation between different frameworks of knowledge employed to create three audio-visual shows for display. For example, she argued that the company hired to develop the shows represented,

“Professional expertise of heritage interpretation that was favoured over any home-grown, specialised or situated knowledge of local history” (p64).

This choice reflected socio-political discourses in the broader museum sector; in particular, the entrepreneurial model of development favoured by the Conservative government of the time. Consequently, the museum set out to create video presentations based on recognisable tropes about mining communities rather than local narratives about South Wales’ and its heritage.

This approach attracted criticism from local press and councillors, who questioned the ‘authenticity’ of these narratives. In response, consultants worked with a locally recognised labour historian to instil greater historical detail and local expertise in the three shows. This collaboration brought together two competing accounts of the Rhondda’s mining history:

“The consultants’ creative treatments based on ‘thrills and spills’, and the historian’s detailed and socialist-driven historical narrative” (p65).

To study processes of ‘decoding’, Dicks carried out interviews with museum visitors before and after their trip to the park. All of the visitors interviewed discussed the importance of ‘community’ in overcoming dangerous working conditions and difficult economic circumstances, and a ‘struggle for justice’ on the part of working-class people. However, they shared different accounts of how historic experiences related to the present day. For some, the mining communities of the Rhondda were consigned to the past while others drew comparisons between the historical communities on display and their contemporary counterparts.

Dicks interpreted these different responses using Hall’s preferred/negotiated/oppositional positions. She argued that,

“We have identified a preferred reading - that the people’s collective action constituted a ‘struggle for justice’, we have also seen that the ideological framing of this very general reading varies considerably” (Dicks 2000 p73).

As such, while a preferred reading of the displays seems to prevail in visitor responses, the different ways that respondents related historical communities to the present-day represents negotiation and opposition in processes of ‘decoding’.

Dicks emphasised the importance of conflict and negotiation in ‘encoding’ in museum contexts. She observed,

“There is a negotiation, a prevarication, in the texts, established through their conditions of production. The question then becomes one of how visitors negotiate with the negotiation” (Dicks 2000 p74).

The audio-visual shows presented at Rhondda Heritage Park were created through negotiation by professionals drawing on different relationships with the site (local vs. external) and different understandings of the purpose of the project (economic development vs. authenticity).

In *‘Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference’* Richard Sandell (2007) applied the encoding/decoding model to his analysis of St Mungo’s Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow. In particular, he engaged with the potential role museums can play in combatting prejudice by presenting societal diversity in pluralist, equitable ways.

St Mungo’s Museum opened in 1993 with a mission statement to explore,

“The importance of religion in people’s everyday lives across the world and across time” (Sandell 2007 p48).

It comprised three permanent galleries and a temporary exhibition space displaying images and object from a variety of faiths. Sandell (2007) wrote that the museum set out to address racism and religious sectarianism from its outset, sharing ‘preferred’ messages of “cross-cultural understanding, mutual respect and equal human rights” (p80). Drawing on visitor interviews and written ‘comment cards’, his analysis explored how visitors interpreted the content they encountered, finding evidence of preferred, negotiated, and oppositional positions in visitor accounts of decoding the museum.

He observed that preferred, or 'confirmatory', responses were most common in the data. He described three dominant interpretations emphasising equality (drawing on discourses of rights), universality (emphasising common ground between religions), and tolerance (calling for mutual understanding). Nonetheless, he identified negotiated responses to the museum. For example, one comment card supported the museum's mission but argued that content about Islam should be removed following the events of September 11, 2001; similarly, some interview responses questioned the inclusion of Muslim iconography. Sandell noted parallels between such responses and 'Islamophobic' discourses prevalent in UK media in the aftermath of terror attacks in the early 2000s.

He also identified some 'oppositional' positions. For example, one comment card strongly objected to the display of Salvador Dali's 'Christ of St John on the Cross' alongside objects from other religions. Sandell characterised this as a 'lack of equivalence' between moments of encoding and decoding.

Sandell reflected that the confirmatory/negotiated/oppositional framework was "helpful" in analysing visitor responses but emphasises that "the categories were neither discrete nor fixed" (Sandell 2007 p80). In particular, he emphasised that processes of communication, interpretation, and prejudice vary according to context. Nonetheless, he argued that while museums may not have the ability to confer new ways of thinking upon their visitors, they can provide them with resources to articulate accounts of society based on diversity and mutual understanding.

In both of these analyses, the encoding/decoding model was employed to explore the co-construction of meaning in museum galleries; different types of agency exercised by museums staff and visitors; and relationships between museums and wider social discourses. In this project, it has been used to explore how curators 'encode' meaning into collections, galleries, and exhibitions (chapter five); and how visitors 'decode' gallery content to produce their own meaning (chapter six). This understands communication in museums as a collaborative process achieved through interaction between artefacts, museum staff, visitors, and societal discourses.

3.3 Stuart Hall and stereotypes

Away from the encoding/decoding model, Hall's (2013b) work engaged with relationships of power in communication and representation. He wrote that,

“Power has to be understood not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical coercion, but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way” (Hall 2013b p249).

To illustrate this, he reflected on Edward Said's (1978) 'Orientalism':

“The discourse by which European culture was able to produce, through different practices of representation in scholarship, exhibition, literature, art, and so forth, a racialised knowledge of people from the 'Orient' as 'other'” (Hall 2013b p259).

In line with Foucault's description of knowledge/power, these processes were implicated in practices and relations of power related to imperialism and colonial expansion (Hall 2013b). Hall's work illustrated how discursive constructions and representations about race used ideas about 'difference' to reproduce and legitimate societal prejudices and inequalities.

Hall identified 'stereotypes' as a practice of representation used to achieve this. He explained,

“Stereotypes get hold of the few simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped, and widely recognised characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development... stereotyping reduces, essentialises, naturalises and fixes difference” (Hall 2013b p258).

As such, stereotypes fix boundaries and demarcate who doesn't 'belong'. Furthermore, when they occur in contexts with gross inequalities of power, they reflect structural relationships between representation, difference, and power (Hall 2013b). While Hall's analytical focus was race, his arguments can be applied to the experiences of disabled

people. For example, chapter two explores how writers such as Erving Goffman (1963), Tom Shakespeare (1999), and Colin Barnes (2001) have shown that stereotypes associated with disability emphasise difference from ‘normal’ people and use these differences to legitimate dominant discourses and inequalities. These discussions influence analysis of ‘encoding’ and ‘decoding’ in chapters five and six, in particular.

3.4 Summary

This section has focussed on the work of Stuart Hall, in particular his work on co-production of meaning (1973, 1980) and representation of difference (2013a, 2013b). These discussions raise several key concepts which have influenced this project. For example, Hall’s work illustrates how communication in museum spaces is enacted through social interaction; and situated in wider contexts of discourse and power. It can also illuminate how dominant discourses about disability focus on discursive constructions about difference. In this thesis, the encoding/decoding model provides the foundation for analyses of how curators use collections and community engagement to produce and communicate messages about disability (chapter five) and how visitors draw on discourses about disability, difference, and self-identity to interpret museum galleries (chapter six).

4. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to review existing literature which informs the analysis presented in chapters five, six and seven. In particular, it focuses on sociological theory which has shaped the analytical framework adopted for this study.

Section two began with Michel Foucault’s work surrounding the concept of discourse: how practices and statements regarding a subject constitute its dominant social meanings and power relations associated with them. In the study of disability, these ideas have been applied to social processes shaping definitions of health, illness, and disability; and the barriers to access and inclusion constituted alongside them. In museum studies, discourse theory has been used to explore the social role(s) of public museums, from their emergence as part of a new logic of governance in the eighteenth

and nineteenth centuries to current ideas about social inclusion. It has been argued that museums have a history of (re)producing dominant social discourses in their galleries, exhibitions, and collections; but that they have the potential to reveal and examine these discourse and display other ways of thinking and being.

Section three discussed Stuart Hall's work regarding co-creation of meaning in television communication, and how this model has been applied in the study of museums. This work emphasises that 'messages' shared in museums galleries and engagement practices are co-constructed by staff and visitors; and that they are fluid, context-specific, and personal in nature. As such, processes of 'encoding' and 'decoding' are subject to conflict, negotiation, and complexity. This thesis uses the encoding/decoding model as a framework for chapters five and six, which present analysis of interviews with museum staff and visitors, respectively.

Chapters five, six, and seven apply these ideas to data co-created in interviews and focus groups. In particular, chapter five reflects on accounts from museum staff to explore processes of encoding, as well as conflicting discourses about the place of community engagement in curatorial practice. Chapter six turns to accounts from museum visitors to discuss processes of decoding in museum galleries, discussing how participants constructed different interpretations about history, disabled identities, and the role of museums. Finally, chapter seven considers the data as a whole to explore different logics of governmentality regarding the social roles played by AC-MW and their implications for representation.

Before this the next chapter, chapter four, presents the methodology adopted for this study. It provides an account of the methods used and the rationale behind them; presents a set of research questions; and explores of the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research, in particular managing the author's own experiences of disability when conducting and analysing interviews on perceptions and representations of disability.

Methodology

1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to describe the methods used to collect and analyse data for this project and discuss the theoretical and practical motivations underpinning them. It will also explore some key themes which arose in the process of designing and carrying out this work, in particular managing my own experiences and perspectives of living with a disability; and adapting to changing circumstances in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and associated regulations.

The chapter begins with an account of the methods used to collect data. These included documentary analysis of AC-MW's policies and guidelines, archival research regarding historical museum policy, interviews with museum staff and visitors, and a focus group session. This section will also describe the three museums studied and the research participants involved in the interviews and focus group. Following this, it will consider the implications of a shift in methodology from in-person to online interviews during the Covid-19 pandemic; and conclude by presenting a set of three overarching research questions.

The next section turns to data analysis. In particular, it explains how social constructionism framed the approach taken and discusses the frameworks used to make sense of the data. It then considers the importance of reflexivity in this project – in particular with regards to studying disability as a disabled person, and working with research participants with whom I had an existing relationship.

Finally, the concluding section summarises key themes from across the chapter and introduces chapter five.

2. Data collection

2.1 Case study approach

This study explores processes of meaning-making, communication, and representation using a case study approach at AC-MW, focussing on three of its seven sites. This methodological choice reflects the importance of social interaction and context in these areas of interest. Nerida Hyett et al (2014) suggested that case study research provides an opportunity to study phenomena in the real-life contexts in which they occur. As a result, it can capture the complexity which ties them into the social world. Its purpose is to develop a deep understanding of a particular instance (or instances) of a phenomenon, characterised by detailed description and nuance, attentive to the complex, dynamic, and context-dependent nature of social phenomena (Hyett et al 2014). These characteristics mean that a case study approach would allow this research to explore how complex processes of interpretation and communication unfold in the context of different aspects of museum practice.

2.1.1 Case study: AC-MW

Figure 4.1 maps the seven museums (and one collections centre) which constitute AC-MW. This project focusses on three of these sites: the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea, the National Museum Cardiff, and St Fagan's National Museum of History, chosen due to their geographic proximity. Chapter one provides an introduction and short history for each of these sites. While all of AC-MW's sites are subject to shared policy and institutional values, they also have their own individual approaches to their work, influenced by the geographic and historical contexts of their development.

St Fagan's National Museum of History is located on the outskirts of Cardiff in rural surroundings. It consists of an entrance building, redeveloped between 2008 and 2018, which houses two social history galleries, a temporary exhibitions space, and a restaurant; a manor house built on the site in the sixteenth century; and over forty historic buildings collected from around Wales and rebuilt in the manor's forty acres of parkland.

Figure 4.1: AC-MW and its sites (AC-MW 2012)



The National Waterfront Museum is located in central Swansea. It opened in 2005 as part of AC-MW’s ten-year strategy to better represent Wales’ industrial heritage, and focusses on Welsh impacts and experiences of the Industrial Revolution. The museum comprises a converted warehouse building in Swansea’s historic dockland, an extensive purpose-built extension, and a community garden. Unique amongst AC-MW’s sites, it is owned and funded in partnership with Swansea City council.

The National Museum Cardiff is the oldest of the sites, built between 1912 and 1927 and original home of the National Museum Wales. As the name suggests, it is located in central Cardiff alongside the city’s university and civic buildings. It houses AC-MW’s natural history galleries, art collection, and temporary exhibitions.

These galleries were not intended to represent museums in general terms because there is huge diversity in the museum sector. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (1999) reflected that museums can range from,

“Large international urban cultural palaces to small, homely displays of local life, and from the pungent pigsties of farm museums to the high-tech interactive cyber-exhibits of science centres” (p3).

Research was focussed on these three sites so that interviews could take place within the museums as part of a gallery visit. This is discussed in more detail later in this section.

2.2 Methods

Data collection began with two strands of documentary analysis. The first strand engaged with AC-MW policy documents, in particular ‘*Strategy 2030*’ (AC-MW 2022), ‘*Disability Action Plan*’ (AC-MW 2009) and ‘*A Charter for Decolonising AC’s Collection*’ (AC-MW 2023). These policies describe the museum’s approach to diversifying representation in its collections, galleries, and programming. The second strand engaged with historical documents held in archives at National Museum Cardiff and St Fagan’s National Museum of History. These included minutes from museum committee meetings in the early to mid-twentieth century; and correspondence between Iorwerth Peate and Cecil Fox regarding the development and opening of the St Fagan’s site. These documents provided an insight into the opening of the National Museum Cardiff and St Fagan’s National Museum of History. Informal interviews with staff involved in the development of the National Waterfront Museum provided similar insights for the Swansea site.

The second stage of data collection included thirteen interviews with disabled museum visitors. Visitors were recruited by approaching disability sports and peer support groups with information about the project, inviting them to get in touch. Interviews were composed of three components. They began with a short conversation about whether the participant visited museums regularly, why they did (or didn’t do) so, and what they expected from a trip to a museum. After this, they looked around the museum galleries at their leisure, taking photographs of things which caught their attention. Finally, an interview was structured around the photos taken during their visit. This was motivated by three considerations. Firstly, photos provided *aide-memoire* to recall their visit as we spoke about it, particularly important for people who experienced memory difficulties brought about by neurological disability or pain medication. Secondly, Dawn Mannay

(2010) argued that photo elicitation methods can encourage research participants to look at their subject with new eyes. By taking photos and then explaining why they had chosen to capture what they did, each visitor was prompted to reflect on what drew their attention in the museum and why. This critical engagement with their own reactions to the gallery then formed the starting point for discussion. Thirdly, using these photos as prompts allowed participants to choose the starting point and direction of our conversation, letting them take the lead in shaping the data collected (Richard and Lahman 2015). Three participants visited the art galleries at National Museum Cardiff, three visited the social history galleries in the entrance building of St Fagan's National Museum of History, and seven visited the National Waterfront Museum. A list of participants, and the pseudonyms used in this thesis, is provided in the appendix.

This process was impacted upon by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the initial research design, a 'pilot' stage of data collection included eight interviews with people known to the researcher, either as friends, colleagues, or fellow members of brain injury support groups. These pre-existing relationships made it relatively easy to recruit them to the study and provided an opportunity to test whether methods were fit for purpose – in particular, carrying out interviews *in situ* at the museum and using photo elicitation as an interview prompt. Following this, participants were recruited from disability sports and interest groups local to the three case study sites; this stage included five interviews. At this point, museums throughout the UK were closed to halt the spread of the Covid-19 virus and data collection was brought to a halt. Given the open-ended nature of pandemic restrictions, the decision was made to use pilot study data in the analysis for this thesis. Indeed, this data was also rich and percipient, and gave insight into the research questions posed.

The pandemic also affected the intention to carry out all interviews in person at the museum. This was the case for nine of the interviews (two at the National Museum Cardiff, three at the National Waterfront Museum, and four at St Fagan's National Museum of History). However, the final three interviews took place in the context of Covid-19 restrictions and limitations on travel. As a result, participants were asked to visit the National Waterfront Museum, which was geographically close to them and the last of

the sites still open to the public; and an interview was conducted online using Zoom software as soon possible afterwards. Interviews came to an end when the Waterfront Museum closed with no planned date for reopening.

Alongside this, thirteen interviews were carried out with staff involved in community engagement, policy development, exhibition design, and curation at AC-MW. The choice of whom to recruit began with an internet search of curators at the museum and was developed with a snowballing approach following recommendations from participants. Of this group, six were primarily based at St Fagan's National Museum of History, two at National Museum Cardiff, and four at the National Waterfront Museum. One worked at a UK university in the field of disability history and had developed a temporary exhibition at the Waterfront Museum. Five interviews were carried out in person at their place of work and ten were conducted online. This, again, was a response to Covid-19 restrictions. These unusual working patterns impacted on their responses to some questions. For example, several respondents described how the Covid-enforced hiatus from work had paused certain projects or substantially changed their way of working. It also meant that they were temporally and physically removed from their usual patterns of work, and so may have thought about and described their work differently to an interview conducted in less exceptional times.

Interviews varied in length from thirty minutes to ninety minutes. For museum visitors, this was to allow for fatigue or cognitive issues, which either prohibited a longer meeting, or made participants feel that they needed more time to make their point effectively. For museum staff, this was to adapt to flexible working patterns brought on by furlough working in response to Covid-19.

The final stage of data collection was an online focus group. This discussion brought together four members of staff and three visitors; and was framed around three ideas which had arisen from preliminary analysis of interview data. These were: diverse responses to a prosthetic leg on display at the National Museum Wales; one participant's response to a video on display at St Fagan's National Museum of History which discussed military veterans; and places in the galleries where visitors experienced access

difficulties. Each of these points was illustrated by photos taken by participants; these themes are discussed in chapter six.

One characteristic of focus groups as a research method is the,

“Explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insight that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (Smithson 2008, p. 358).

Meaning making is not a solitary process: people draw on interactions and relationships with the social world to understand their lives. The aims of the focus group were to explore how participants spoke about their experiences and perceptions of the museum as a group; and to support discussion between participants who had contributed to the galleries and those who visited them.

It also reflected on preliminary analysis of the interview data. Anthony Onwuegbuzie and Nancy Leech (2007) argued that inviting participants to bring their own interpretive lens to qualitative analysis can increase its validity by introducing different viewpoints and interrogating the researcher’s subjective accounts of the data.

Conducting this session online made it easier to bring together participants at the same time and (virtual) place. Disabled people are often omitted from social research because of physical barriers they encounter in reaching research sites (Banas et al 2019). Bringing the research to their own homes avoided several of these barriers.

2.3 Participants

2.3.1 Visitors

Jennifer Banas et al (2019) argued that people with disabilities are underrepresented in research – in part because common research practices can provide significant challenges to inclusion. They identified a number of barriers arising from current norms and practices in academic practice. For example, paternalistic attitudes to protecting potentially vulnerable people leads to an overemphasis on research risks, resulting in excessive ‘red tape’ or trepidation around including them as participants. People may not

visibly self-identify as disabled (or indeed identify as disabled at all), making it difficult and time-consuming to find and recruit participants. Symptoms such as fatigue and limited mobility may provide physical access to research sites. Finally, low rates of disabled representation amongst researchers means that barriers may not be recognised and unwittingly incorporated into research design. In this study, a flexible approach to data collection was important to make interviews more accessible to disabled participants. For example, interviews were rearranged several times, often at short notice, to adapt to participants' experiences of fluctuating chronic pain and fatigue.

Experiences of disability vary enormously over 'disabled communities'. Figure 4.2 attempts to capture some of the differences and similarities between participants. These include whether their disability was congenital or required; and whether they experience mobility, neurological, sensory, or other impairments. Categories on the vertical axis are not mutually exclusive.

Figure 4.2: Characteristics of participants

	Acquired	Congenital
Mobility	Chris, Harriet, Michael, Jo, Nick, Tom	Jared, Gabby
Neurological	Chris, Jo, Ryan, Harriet, Tom	Ryan, Rhian
Sensory	-	Gabby, Niamh
Other	Laura	Simon

While all participants self-identified as disabled, they were not asked to disclose the nature of their disability. It was left to their discretion whether or not they discussed their experiences of disability during the interview; indeed, all participants provided some account of their disability and how it affected their experience of the museum. For example, several participants spoke about their experience of encountering accessibility barriers in the museum. Harriet, Gabby, and Ryan identified difficulties in navigating galleries in a wheelchair, while Jared reflected on the accessibility of the Waterfront museum relative to other public spaces in Swansea. Niamh praised the use of British Sign Language in displays but pointed out instances when she didn't know if video displays had sound or not due to a lack of labelling or subtitles. In other cases, participants related gallery content to their experiences of disability (discussed in detail in chapter six).

Harriet, Michael, Gabby, Simon, Laura, Ryan, Jo, and Rhian comprised the 'pilot' group of interviews. As such, they all had some degree of existing relationship with the researcher. Sue Garton and Fiona Copland (2010) argued that when researcher and researched have a pre-existing relationship, and as a result share a history of experiences, language, and social norms, they can draw on these shared resources over the course of the interview. However, this potentially underplays the significance of shared experiences of disability. For example, Tom and I met for the first time on the day of his interview but were able to draw on shared terms (e.g., 'brain fog') due to shared experiences of brain injury. The prevalence of online support groups and national charities has popularised specialised vocabularies for talking about shared symptoms and medical interventions shared across socially and geographically disparate groups. For example, we had both been supported by the UK charity 'Headway', albeit in different cities.

This illustrates the complex nature of 'rapport' and its implications for interview practice. Rapport can be defined as an orientation towards ease and comfort in interaction (Weller 2017); and can encourage interviewees to feel able to disclose personal experiences and thoughts more fully and openly. It can also address power differentials between interviewer and participant by developing mutual respect and understanding (Weller 2017). This felt particularly important in data collection since participants were discussing potentially sensitive and emotional topics such as experiences of impairment

or medical interventions. Indeed, prior relationships with some participants created a sense of rapport from the very start of an interview. However, speaking with Tom about his similar experiences of brain injury formed a different kind of rapport which provided a platform for him to speak candidly about his personal feelings and reflections. In both cases, rapport supported the co-creation of rich, nuanced data; and required reflexivity in both interview and analysis, as data became very ‘close to home’.

James McConnell-Henry et al (2010) argued that pre-existing relationships can cause ‘role conflicts’ in interviews, which occurs,

“When the researcher perceives or responds to events or analyses data from a perspective other than researcher” (p3).

For example, it could be more difficult to distance oneself from emotionally charged data when conducting an interview with a friend; and as a result, the researcher may neglect its relevance to the topic. Furthermore, participants may withhold some thoughts and memories to maintain their friendship. In both cases, the interview is shaped by motivations other than co-creating data about a given topic.

However, this was always a concern for this project. Choosing to research disability representation as a disabled person meant that some interviews may reinforce or challenge my perceptions of my own life experiences, both of which may be emotional experiences. As such, it was decided that, given the lack of opportunity to carry out more interviews at the museum for the foreseeable future, using the ‘pilot’ interviews as part of the main study would not compromise its rigour since reflexivity would be an important aspect of interviews and analysis in both cases.

2.3.2 Staff

The members of staff involved in interviews can be categorised as working in curatorial, policy, and community engagement roles (figure 4.3). While these categories were far from mutually exclusive (chapter five discusses how many participants identified community engagement as an important part of contemporary curatorial practice, for

Figure 4.3: Participant role titles

Curation	Esther, Matthew, Luke, Bashir, Juliet, John, Alex, Isaac
Policy	Eleri, Jacqui
Community engagement	Gareth, Lowri, Ava

example), they reflect different role titles within the institution and the primary focus of their work. Eleri and Jacqui were primarily involved in developing AC-MW level policy; while Lowri, Gareth, and Ava’s roles focussed on supporting and expanding community engagement work. Esther, Matthew, Luke, Bashir, John, Alex, and Juliet were primarily involved in developing collections and displays.

Isaac was unique amongst the participants in that he was not employed by the museum. He worked in partnership with the museum to develop an exhibition called *‘From Pit Head to Sick Bed’* as part of an academic research project. His reflections on adapting to museum ways of working are discussed in chapter five.

Only Esther and Isaac had been involved in representing disability at AC-MW. Esther had been involved in,

“Quite a lot of work around medical prosthetics and finding these silent objects in storage”.

Part of a project led by a UK university, she had explored the museum’s collection and accompanying documentation to identify artefacts related to disability history. She recalled finding previously unrecorded relationships between some objects and disability, such as,

“An invalid chair, you know, catalogued under wheeled vehicles”.

Isaac, who primarily worked as an academic researcher in the field of disability history, had curated a temporary exhibition on disability in South Wales' coal mining communities. This exhibition was part of the dissemination work package of a wider history research project. Esther and Isaac's experiences are discussed in detail in chapter six.

2.4 Interviews: in-place and online

In 2020, new regulations intended to slow the spread of the Covid-19 virus meant that the final twelve interviews (two with visitors, ten with staff) were carried out online rather than in person. The original intention had been to carry out all interviews within the museum. Like the choice to adopt a case study methodology, this was intended to capture contextual aspects of museum practice.

Interview data is co-created through social interaction. The researcher begins this process by choosing who to speak to and what to speak about, and over the course of a conversation, meaning is negotiated between researcher and researched (Finlay 2002). Data is a "collaborative accomplishment" (McGregor and Fernandez 2019 p227) in which researcher and researched seek to find common ground or disagree with one another. Like other social interactions, interviews are affected by the context in which they take place. As such, interview data is also an artefact of its context: a record of how the participant chose to describe their thoughts in conversation with the researcher in a particular place and time (Silverman 2017). The way a place looks, sounds, smells, and feels (physically and emotionally) contains contextual clues which frame the interview discussion. For example, some social norms are context-specific to one's physical surroundings. We all know, after all, that we should be quiet in a library (May and Lewis 2020). Jon Anderson et al (2010) argued that this array of sensory and social cues is "place bound, but also place making" (p600): being in a quiet library, to continue this example, changes the way one behaves; and simultaneously, sensory clues like the smell of books and the sound of muted voices tells one they are in a library. The methodological choice to conduct interviews in the museum was intended to incorporate these cues into the interaction so they could frame participants' answers. In all of the face-to-face interviews, the museum itself was a third party at the table.

Online interviews occurred in different contexts. For visitor interviews, participants still visited the galleries at the National Waterfront Museum (the only one of the three sites which was still open at the time) and took photographs of things that caught their interest. These photos then framed an online discussion later that day. Unfortunately, I was unable to travel to Swansea to meet them due to legal restrictions on movement. As a result, interviews took place in the participants own homes using Zoom software.

Several authors have explored how carrying out interviews online impacted on their research. For example, Susie Weller (2017) found that her respondents seemed more comfortable during remote, online interviews. She theorised that the “pressure of presence” (p. 618) was behind this: that the embodied presence of an interviewer asking questions could make interviewees feel ill at ease in a way they did not when speaking from their own homes. Indeed, staff participants seemed comfortable talking about their working practices and relationships – which may have been more difficult in an office environment. Bashir, for example, was able to talk about the challenges he had experienced when he started at AC-MW from a background in community activism. He described how the museum had at first seemed slow and resistant to change compared to the world of local politics; and how it had been emotional to encounter very little representation of Black Welsh communities in the collection and galleries. These observations may have felt easier to voice in one’s own home.

Sally Seitz (2016) found that difficulties arose when more personal topics were raised: without being able to use physical presence to support an emotional rapport, interviewers found that sensitive topics felt awkward and stuttered to a halt. This observation calls to mind Tom’s interview, in particular. Following his visit to the gallery, Tom shared a poignant and emotional account of his experiences of brain injury which may not have been possible with a remote interview. For one thing, Tom reflected that he often found technology difficult to navigate; as such, an online meeting may have introduced access barriers. For another, it may have impacted on the feeling of rapport which underpinned his interview and enabled him to speak candidly about personal topics. However, existing research suggests that online interviews do not necessarily lead to a reduction in rapport and are often popular amongst participants for their

convenience (Jenner and Myers 2019). Nonetheless, methodological changes in response to the Covid-19 pandemic meant that some interviews occurred in different sensory and social contexts to others.

2.5 Research questions

The academic literature discussed in chapters two and three informed three research questions which framed data collection and analysis. These were:

How do museum staff go about encoding meaning into museum gallery spaces and their content? Which choices, processes, frameworks, resources and so forth do they employ in their work and why?

How do museum visitors go about decoding meaning from gallery spaces and their content? How does their identity as disabled people affect this?

How do these process of encoding and decoding meet in the museum gallery? What can this tell us about communication in the museum and representation of marginalised communities in society?

This approach was informed by Stuart Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model, which explores the co-creation of meaning by creators and audiences of television programmes. This model provided a framework to explore how museum staff and visitors co-create meaning in gallery spaces; and how these processes interact with societal ideologies and prejudices beyond the museum. Reflecting on this, question one addressed how museum staff 'encode' meaning into collections, galleries, and programming; question two asked how visitors to the museum 'decode' these messages to co-create meaning about the social world; and question three considered how museums engage with wider societal prejudices and inequalities by either displaying and challenging them (e.g., Sandell 2007, Lord 2006) or reproducing them (e.g., Bennett 1995, Dodd et al 2005).

These over-arching questions frame the structure of this thesis. Chapter five explores data co-created with staff members to address question one; chapter six turns to

accounts from visitors to address question two; and chapter seven uses data collected across the project to address question three.

3. Data Analysis

3.1 Ontological approach

This study is underpinned by a ‘social constructionism’ approach to understanding the social world. ‘Social constructionism’ describes a range of heterogeneous approaches to academic study emerging from different disciplines, connected together by core concepts about the nature of reality. At their heart lies the proposition that as we communicate with each other, we construct the world in which we live (Gergen 2015). Key themes in social constructionist literature include a critical stance towards taken-for-granted ways of knowing and understanding reality; a focus on historical and cultural specificity; and the relationship between knowledge and social interaction (Burr 2015). As such, the intention of social constructivist inquiry is to explore hidden processes and logics which structure social interaction and the co-construction of knowledge about the world and identity.

Indeed, this model of thought has been widely applied to the field of identity, observing that people create their own identities, and influence the identities of those around them, through interaction and making sense of one another (Lock and Strong 2010). Rather than amounting to a single core self, an individual consists of multiple selves which are constituted by the relationships in their lives (Gergen 2015). Social constructionist research is also concerned with revealing the effect of power and its unequal distribution in the operations of the social world, often with a mind to create more just world (Lock and Strong 2010).

Adopting a social constructionist lens framed the methodology adopted for this project in a number of ways. For example, it emphasised the importance of context(s) in shaping social interactions and the construction of ‘knowledge’. Similarly, it described self-identity as comprising multiple ‘selves’ which change in response to context and relationships. This influenced the decision to conduct interviews on museum premises

(where possible) so that interviewees could draw on the place-based contextual cues they encountered in this space.

Furthermore, it suggests that 'reality' can be constituted in multiple ways characterised by different degrees of societal power. These power differentials affect processes of social exclusion, injustice, and prejudice. This is reflected in research question three.

Data analysis in this project was influenced by Michel Foucault, in particular. Foucault's (1970, 1972, 1978, 1982) work explores how social practices and ideologies constitute culturally dominant ideas of true/false and right/wrong. In particular, his accounts of 'discourse' discuss how power and knowledge interact to construct historically and culturally specific social realities. Foucault's work on discourse, governmentality, and heterotopia have significantly influenced data analysis. These concepts, and their use in this project, is discussed in chapter three.

Several authors have explored how researchers can carry out distinctively 'Foucauldian' discourse analysis (FDA). Unlike other forms of discourse analysis, which study the use of language to convey meaning, a Foucauldian approach focuses on the rules which govern what can be considered 'meaningful'. The focus is not what language signifies but the societal structures which govern ways of speaking (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine 2007). Furthermore, FDA is concerned with how societal power dynamics produce, and are in turn produced by, dominant discourses about the social world (Hossain Khan and MacEachen 2021). Reflecting on this literature, data analysis through this project sought to engage with discursive ideas, the social institutions and practices associated with them, and the power dynamics which operate through and around them.

As discussed in section two, Stuart Hall's (1980) account of encoding/decoding also influenced data analysis. In particular, it provided insight into the co-creation of meaning in communication; and the influence of wider societal discourse on individuals' processes of meaning-making. Furthermore, Bella Dicks (2000) argued that the encoding/decoding model allows analysis to interrogate claims that museums provide a more 'authentic' account of history than other forms of media by revealing the complex social interactions, institutional norms, and power dynamics which constitute the

‘encoding’ process. Indeed, ideas about the authority and authenticity in museums emerged from the data; this is discussed in chapter seven, in particular. Hall’s work, and its influence on this project, is discussed in detail in chapter three.

3.2 Reflexivity

At its simplest, the distinction between quantitative and qualitative research is that the former engages with numbers while the latter deals with meaning mediated through action and language (Dey 1993). However, Paul Atkinson and Amanda Coffey (1996) argued that this distinction does not capture the different characters of quantitative and qualitative research. An alternative distinction is that quantitative research reduces data to find overarching trends; whilst a qualitative approach expands data to identify new sources of information and research questions to address (Mabry 2008). Qualitative research embraces ambiguity and aims to explore, describe, understand, and explain it (Mabry 2008).

Indeed, this project began with broad interests in the representation of disabled people and the social role of the museum; and a persistent inkling that there was a productive space for research to be found between them. Early data collection and analysis – archival research at the National Museum Cardiff and St Fagan’s National Museum of History and informal interviews with staff at the National Waterfront Museum, in particular – played a significant role in shaping research questions and interview methodologies. As such, the project began by identifying new avenues for research and embracing ambiguity.

‘Rigour’ is a topic of some debate in existing literature on qualitative research. Some authors have argued that many popular standards of research rigour and validity were developed for quantitative research and subsequently are not appropriate for evaluating qualitative research. For example, Clive Seale and David Silverman (1997) argued that “reliability” (p379), the ability of a piece of research to generate consistent outcomes if repeated in consistent conditions, should not be used to evaluate the rigour of qualitative research. Instead, it should be replaced by “authenticity” (p379) – the pursuit of an ‘authentic’ understanding of participants’ accounts, and experiences in a particular

context. The importance of context in qualitative inquiry means that no two research projects will be the same, even if they follow the same protocols to answer the same questions. This is not a failing of research, but a characteristic of the social world.

Uwe Flick (2018) suggested that researchers can test the validity of their work by asking themselves two questions. Is there a gap between perception and external reality, either by myself or by my participants? And is there a gap between my perception and that of my research participants, whose experiences I am trying to understand? These questions contend with issues of research bias, authenticity, and reflexivity.

It is widely recognised that reflexive practice is an important feature of 'good' research, but there is less consensus as to what this looks like in practice (Alexander 2017). It can be understood as,

“An internal dialogue that takes place in order to understand and evaluate multiple perspectives” (Alexander 2017 p308).

These multiple perspectives include the researcher's own subjective biases towards participants and topics of discussion. In his influential writings on phenomenological inquiry, Edmund Husserl (1913) argued that reflexive interpretation begins with identifying one's own biases and assumptions and removing them from analysis, a process he termed 'epoché'. The goal is to 'bracket out' one's unexamined beliefs and assumptions to find a more sophisticated understanding of how we experience the world (Porter and Robinson 2011).

Martin Heidegger (1927) described a different approach to reflexivity with his concept of 'dasein'. He argued that it is difficult to remove pre-ontological understandings of reality and identity from research; these ways of understanding the world are buried deep in our consciousness and will shape the way we interpret phenomena around us (Cerbone 2014). He proposed the 'hermeneutic circle' as a way of addressing these taken-for-granted perceptions and subjectivity and instilling reflexivity into research. The hermeneutic circle is an iterative process of focussing analysis on particular sections of one's data; and then returning to its place in the entire data set to develop more nuanced

interpretation and manage one's own pre-conceptions (Peoples 2021). As such, the goal is still to remove the researcher's subjectivities from analysis.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977) took a different approach to the idea of reflexivity. In his work, reflexivity is exercised not at the individual level but at the level of 'social field', the environment in which actors meet and interact with one another. He wrote:

“We can indeed, with caution, compare a field to a game . . . although, unlike the latter, a field is not the product of a deliberate act of creation, and it follows rules or, better, regularities, that are not explicit and codified” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 p98).

Each social field is subject to 'rules of the game': modes of practice and thought which are tacitly understood by actors. These frameworks will place differing levels of value on different types of capital, thought, or action; and both researcher and researched have their own understandings of the social field (for example, the museum) which will structure their practice. Reflexivity is employed at this collective level to understand the taken-for-granted rules which guide our practice as individuals (Kenway and McLeod 2004). As such, while people can and do reflect on their personal practice, the goal of reflexive practice is to understand the unseen rules of the field (Bottero 2010). Indeed, Bourdieu observed that the academic field of sociology, itself, has its own 'rules of the game' which shape research design and practice within the discipline – and can lead to an “intellectualist bias” in research (Maton 2003, p.57).

Others have argued that researchers cannot remove their own subjectivities. Instead, they should constantly “locate and re-locate” themselves in their work to understand where their own opinions have influenced data collection or analysis (Bott 2010, p160). Esther Bott (2010) illustrated this with her own experiences of carrying out research in 'strip clubs'. Reflecting on her data analysis, she found that she had different emotional responses to accounts given by dancers than to those given by patrons. She argued that preconceived opinions about some of her research participants had unduly influenced her analysis. As such, recognising her own bias was important to avoid assigning different value to the opinions of some participants over others.

Similarly, some authors have reflected on their experiences of researching communities with which they identify. For example, Roni Berger (2013) described her experiences of carrying out research on immigration experiences which mirrored her own. She argued that by sharing her own experiences, she was able to create a rapport with participants which encouraged them to respond with more personal stories; and that she was able to recognise use of language and associations particular to their shared community that may otherwise have been hidden. On the other hand, she found herself drawing conclusions based on her own experiences rather than those of research participants. She observed that reflexivity was important to avoid letting her own perceptions and emotions skew her analysis.

Similarly, Janice McGregor and Julieta Fernandez (2019) considered this in their work exploring national identity. Fernandez, in particular, described instances when she had to manage her own opinions about her own cultural identity during interviews with fellow Argentinians. She found herself disagreeing with characterisations of their shared culture and had to exercise reflexivity to prevent these reactions from derailing the interview or the research relationship. She concluded that managing one's own biases is an important part of any interview.

Dawn Mannay (2010) argued that researchers within a community can bring insight and familiarity with their subject; but may miss taken-for-granted details which would have been apparent to an outsider. She argued that a researcher, like any research participant, is comprised of an assemblage of identities, and so can employ reflexivity to manage this tension. These observations influenced processes of data collection and analysis in this project because of my own experiences of brain injury and chronic illness. I was aware at the outset that my personal interest in disability identity and activism drew me to this area of research; and endeavoured to use reflexive practice to manage my own preconceptions and emotional responses.

Like Berger (2013), I found that sharing my experiences of disability built a rapport with participants and facilitated rich, nuanced discussion of sensitive topics. For example, Gabby shared her frustrations at the lack of disability representation she perceived in popular culture and media, saying,

“One of the things that has led the both of us into it, is that we’re both disabled. I can guarantee that the majority of the population, it’s never even occurred to them”.

In this excerpt, she suggests that our shared experiences of disability afford us an insight that a non-disabled person would not have access to. Building on this shared identity, she spoke passionately and candidly in her criticism of the museum, saying,

“Disabled people have always been here; disabled people always will be here. We are marginalised because we’ve been pushed to the margins. We shouldn’t be just a footnote”.

As such, the sense of rapport and familiarity fostered by our shared identity as ‘disabled people’ supported the co-creation of rich data.

On the other hand, like Fernandez, I found that I needed to acknowledge and manage emotional responses to some parts of the data. For example, during his interview Jared reflected,

“I would imagine if somebody does have a disability, and they’re very isolated in regards to, you know, knowing other people that have similar issues, problems, they probably do feel isolated, but they don’t understand why... say if it’s an acquired disability, they probably notice more, because, you know, they’ve spent life as an able-bodied person, and, you know, not had that, you know, worry about isolation”.

This insightful comment brought to mind some negative memories from my own experiences of acquiring a disability and induced an emotional response. I found that I needed to exercise reflexivity to ensure that these emotions did not derail the interview or my analysis of it.

Reflecting on these discussions, reflexive practice was an important part of this project; but the goal was not to ‘remove’ my own experiences, emotions, and perceptions about the topic from data collection and analysis. Instead, the intention was to acknowledge

the role that these subjectivities played in the research and endeavour to look past them and focus on participants' accounts. Indeed, a social constructivist approach to qualitative research suggests that there is nothing 'impartial' about the social processes that shape the realities of researcher and participant. Exercising reflexivity can help researchers recognise their own subjectivities in research design, data collection, and analysis, as well as creating rapport with participants and offering insights into context-specific language and experiences (Berger 2013, Mannay 2010). Nonetheless, these subjectivities remain and will shape the research.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has considered some of the important themes which framed the approach to designing, carrying out, and presenting this project. For example, it explored the tenets of social constructionism and emphasised the relational nature of social worlds and actors. As such, processes of data collection and analysis were shaped by sensory and spatial contexts and wider societal change. Furthermore, the data produced was co-created between participant and researcher.

This chapter has also highlighted the importance of reflexivity in this research. A review of the academic literature stressed that good qualitative research is underpinned by a reflexive approach to data collection and analysis. Reflecting on social constructionist tenets, this project has sought to incorporate reflexivity throughout, notably managing my own identity as a disabled researcher.

Furthermore, this chapter has argued that adaptability was integral to carrying out this project. This included meeting the changing regulatory system of a global pandemic and ensuring that methods were accessible for disabled participants. While the study did not unfold as it was initially designed, it was able to adapt to these changes.

The next chapter, chapter five, is the first of three analysis chapters. It explores processes of encoding in museum work – notably developing and using collections and carrying out community engagement work.

Encoding Disability at the Museum: Collections and Communities

1. Introduction

This chapter, along with chapters six and seven, is concerned with data co-created with participants in interviews and a focus group session. These analytical chapters explore processes of meaning making and communication around disability in AC-MW's galleries and exhibitions. Following Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's observation that museums can be understood as "sites of contention" where meaning is negotiated, mediated, and disseminated (2000 p21), they explore how issues surrounding disability are understood and communicated in museum practices and spaces.

This chapter, in particular, is concerned with data from discussions with museum professionals working at AC-MW. Participants worked in a range of activities and roles within the museum, including community engagement, curation, administration, and policy development; and played a part in interpreting and displaying the museum's collection. This chapter uses Stuart Hall's (1980) 'encoding/decoding' model as a framework to understand the data; in particular, how current efforts to increase representation and diversity in museum content interact with curation and interpretation in museum contexts.

It is structured around two themes emerging from the data. First, it explores how participants spoke about the role of the collection in their work. Several curators reflected on the how artefacts held in the collection, and the documentation which accompanied them, impacted on how they displayed particular communities and narratives in galleries and exhibitions. Using Hall's concept of encoding as an analytical framework, this section considers how participants encountered the collection as a productive tool which supported their efforts in communicating historical narratives; and a constraining framework which privileged some stories over others and posed challenges in diversifying representation in galleries and exhibitions. It goes on to

consider two particular accounts of using the collection at AC-MW to explore disability history and increase representation of disabled people in museum content.

Second, it discusses community engagement work, which many participants characterised as an important part of the encoding process. In particular, it identifies contrasting opinions regarding the role of community engagement in encoding meaning into collections and exhibitions and in wider museum practice; and tries to understand the competing discourses of expertise which underpin this contention. It concludes with some comments on the implications of these discourses for how museums can implement representation and decolonisation agendas in their displays.

Finally, it draws conclusions regarding key themes across the chapter before introducing chapter six, which turns to interviews with museum visitors who identify as disabled and their experiences of decoding museum galleries.

2. Encoding in museum practice

In the interview and focus group data, staff at AC-MW spoke about how they had encountered disability in their professional practice. Apart from Esther and Isaac, none of them had engaged with the topic directly; but they reflected on how they had engaged with and represented other community groups in their work. For example, Alex, Bashir, and Matthew³ reflected on their experiences of working with economically disadvantaged, LGBTQ+, and BAME communities to think about representation more generally, as well as disability representation in particular. In doing so, they spoke about the resources they used to produce and communicate meanings about different objects and communities. They identified the museum's collection and its accompanying documentation as one such resource; and community engagement practices as another. They described how they used these resources to produce narratives for dissemination in the museum's exhibitions and galleries.

These accounts suggested that Stuart Hall's concept of encoding could be a useful framework for exploring the data. It provided a schema for thinking about the different

³ A list of participants is provided in the appendix.

resources and meaning structures used by participants to produce historical narratives and express them. Hall wrote that,

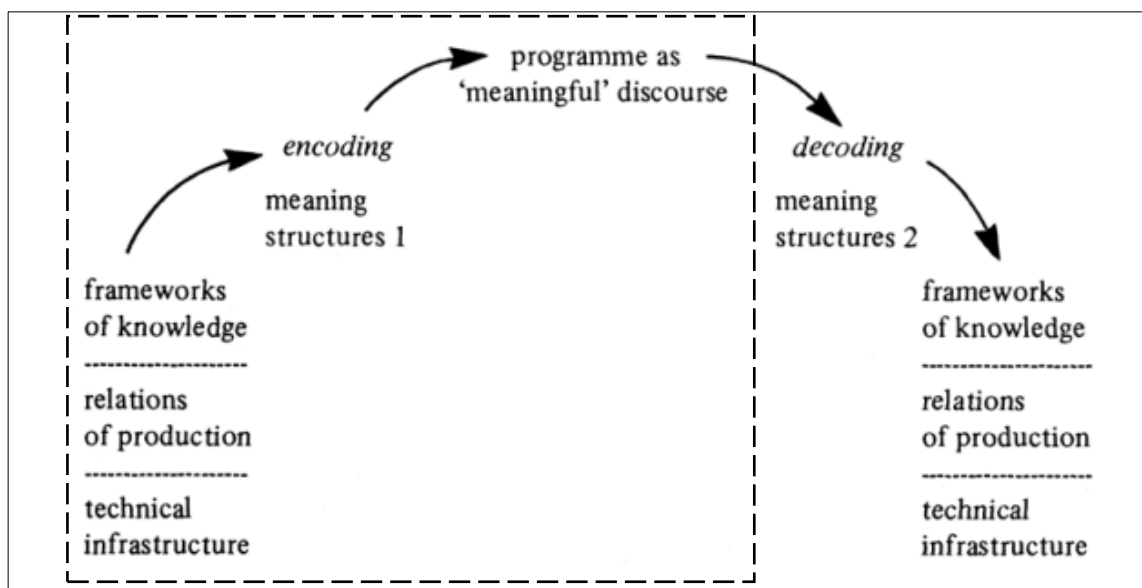
“The process requires, at the production end, its material instruments – its means – as well as its own set of social (production) relations – the organisation and combination of practices within media apparatuses. But it is in the discursive form that the circulation of the product takes place” (Hall 1980 p137).

In producing a television programme, he argued, creators use material components (referred to as ‘technological infrastructure’ in Hall’s work) and social interactions (‘relations of production’) to construct a discursive product, or narrative (‘meaningful discourse’), which can be shared with an audience. The third and final ingredient in this model are ‘frameworks of knowledge’ drawn from professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions about a topic, assumptions about an audience, and,

“Other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part” (Hall 1980 p138).

These three factors constitute the ‘encoding’ side of broadcast communication, shown in figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: Factors of ‘encoding’ (Hall 1980 p139)



While communication through the media of television programmes and museum displays differs in many ways, participants' accounts of using the museum's collection and community engagement work to construct narratives which communicate meaningful discourses about historical and contemporary communities were reminiscent of Hall's model. As such, this chapter explores their accounts to identify frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and technical infrastructure used to produce meanings and communicate them to visitors.

3. Collections and catalogues

AC-MW holds over half a million objects collected and catalogued over the institution's lifetime in accordance with historically contingent and dynamic ideas about museology and research (Turner 2016, 2017). Several participants spoke about the importance of objects in the collection in their professional practice. Esther, a curator at St Fagan's National Museum of History, stated,

“It was what we always start with, the object”.

Recalling the recent development of 'Wales Is', a social history gallery opened in 2018, she said:

“We went back to, what stories do we have in the collection? In a way, museums would be nothing without objects”.

In Esther's account, the value of displaying objects lay in their ability to trigger an emotional response from visitors:

“Do people care about these objects, do they mean anything to them? Do they make them laugh, cry, make them feel angry? If people are ambivalent, if they don't trigger off something then you might think, okay, is that the right object?”

She expanded on this with an account of community engagement work she had been involved in regarding the history of the Windrush and the people it brought to Wales. She

recalled one particular object, a suitcase shown in figure 5.2, donated by its owner's daughter. She said,

“[The donor] understands the power of objects. Last week she gave us the suitcase that her mother used to move from Jamaica to Port Talbot in the late 50s. It's such an emotional object. It carried her hopes and fears, that bag”.

In this account, the objects held in the museum collection consisted of more than their material form; they also incorporated the emotions and experiences of those who had owned and used them. Academic authors have explored this affective dimension to museum collections. For example, Donald Preziosi (2006) argued that museums use objects to represent not only individuals or communities, but their “soul, spirit, character, or mentality” (p38). They are emblems not only of events or people in history, but also something emotional and ephemeral about them.

For Esther, perceived absences in the collection were similarly emotional:

“There's something about being in the national story gallery, in my opinion, which has a sort of legitimacy to it? I don't know, I don't know what it is. But you know, when you speak to people who've told you that they've been discriminated against, how they were treated in the 60s when they arrived. It's inspiring, it's humbling, and it's also – it can also leave you feeling angry at your profession. Thinking, how have generations of people being unremembered in civic life, in archives, in museums, in public monuments, or whatever”.

This calls to mind museums' public role in constructing, displaying, and legitimating discourses about national identity and shared heritage (discussed in chapter two). Kevin Coffee (2006) argued that museums have the power to “define and control visual expressions of major social narratives” (p435), reproducing or countering social discourse. Authors including Rhiannon Mason (2007a, 2007b), Prys Morgan (2007), and Fiona McLean (1998) have described museums' role in supporting narratives of Welsh and Scottish nationhood as part of devolution in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; while Harriet Lidchi (2013) and Donna Haraway (1984) explored how museums

supported discourses about race in the twentieth century. Esther's account highlighted the other side of the coin. By omitting the experiences of particular communities, museums communicate something about who was 'not' included in shared historical narratives. Indeed, Michele Caswell et al (2017) identified this phenomena in their interviews with BAME archive users. They argued that,

“Communities marginalized by race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, gender and political position experience both the profoundly negative affective consequences of absence and misrepresentation in mainstream media and archives” (p6).

As a result, these communities experience a sense of erasure and isolation. Annie Delin (2002) observed a similar effect in her study of disability representation in museums. She wrote,

“Disabled people may feel disassociated from the culture of their country because of the absence of their historical peers in what is shown” (p84).

As such, Esther's reflection on the affective impact of 'absence' in historical accounts of civic life on display in the museum mirrored a rich thread of academic literature.

Matthew, a fellow curator at St Fagan's National Museum of History, also spoke about the importance of objects in his work. He stated that, in his experience, processes of collection and exhibition development began with,

“Thinking about what stories you want to tell. What important stories you want to tell and how you could use objects, then, in the collection to tell that story”.

While Esther described objects as the starting point of the 'Wales Is' exhibition, Matthew's account of developing LGBTQ+ content for display began with “stories”. He explained that,

“I’ve been looking again with LGBT history where if we haven’t got the object... with all that use of videos and flipbooks and various other bits and pieces, you can tell stories though other ways”.

As such, he suggested that the collection did not always contain the objects he considered necessary to represent LGBTQ+ experiences and include these communities in historical narratives. He addressed this perceived shortcoming by collecting alternative content, such as oral histories. Reflecting on this, Matthew said that, in his opinion, “fairly insignificant objects can tell quite important stories”. In particular, he recalled a particular image he had collected (shown in figure 5.3):

“In a couple of the photographs was a man wearing like a leather harness and a gag in his mouth. And the reason behind that was as a gay man from a Muslim country, he was from Pakistan, where he had to seek asylum in Wales because of his sexuality. And he was saying this because of, he was wearing this because of how, as a gay man, he was gagged”.

He argued that, while the image ostensibly showed two people smiling for the camera, it also represented experiences of prejudice and marginalisation faced by many LGBTQ+ people. He spoke about his own apprehension of choosing this particular object for display, recalling,

“A few comments from people saying like, why have you got these sexually explicit images?”

He explained that, on reflection, he had felt,

“It would be wrong for not to collect those as an important aspect of gay culture just because I’m worried about what a few people’s reactions might be”.

In this account, the photograph told a story beyond the two people in frame: on one hand they represented individual experiences of oppression and migration, and on another they reflected the shared experiences of a sub-culture.

Alex, a curator at the National Waterfront Museum, expressed a similar sentiment. He suggested,

“The adage of you know, a picture tells 1000 stories, I think it's true of an artifact as well... my belief is that if we don't have the materials, like the artifact, like the painting, that actually makes our job of explaining much more difficult”.

He suggested that objects were able to represent complex ideas in an accessible way. He likened images and objects on display to illustrated children's books in terms of legibility:

“The idea is that in a Rupert Bear annual, you have a picture, so if you can't read at all you just look at the picture and you get an idea of what's going on”.

He suggested that objects and images could be used as signifiers for complex ideas in place of lengthy prose. He reflected further on his experiences of using objects to represent particular communities or narratives in his work. He said,

“Artifacts are not fixed destinations, they're points of departure, and so you can actually use most of the stuff that you will find in any museum to explain at least you know, five or six, if not more, totally divergent stories. About material culture, about the people that made them, the people that use them, you know it just goes on and on and that's why the collections are so important”.

He argued that different curators and visitors were likely to interpret the same object differently, sparking discussion and debate. During the focus group session, in particular, he reflected on the breadth of visitor responses to a single display at the National Waterfront Museum, Swansea. The glass cabinet included a prosthetic leg and a series of texts related to the development of the UK's National Health Service. He argued,

“For me that's actually the richness of material culture. Because actually people will bring to this material their own opinions, but also to some extent their own reinterpretations and I think that's how it should be”.

Figure 5.2: Suitcase used by Ivy May Leslie when she emigrated from Jamaica to Port Talbot in 1961. [Suitcase - Collections Online | Museum Wales](#)



Figure 5.3: Photograph of Numair Masud and Rania Vamvaka of Glitter Cymru during the first Welsh BAME Pride. [Ffotograff \(digidol\) / photograph \(digital\) - Collections Online | Museum Wales](#)



This account stressed the plurality of meanings attributed to an object, and the subjective nature of interpretation. Again, this is reflected in existing academic literature. For example, Beth Lord (2007) suggested that,

“The museum puts itself on display and tells the visitor that objects can and will be used to construct history in multiple different ways. The curatorial voice initiates this historical process, but the visitor must carry it out” (p361).

Lord argued that twenty-first century discussions in museology centre the subjective nature of objects and their plurality of meaning, moving away from objective, didactic approaches to interpretation in past practice. Elsewhere, Bella Dicks’ (2000) account of communication at a local heritage museum in the Rhondda valley, Wales, explored processes of negotiation and prevarication in the development of museum context by contracted experts, museum staff, and local political bodies, and in their reception by museum visitors. She argued that,

“The outcome of this negotiation between locally based knowledge and professional, exhibitionary knowledge cannot be assumed in advance, or simply read off from a reading of the texts” (p75).

Lord and Dicks’ accounts stress the importance of subjective interpretation and social interaction in the co-construction of meaning in museum content; and this argument is mirrored in Alex’s reflections on his practice.

Similarly, Gareth – a curator at St Fagan’s National Museum of History – considered how approaches to interpretation had changed during his time working for the museum. He described a shift in interpretative focus with regard to the buildings displayed at this site. He said,

“How those objects are interpreted is key. I think one example is the buildings at St Fagan’s. Traditionally they’ve been interpreted as vernacular examples of buildings across Wales and the interpretation was around the architecture of them. But about ten, maybe fifteen years ago, it was decided to tell the stories of

the people who lived in the house is rather than the architecture, so that is an example of using people to interpret the object”.

He argued that this change in the institution’s approach to interpretation of its buildings had changed the nature of the narratives on display. Again, this illustrates how objects in the collection and the way they are juxtaposed against one another can be interpreted in a multitude of ways.

3.1 Disability history at Amgueddfa Cymru

Two participants recalled working with the collection in relation to disability: Esther and Isaac. Esther spoke about her experiences exploring the collection to identify objects related to disability held in storage by UK museums. Esther remembered the project fondly, saying,

“It’s always good to get an opportunity to do surveys like that because that’s what starts a project”.

As such, she characterised the collection as a fertile and inspiring space for identifying potential new displays and exhibitions. This particular project, led externally by academic researchers, resulted in a small cache of objects being categorised as related to disability, where such links had not been drawn previously. Examples included,

“An invalid chair, you know, catalogued under wheeled vehicles” and “arm attachments from a First World War veteran just catalogued as arm attachment, medical”.

Esther recalled her frustration at the lack of information about the personal and social context of the object gathered from its previous user at the accession stage. She explained,

“You just think oh god, if they had only asked this, that, or the other!”

Moreover, she described her surprise at finding so many disability objects in the collection, which she described as “silent in storage”. She argued that their relationships

to disability history had been hidden by the choice of labels used to classify them. She suggested that the curators who had acceded these items into the collection had not considered their social dimensions when cataloguing them. She said,

“The wrong people have done the labelling, you could argue. Whose voices have been kept and recorded here? And in most cases with our things to do with physical disability, it was never the person who used or wore or experienced that particular disability”.

This is reminiscent of academic arguments which champion community engagement in museums; in particular, those which challenge the authority traditionally afforded to curators. For example, Bryony Oncuil (2018) argued that since the development of public museums, the curatorial role has changed over time from amateur collector, to expert educator, to facilitator. She suggested that present-day curators,

“Act as conductors, bringing together diverse networks of human and non-human actors” (p163).

In doing so, they bring new types of expertise into the museum, particularly those of ‘source’ and local communities. Similarly, Rose Paquet Kinsley (2016) argued that community engagement practices can address problems of under- and misrepresentation of marginalised groups by challenging ideas of expertise, how it is acquired, and who holds it. Esther’s comment alluded to these discussions by questioning whether curators were best placed to interpret some kinds of objects, or whether the expertise needed to understand them is held elsewhere.

Similar to Gareth’s observation that interpretation styles had changed over time, Esther felt that collecting practices had changed significantly during her time at AC-MW. Reflecting on her professional experience, she described,

“A growing acceptance that knowledge is a two-way thing, and in the case of social history collections, that curators are only one part of the story... communities are at the heart of how their stories are being told and collected”.

Esther illustrated these changes by comparing the accession of the disability objects she identified as “silent in storage” with her own experiences of “rediscovering” them. Her account is explored using the encoding/decoding model in the following sections.

3.1.1 Frameworks of knowledge

Esther suggested that when the objects were originally collected and documented, the information recorded alongside them focussed on their physical form. She observed,

“That’s why we have things like, you know, the arm attachments from the First World War veteran just catalogued as arm attachment, medical, nothing about the wearer even though he was the one who gave them to us”.

This contrasted with the approach she took to documenting objects related to the Windrush and its passengers, during which she gave considerable thought to the object’s relationship with its user and associated emotional attributes. When it came to reconsidering objects such as the arm attachment, she lamented the lost opportunity to collect the owner’s experience of using the object, saying, “you just think, really, oh god, if they had only asked this”.

As such, Esther’s account suggested that the historical curators who collected these objects and those reinterpreting them in the present-day privileged different frameworks of knowledge in their interpretation. The original framework focused on the form and function of the objects: what they looked like and what they did. Esther’s interpretation focused on the object’s relationship with its user: its social interactions and emotional impact. These different perspectives shaped the sort of information recorded alongside objects in the museum’s collection.

3.1.2 Relations of production

Esther lamented the lack of contextual information stored alongside disability objects in the museum’s collection. She suggested two reasons as to why the collection had developed in this way. First, she observed that times in the museum’s history had been particularly busy in terms of collecting objects. She recalled,

“One year I looked at an annual report in the seventies. They were collecting 10,000 objects a year. Well with that, I’m not saying curatorial standards slipped, but they were collecting so much, things like the experiences of the collector, user, wearer, maker slipped off”.

She felt that collecting so many objects in a year could explain why the process of including them in the museum catalogue would become less rigorous, with some desirable information omitted due to time and capacity constraints. This resulted in a legacy of the user, and their expertise regarding the object, being lost. She acknowledged that this problem could be seen in her own work:

“What we didn’t do at that time was to get these alternative narratives on our collection database system... it was at that time when we were so busy doing other things as well”.

She explained that this project had coincided with the redevelopment of St Fagan’s National Museum of History. An institutional focus on preparing new material for new ‘Wales is’ and ‘Life is’ galleries cut other projects short; and connections between the collection and disability history were not recorded in the museum catalogue at that time. As such, the legacy of the project was impeded by limitations on her time and capacity.

Second, she suggested that historical documentation practices had privileged curatorial voices over user voices by focussing on the physical form and function of objects over their daily use or affective dimensions. This can be contrasted with her own work on the Windrush project, in which she tried to record what objects had meant to the people who used them. She argued that extensive community engagement and collections of oral history had been an important part of the project, underpinned by a belief that,

“They are the experts in how their stories should be told, not us as curators”.

This illustrates how the processes and relationships implicated in the work of interpretation had changed over time: community engagement had become a significant part of the institutional structure of the museum.

3.1.3 Technical infrastructure

Esther described the process of finding these objects as “uncovering” them, as they were “hidden” in storage. She argued that the information collected and recorded in museum documentation when they were acceded to the collection had contributed to this invisibility. She explained that she would not have known the museum held objects related to disability history without the externally led project which identified them. This provided an example of how the process of documenting objects shaped their future use in galleries and exhibitions – or indeed their absence, as they remained in storage. This is reminiscent of Hannah Turner’s (2021) work, in which she argued that catalogues in the Smithsonian Museum, Washington D.C., privileged particular historical narratives and perspectives by recording some types of information and omitting others.

Esther also reflected on changes in the sorts of objects acceded to the collection; and, consequently, the communities represented by them. In particular, she discussed Iorwerth Peate, a curator at AC-MW between 1927 and 1971, and his role in developing St Fagan’s National Museum of History (then the Welsh Folk Museum). She suggested that early collecting activity had been guided by his passion for ‘traditional’ Welsh culture and his belief that these customs were being lost:

“For him the underrepresented community in National Museum Wales was Welsh speaking, rural Wales”.

As a result, the collection came to disproportionately represent these communities. Esther suggested that Peate’s focus on collecting from and representing rural Welsh communities shared commonalities with current attempts to ‘decolonise’ the museum. She observed,

“He was, essentially, you could argue, from the prism of his own experiences, decolonising National Museum Wales, in that it was a very British sort of colonial looking institution”.

Here she drew on discourses which characterise Wales as ‘England’s first colony’ (e.g., Martin Johnes (2019)). In drawing this connection, Esther carved out an identity for St

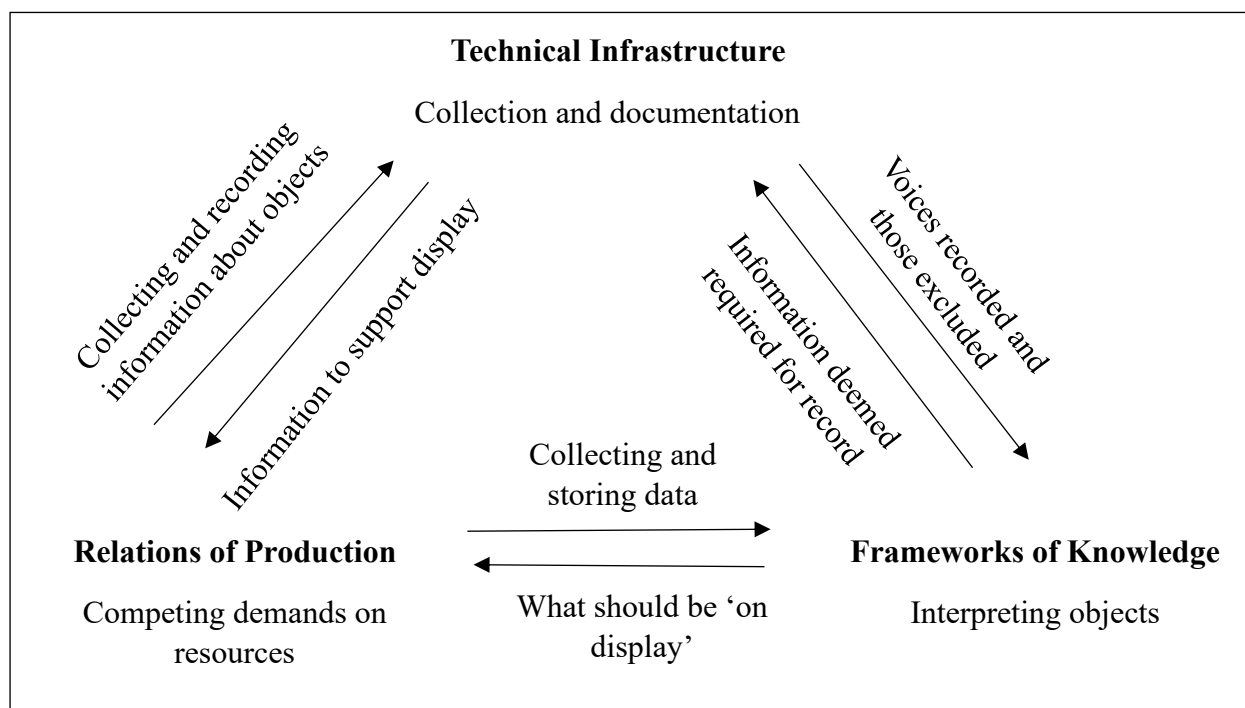
Fagan’s National Museum of History as innovative and ahead of its time. She explained that Peate had used questionnaires and co-collection practices in the 1940s and 1950s to engage with rural communities in Wales; and to record objects and experiences which he considered to be marginalised by urbanisation and the decline of the Welsh language.

Peate’s focus on rural, Welsh-speaking Wales led to extensive criticism of the museum for neglecting the nation’s industrial and urban history (Grufudd 1994). In response, the museum introduced terraced houses from a mining community and the Oakdale Workmen’s Institute while AC-MW embarked on a wider, extensive industrial strategy (Thomas and Williams 2015). Nonetheless, Peate’s choices left its legacy in the buildings and objects collected and displayed at the Welsh Folk Museum.

3.1.4 Encoding: relationships between factors

Figure 5.4 attempts to identify and illustrate relationships between some of the ‘frameworks of knowledge’, ‘relations of production’, and ‘technical infrastructures’ identified in this discussion.

Figure 5.4: Relationships between factors of encoding



Frameworks of knowledge – technical infrastructure

The collection and its accompanying documentation impact on the frameworks of knowledge used to interpret objects; and are in turn impacted by them. For example, several participants (Esther, Alex, Matthew, and Gareth) described growing emphasis on community engagement in curatorial practice at AC-MW. This has implications for the sorts and sources of information considered relevant and significant to the collection's documentation when objects are acceded into the museum. In turn, this changes the nature and breadth of information available in order to identify and interpret objects in the collection in the future.

Frameworks of knowledge – relations of production

Similarly, dominant frameworks of knowledge shape the type of objects AC-NMW aims to collect and display. This can be seen in Iorwerth Peate's work to represent rural Welsh communities; and in current work to increase representation of BAME communities, such as Esther's work regarding the Windrush and its passengers. In both cases, the museum sought to increase representation of particular communities; but the logic used to choose which communities had changed over time. In turn, this community engagement work has shaped the frameworks of knowledge used to collect and interpret objects. This can be seen in Esther's interest in the emotional dimensions of objects in the collection, compared to the focus on form and function employed by past curators when the disability objects were collected.

Relations of production – technical infrastructure

Institutional structures and relationships within AC-MW shape the way that objects and information are collected and stored. For example, Esther recalled that the work she had done identifying and interpreting disability objects in the collection was curtailed because of constraints on her time and an institutional focus on the redevelopment of St Fagan's National Museum of History. As such, the high-profile redevelopment drew time and resources away from other projects; and consequently, limited their legacy as new interpretations were not recorded for future use.

3.2 Telling disability stories with the collection

Unlike other participants, Isaac was not directly employed by AC-MW. His experience of working with the collection came from a project he took part in as an academic in the field of disability history. In 2016, he worked with the National Waterfront Museum to develop an exhibition called '*From Pit Head to Sick Bed and Beyond*' which explored records of disability in the South Wales coal fields. The exhibition was part of a five-year funded research programme on experiences of disability in Britain's coalmining communities between 1780 and 1948. In particular, it sought to challenge conventional ideas of disabled people as 'helpless' and 'dependant'; and to reveal the multiple roles they played in coalfield communities. It drew on a variety of sources, including AC-MW's collection and other relevant artefacts held at Swansea University and Llandough hospital.

Isaac recalled that one of his goals has been to "present different narratives" and "convey the complexity" around historical disability:

"That was the whole project, to challenge expectations and people's understandings about disability history. So I'm glad that we got things like the crochet in there, because it's unusual and it's clearly something related to disability but not your sort of obvious disability object, like a wooden leg or something".

As such, Isaac went into the process of encoding with a particular framework of knowledge in mind. Writers such as Colin Barnes (1992) and Tom Shakespeare (1994) have explored common tropes and stereotypes used to depict disabled people. Barnes' influential report for the British Council of Disability People stated that,

"Stereotypes which medicalise, patronise, and dehumanise disabled people abound in books, films, on television, and in the press" (Barnes 1992 p19).

More recent work has found disability representation often still relies on these stereotypes. For example, John Aspler et al (2022) and Emma Briant et al (2013) argued

Figure 5.5: Crochet depicting a naval gunship made by George Preese. [Crochet panel depicting a naval gunship - Collections Online | Museum Wales](#)



that TV and news media, respectively, continue to reproduce negative cultural tropes about disability. Having encountered these arguments as a disability historian (and a disabled person), Isaac explained that he wanted to present new counter-narratives to challenge obdurate cultural stereotypes. The crochet he mentioned (figure 5.5) was made by a disabled miner, George Preese, whose image was featured elsewhere in the exhibition. Isaac described it as,

“A disability thing, you could describe it... kind of a juxtaposition of the masculine subject matter and the kind of feminine art form that was really interesting”.

While he spoke fondly of the project, he recalled that the objects and texts he was working with had constrained his ambition to challenge common depictions of disability: in particular, approaches which focused on medical dimensions and definitions of disability, and narratives of disability as a ‘personal tragedy’. For example, objects held at the National Waterfront Museum included a prosthetic leg; and at Big Pit National Coal Museum (an AC-MW site located in Blaenavon in South East Wales) included a form of

stretcher adapted for use underground. Other objects were brought in from the historical collection held at Llandough Hospital. As a result, he reflected,

“We were limited by the kind of objects at our disposal, as of course everyone is, and that did mean that it was perhaps a bit more medical than we would have liked”.

He also described a textual account of two brothers involved in a pit disaster in Merthyr Tydfil. The story had been included because one of the brothers used a prosthetic leg, providing an,

“Example of somebody, a disabled person being economically active in a place you wouldn’t expect to find disabled people”.

While the exhibition had focussed on this individual’s experiences as a disabled miner, Isaac reflected that the story described traumatic experiences faced by the brothers. He said,

“As disability historians we’re trying to challenge the idea of disability as tragedy, but because we’re accessing that through, because we’re doing that through sources which are about tragedy, then that was very difficult to actually achieve”.

He reflected that he encountered this challenge throughout his work as a disability historian; but it was exacerbated by the museum’s policy on word limits (150 words per panel), intended to make labels easy to read and accessible for a range of audiences. He argued,

“Some of the subtleties you can convey in an academic text or where you’ve got more space and you can discuss the nuances, it was rather more difficult to convey in the exhibition”.

Isaac recalled that he had not able to explain his personal interpretation of the story in only 150 words. As such, he struggled to express that the story was intended as an example of a disabled person returning to work. Isaac encountered two technical

infrastructures within the museum which shaped his work: the collection and the types of object held in it, and conventions governing how much text can accompany objects in museum displays.

Isaac shared another example: a photograph of George Preese (figure 5.6) which was displayed prominently as part of the exhibition. He recalled,

Figure 5.6: Photograph of George Preese, a disabled miner (Mantin 2015)



“There’s a photograph of him and he’s got two artificial limbs. What’s interesting about that is we wrote to get in touch with his descendants to get some useful information about him but apparently, although he’s photographed in these artificial legs, he never really used them”.

While the photograph provides evidence that Preese wore such prosthetics at times in his life, further research by the project team revealed that his relationship with them had been much more complex. Isaac explained that correspondence with Preese’s relatives had revealed that,

“He is pictured with these prosthetic limbs but in fact he didn’t like them at all”.

He recalled that this information had completely changed his interpretation of the image and his understanding of Preese’s relationship with his mobility aids.

3.2.1 Frameworks of knowledge

Isaac explained that one of the exhibition’s core aims had been to challenge perceptions about disability. In particular, he had wanted to address approaches which focus on medical intervention and narratives about personal tragedy. However, he felt that he had not been able to do so as clearly as he had hoped. In particular, he felt that the sorts of texts and objects held in the collection, and consequently used in the displays, may have reproduced the very narratives he hoped to counter. These included medical instruments and aids, and accounts of mining tragedies.

He suggested that his background as a disability historian gave him a different perspective to most curators or visitors who were less familiar with the topic. He said,

“I think that there is a thing where you’re working with these sorts of sources all the time and you become a little bit kind of hardened to it, if you know what I mean? It’s normal for me to not think of disability as a tragedy in somebody’s life”.

He felt this was exacerbated by the 150-word limit in museum guidelines. He found it difficult to balance this brevity with the level of context and nuance he would have liked

to include. As such, his approach to the project was shaped by frameworks of knowledge he encountered as an academic (e.g., writing at length to provide context for the objects and texts he had selected for display) and as a disability historian in particular (e.g., wanting to challenge prevalent cultural tropes).

3.2.2 Relations of production

The project team reached out to Preese's relatives to contextualise images and objects from his life. This example of community engagement shows how knowledge held by 'source' communities can radically change the interpretation of an object. Correspondence with his family provided a new perspective on his photograph, which was displayed prominently in the exhibition. However, Isaac felt that the project could have done more to work in collaboration with disabled people, recalling:

"I was able to do it later, actually, after the initial exhibition at the Waterfront because of the touring version of that exhibition. I worked quite recently with a group in Caerphilly, who wanted to put on their own disability history exhibition. In retrospect, I'd like to have done something like that from the start with the project, rather than at the end".

This account illustrated that different types and 'levels' of community engagement which can be incorporated into the development of an exhibition. In the field of planning studies, Sherry Arnstein's (1969) influential 'ladder of participation' argued that citizen participation in decision-making processes can be separated into three broad categories: non-participation, degrees of tokenism, and citizen power. She identified 'informing' and 'consultation' as types of tokenism, while citizen power is characterised by 'partnership' or 'delegated power'. In his account of the *'From Pit Head to Sick Bed'* project, Isaac expressed regret that community engagement did not include the delegation of decision-making power until a subsidiary project after the exhibition had closed.

3.2.3 Technical infrastructure

Isaac described how the exhibition had been shaped by the artefacts and sources available to the project team. For example, the incidence of medical objects related to disability in the museum collection meant that the exhibition was “more medical than we would have liked”; similarly, the nature of sources used to find anecdotal evidence of disability coal miners meant that “tragedy is always there”. These factors impacted on Isaac’s intention to challenge medical and tragedy representations of disability. His account shows how the collection can be both a facilitatory and limiting factor. Objects drawn from a variety of AC-MW sites shaped the development of the exhibition and the narratives on display.

3.3 Reflections

Common experiences arise from Esther and Isaac’s experiences. Both sought to challenge preconceptions about particular communities – in particular, passengers on the Windrush in the 1960s and disabled people in the South Wales coalfields. In his encoding/decoding model, Hall (1980) argued that:

“There is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding, the former can prefer but cannot prescribe or guarantee the latter” (p142).

As such, Esther and Isaac encoded particular discourses into gallery content; but the final message on display would be realised when decoded by museum visitors. This process is explored in chapter six.

Esther and Isaac both described how the museum’s collection, and its accompanying documentation, provided opportunities for communicating ideas; but also posed challenges due to the sorts of objects which had been collected, the way they had been described and recorded, and complexity in telling nuanced stories and changing perception.

4. Community engagement

Many participants spoke at length about the importance of community engagement in their work at AC-MW. In particular, they argued that it could increase ‘diversity’ in the representations on display; and encode new narratives about marginalised communities into galleries and exhibitions. However, while many participants felt that this was a positive development, others held reservations about the emphasis placed on community engagement in curatorial practice. These different viewpoints were underpinned by different discursive formations about expertise, where it was held, and how it should be put to use in the museum.

To explore these differences, this section uses the concept of ‘discourse’ as developed by Michel Foucault. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), Foucault wrote,

“The unity of discourse would not be based on the existence on the object ‘madness’... it would be the interplay of rules that make possible the appearance of objects in a given period of time” (p36).

He argued that a topic, in this example madness, is constituted by signs, statements, and practices which dictate the way it is ‘known’ or understood in a given culture and time. This concept is explored in more detail in chapter three. In his treatise on representation, Stuart Hall (2013) suggests ‘elements’ which comprise a Foucauldian discourse: statements about the topic and rules which prescribe some ways of talking about the topic and exclude others, subjects who personify the topic, and practices for dealing with subjects (Hall 2013a p30).

What is their relevance to encoding, as it occurs in museum practice and spaces? In the interview and focus group data, participants gave different accounts about ‘what’ community engagement should entail and ‘how’ it should be incorporated into curatorial practice. These accounts were punctuated by different ‘relations of production’ between museum staff and community partners; and different ‘frameworks of knowledge’ about what objects represent and how they can be used in galleries and exhibitions. These will

be explored using Hall's 'elements' of a discourse to examine the logics of community engagement expressed by different participants.

4.1 Role of community engagement in museum practice

All respondents agreed that community engagement had risen on AC-MW's agenda in recent decades and changed the way that museum staff worked. Gareth, for example, argued that this work has moved from a periphery concern for the museum to a central consideration:

"Whereas in the past it was perceived by some to be an add on, it is now recognised that it is core".

He cited changing demands from UK funders as important drivers for this change, saying,

"I think the way the way funders now require people to work, engage with communities... that is less of challenge than it was".

In particular, he discussed an externally funded, five-year youth engagement project at the museum. He reflected that:

"Because it got external funding, because it got a co-ordinator dedicated to it and it's been given time for it to evolve... we're about half-way through that and we are now seeing organisational change from several perspectives".

This highlights the importance of relationships with external funding bodies in shaping AC-MW's work. Similarly, he suggested that changing attitudes in the university sector had driven change:

"The academic sector had moved in that direction. So every kind of research project had to have some kind of social impact. I can't remember what it's called now – for the REF. Most of the research proposals now will have that built into it".

As such, wider societal discourse about social impact had framed the way that AC-MW incorporated community engagement into its work. Gareth cited two examples where he

perceived that community engagement had become embedded in museum practice. First, he described a project in which natural scientists had engaged with their local community to research an invasive mollusc species on the west coast of Wales:

“In order to collect the data, the curator worked with Pembrokeshire National Park and other community groups to train them to identify molluscs, and now the community is doing the data collection. Now that’s a perfect example of – ten years ago, the curator would have gone out and walked. Now it’s a community project”.

Second, he cited a youth engagement programme as an example of community work moving from the purview of a single department to become embedded across the museum:

“Different groups of young people have a relationship with the comms department, with events, with digital media, with HR, and so forth. And that has permeated right up to director level”.

As such, he argued that relations of production within the museum had changed to embed community engagement principles throughout the institution.

Matthew described his community engagement, and co-collection work in particular, as an important part of his work increasing LGBTQ+ representation in AC-MW’s collection and galleries. He argued that this work was a response to shortcomings in the objects held by the museum. He observed,

“Part of my doing the LGBT collection was that it was an area that needed better representation... the collection can be restrictive in that way. In that if you haven’t got the objects in the collection, you can’t display them. And if you haven’t got the objects and you can’t display them, it can be harder to tell those stories”.

This is reminiscent of Isaac’s experiences working on the *‘Pit Head to Sick Bed’* exhibition. In both cases, processes of encoding were constrained by the technical infrastructure of

the collection – in particular, the artefacts collected according to historical frameworks of knowledge.

Matthew felt that community engagement work was vital to identify the sorts of objects which should be held by the museum. He explained,

“I can go and collect what I feel is important from my experience and my research, but I don’t think you can underestimate how important it would be to speak to people with those lived experiences to get an idea of what they would like to see, what really represents, what they feel would represent their experiences”.

This excerpt reflected on the complexity of the LGBTQ+ community. Elizabeth Crooke (2007) argued that,

“Community is a word that alters in different contexts in an almost chameleon-like fashion” (p173).

Similarly, Matthew observed that the LGBTQ+ ‘community’ encapsulated a large and varied group of people. He described community engagement as a way to bring multiple voices from these communities into the museum, saying,

“I’m a gay man so I’ve got an understanding of one aspect of LGBT history but obviously I don’t have the lived experiences for all the others. I’m just the G on the spectrum, you know”.

In these statements, Matthew shared a particular ‘framework of knowledge’ motivating co-collection practices: that lived experience affords a particular way of knowing that cannot be substituted by scholarly study or professional expertise.

He was not the only person to speak about the importance of community engagement work in developing representation in museum content. Bashir, a curator at the National Museum Cardiff, afforded it a central place in his work:

“There’s a lot of help we can provide, and support to the local communities, but I think it should be led by the communities who’ve we’ve got the objects from and have told us their story”.

Bashir suggested that community engagement served a number of purposes in museum work. For example, he argued that it could bring new visitors into the museum. He reflected on his own experiences as a visitor:

“My own family, I’m a third generation Welsh Somali... Not seeing yourself in the museum, and reflecting yourself in the museum, I think that was quite a hard thing for me to see and to look at, even as a staff member. I think 99% of communities aren’t aware that we’ve got a huge amount of archives that could really resonate with them”.

He argued that AC-MW did not currently represent the diversity of Wales’ population, in particular neglecting BAME communities and their place in the nation’s heritage. He suggested that this made the museum less engaging for these communities; and, consequently, discouraged them from visiting.

Furthermore, Bashir argued that the museum faced a moral imperative to share decision-making powers with communities. He reflected on AC-MW’s status as a national museum and a publicly funded institution:

“We shouldn’t be the ones who are making these kind of decisions. It should be the community. Because we work in a public space that is owned profoundly by the public”.

Finally, he recalled an example from his own practice: a Sudanese love doll held in the collection with little accompanying information. By reaching out to Sudanese communities living in Cardiff, the museum was able to learn more about its place in cultural life, gaining information which could otherwise have been lost. As such, he echoed Matthew’s sentiments that community groups hold knowledge which curators do not; and that this knowledge makes museum interpretation and displays richer.

Eleri, a curator at the National Museum Cardiff, also suggested that museums faced a moral imperative to engage with communities and shared decision-making opportunities. She observed,

“To make it a museum that is representative of all the people of Wales, from whatever background, whatever circumstances, whatever age – that’s the aim, if you like. I suppose, for me, they are public spaces. They are publicly owned, and therefore they should be accountable to the public in its widest form”.

Eleri argued that the museum’s status as a public institution afforded it a public service role. She considered community engagement to be part of the museum’s research role:

“Expertise is for everybody, not just people who, you know, live in that expertise world, if you like. I suppose that’s the difference for me, I don’t see it as watering down knowledge or creating new knowledge, that’s really important, the role of the museum as a research institution is really important”.

In this excerpt, Eleri alluded to different types of expertise. On the one hand, expertise is developed through academic study and research; on the other, it is held in the lived experiences and tacit knowledge of communities. She felt that both types of expertise played a part in the museum’s research function.

Indeed, Bashir, Matthew, and Eleri’s suggestions that communities hold different types of knowledge, and that they can complement academic expertise, are mirrored in the academic literature. For example, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2007, 2010) argued that twenty-first century developments in museum practice emphasised that communication between museum staff and visitors is a two-way street. Nonetheless, authors such as Dan Hicks (2020), Hannah Turner (2021), and Laurajane Smith (2006) argued that museum practice continues to privilege particular schema for understanding and interpreting artefacts, reproducing historical power relations.

Indeed, the concept of community engagement proved polarising for some research participants. For example, Alex voiced concerns about the growing importance attributed to community voices in curatorial practice. He said,

“What I don’t believe in is a growing tendency in museums – there’s a body of much younger curators who have on one hand abandoned any sense of historical – in terms of community history – any sense of historical knowledge being important for them in their work. They see their role purely as facilitators. And there is a view that if the community believe black is white, then that’s okay, but I don’t think that’s right”.

While he agreed that community engagement had become increasingly important in the way the museum collected and interpreted objects, he had reservations about this trajectory of change. He reflected on his own experiences during a community engagement project at another museum, exploring relationships between wealthy rural homes and their domestic staff. He suggested that community perceptions of these relationships were informed by TV, film, books, and hearsay; and as a result, were not accurate. He explained,

“Community memory’s a very funny thing. It’s not very all-encompassing, it’s quite forgiving in one respect and quite unforgiving in others”.

He argued that curators have an important role to play in carrying out academic research to create an account of historical ‘fact’:

“If you don’t keep your eye on that historical fact, historical narrative. I think that’s a dereliction of duty, really”.

Alex’s account centred academic research as a way of compiling and understanding historical fact; and contested the ‘frameworks of knowledge’ espoused by Eleri, Matthew, and Bashir. These different attitudes towards the purpose of community engagement, and the extent to which power should be shared, drew on different ideas of what constituted expertise when it came to understanding objects and stories from history.

4.2 Competing discourses about expertise

These different accounts of community engagement made different claims as to who could be considered ‘expert’ when it comes to interpreting objects: the curator, who

holds academic knowledge from extensive formal education, and professional skills and experience developed through study and practice; or the community, who hold tacit understandings of how the object may have been used and perceived in daily life, drawn from their lived experiences and personal relationships. They can be understood as two competing discourses about the nature of expertise.

4.2.1 Statements and rules for talking about the topic

The first of these discourses centres community members as experts in matters of community heritage and history, thanks to insights drawn from shared lived experiences and tacit knowledge held in informal networks. For example, Esther argued that the growing importance of community engagement was driven in large part by “a growing acceptance that really knowledge is out there”.

This is illustrated by an account Bashir shared from his own experience. He recalled using community engagement to re-interpret an object in the museum’s collection:

“We had a Sudanese love doll which was I think donated to the museum. But we really didn’t know or understand about the whole context, the story behind the doll. So one of the things we wanted to do was touch base with the Sudanese community”.

He explained that processes of community engagement had revealed new insights into the artefact’s uses and significance. Matthew, Esther, and Bashir emphasised the importance of expertise held by individuals or by informal networks within communities; and characterised this expertise as more “authentic” (Bashir), “emotional and engaging” (Esther) and “representative of experiences” (Matthew) than that obtained from academic research.

Conversely, Alex felt that curatorial expertise was essential to present nuanced, informed displays in galleries and exhibitions. He argued that keeping “your eye on that historical fact, historical narrative” was an important part of the curator’s role; and while he supported community engagement as part of the museum’s work, he did not feel that its role was to bring expertise into processes of collection and interpretation. Alex argued

that historical research, rooted in academic principles of rigour and empiricism, was essential to contextualise the experience of people in history. As such, he expressed a very different ‘framework of knowledge’ regarding the purpose of community engagement.

4.2.2 Subjects who personify the topic

One of the key points of contention between the two discourses was the role of curators in community engagement. Alex observed,

“There’s a body of much younger curators who have on one hand abandoned any sense of historical – in terms of community history – any sense of historical knowledge being important for them in their work. They see their role purely as facilitators”.

Contrary to this, he argued that curators were responsible for,

“Factual, empirical, historical research” and “keep[ing] your eye on the historical fact”.

As such, they provide a connection between community members and historical expertise obtained through research; and retain decision-making power to develop museum displays.

Similarly John, a curator at the National Waterfront Museum, felt that curators had an important role to play in maintaining balance in museum content. He explained,

“We have to be bit like the BBC. We’ve got to give the opportunity to both sides of any argument”.

He explained that this was because museums did not only serve present-day visitors, but also future generations:

“We’re recording things and keeping things now for generations maybe in 100, 200 years’ time to see, so we’ve got to tell the whole story and let people know what’s

going on. Yes, we can follow Black Lives Matter, we can look at all of these things and collect that information, but I think we also should give a voice who don't think that all statues should be thrown in the dock".

This statement suggests that curatorial expertise encompasses knowledge about the past; but also the professional skills required to provide reflexive, unbiased accounts of historical and contemporary events.

On the other hand, Bashir and Esther both championed the idea of re-casting curators as facilitators. Bashir said,

"I see myself as an enabler. And I always called myself that. I'm not a curator, I'm an enabler. So I think yes, we could put a heading about how we want to contextualise a display, there's a lot of help we can provide, and support to the local communities, but I think it should be led by the communities who've we've got the objects from and have told us their story".

In this discourse, curators provide support for community members to express knowledge about their heritage and the way material culture is understood and used.

These discourses present very different 'relations of production' in the practice of community engagement. For Alex and John, curators are educators: they present the complexity of historical contexts and maintain balance in societal debates. For Bashir and Eleri, they are facilitators, bringing community knowledge into museum spaces and practices.

4.2.3 Practices for dealing with subjects

These 'relations of production' have different implications for the way that power is shared in community engagement work. If the community is centred as expert, then the museum must delegate decision making power to the community members it engages with. Matthew noted this when he discussed his own work:

“I can go and collect what I feel is important, but I don’t think you can underestimate how important it would be to speak to people with those lived experiences to get an idea of what they think is important and what really represents their experiences”.

This excerpt stresses the importance of delegating power to community members to identify gaps in the collection; and which objects and narratives should be on display.

Bashir described this in his own work, recalling his interactions with Black Lives Matter activists:

“They’ve become the curators outside, where they’ve curated a lot of placards for us, and they’ve spoken to a lot of their colleagues. Obviously, we have to train them and obviously we have to pay for their value”.

Figure 5.7: Black Lives Matter placards on display at St Fagan’s National Museum of History (AC-MW 2022b)



This project resulted in a display in the ‘Wales is’ gallery at St Fagan’s National Museum of History, shown in figure 5.7. In this account, communities become part of the museum staff, carrying out collection and interpretation work and being compensated for their time and effort.

On the other hand, Alex and John’s account of community engagement reserves decision making power to the purview of museum professionals. Community partners provide information about contemporary events through oral histories or co-collecting, and experience museum content in an engaging way. As such, community engagement serves a different purpose: it develops relationships with new audiences to expand the museum’s educational role. In both discourses, community engagement can be considered as a ‘technical infrastructure’; but on one hand, it enables a two-way flow of knowledge between museum and visitors, and on the other it develops new audiences for the transmission of knowledge from curators to community partners.

3.2.4 Implications for representation

These different discourses imply different understandings of what representation might mean in a museum context, and what curators’ role in this work might be. Bashir described his engagement work with Black Lives Matters activists, saying,

“One of the things that we want to really capture is the BLM movement and making sure that – we had a collection of billboards and other objects from the BLM movement, but we also recorded some of their activists who were there”.

This approach advocates putting activism front and centre in museum galleries, taking a normative stance, and expressing it to visitors.

On the other hand, Alex spoke about the importance of using academic research, alongside consultation with community members, to understand the complexity of historical narratives:

“The point is trying to get people to have a multi-viewed approach to this. And I think that’s...the rest of it is to do with providing information where you can build up your own narrative”.

As such, the goal of representation is to provide a diverse range of sources and facts and encourage visitors to draw their own conclusions. This calls for museums to present historical narratives in as balanced a way as possible. It is predicated on the belief that museums are able to display objective ‘facts’ about historical and contemporary issues; and that they can present multiple perspectives in a balanced and impartial way. These assumptions, and AC-MW’s relationship with activist practice, is explored in more detail in chapter seven.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has used Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding tool as a tool to identify and explore different factors shaping processes of collecting, interpretation, and community engagement at AC-MW. In particular, it has argued that the museum’s collection and its accompanying documentation can be understood as a technical infrastructure which facilitates and constrains the way historical narratives are presented in museum exhibitions and displays; and as a knowledge framework which privileges certain ways of understanding historical objects and their place in wider narratives. Engaging with accounts of working with the collection at AC-MW to explore disability history, the chapter explored how these factors affected representation of disabled people at St Fagan’s Museum of National History and the National Waterfront Museum.

It has also considered different accounts of the role of community engagement in participants’ curatorial work. In particular, it has explored contrasting opinions of the purpose and significance of community engagement, identifying two different discourses of expertise which underpin them. The differences between these accounts have implications for how engagement work should be undertaken, and how it should contribute to increasing representation of marginalised communities in the museum.

In keeping with Hall's encoding/decoding model, chapter six will now turn to visitor experiences of museum galleries. It engages with data collected in interviews with museum visitors to explore their perceptions of disability representation in the museum galleries at St Fagan's National Museum of History, National Waterfront Museum and National Museum Cardiff.

Decoding Disability at the Museum: Representation and Absence

1. Introduction

This chapter explores interview data co-created with disabled visitors to AC-MW. These interviews consisted of three parts. They began with a discussion of what participants thought about museums in general, whether they were regular visitors, and what they expected when they visited. Following this, they looked around the museum galleries – the social history galleries at the National Waterfront Museum or St Fagan’s National Museum of History, or art galleries at National Museum Cardiff – taking photographs of things which caught their attention. These photos then framed a more detailed interview reflecting on their visit.

In particular, this chapter is concerned with instances where participants felt that disability had been represented in the gallery, and where they felt it was conspicuously absent. It begins with a discussion of varied responses to a prosthetic leg on display at the Waterfront Museum. This exhibit provoked markedly different responses from different visitors. Using Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, this section considers how individual processes of ‘decoding’ resulted in different interpretations of the same display, using the conceptual categories of ‘preferred’, ‘confrontational’, and ‘negotiated’ responses to a text.

After this, the chapter considers how participants related ideas about disability to their own lives and identities when interpreting gallery displays. Participants spoke very differently about what their disability meant to them; and used different texts and artefacts in the museum to reflect on their complex and heterogeneous conceptualisations of disability and its place in society. Using ideas drawn from Michel Foucault’s work on discourse, it explores what these accounts suggest about the diversity of disabled ‘communities’; and implications for representation in museums.

The chapter then turns to examples where participants felt that disability representation was conspicuous in its absence. This section considers instances when participants felt that disabled people had been rendered “invisible” in museum narratives at St Fagan’s National Museum of History, in particular; and how this reproduced societal discourses they experienced in their everyday lives. Following this, it will then consider instances where problems of physical access at the National Museum Cardiff prompted respondents to reflect on exclusionary discourses around disability and its representation.

Finally, it will draw conclusions across the chapter regarding processes of decoding and the representation of disability at AC-MW. It will then introduce chapter seven, which will engage with debates around the social role of the museum.

2. Objects on display: preferred, negotiated, and confrontational responses

In *‘Encoding/Decoding’*, Stuart Hall (1980) observed,

“Before [a] message can have an ‘effect’, however defined, satisfy a ‘need’, or be put to ‘use’, it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded” (Hall 1980 p138).

As such, the messages ‘encoded’ into a television programme by its creators are not realised until viewers perceive them. To do so, they draw on their personal knowledge and experiences to produce their own interpretation of the programme. The resultant message is thus a product of the (remote) interaction between creators and audiences.

Hall argued that the meaning structures used to ‘encode’ and ‘decode’ a message may differ, resulting in ‘misunderstandings’ or ‘distortions’ of the programme’s intended message. Misunderstandings can occur because audiences do not understand the message, for example if they are not familiar with the language or concepts used. Alternatively, distortions may occur because audiences interpret the programme differently. Hall identified three categories of response, characterised by the degree of equivalence between ‘encoding’ and ‘decoding’. A dominant, or preferred, interpretation indicates a high degree of equivalence: creator and audience draw on the same social

orders of meanings, practices, and ideologies to interpret the message. As such, they 'agree' on the message being shared. In negotiated interpretations, audiences recognise the social codes used to encode the message; but adapt them to meet the specifics of their own perspective and experiences. They 'understand' the message, but they negotiate what it means to them. Finally, an oppositional interpretation understands the codes being used to express meaning but rejects them and reconstitutes the message using their own framework of reference (Hall 1980). These categories, and their relationship with societal discourse, are explored in greater detail in chapter two.

Chapter five considered how curators 'encoded' meaning into museum displays to create a 'message' to be shared with visitors. This section reflects on interviews with visitors to identify processes of 'decoding' and explore how they drew on societal discourses to make sense of their gallery visits.

2.1 'Decoding' interpretation of a prosthetic leg

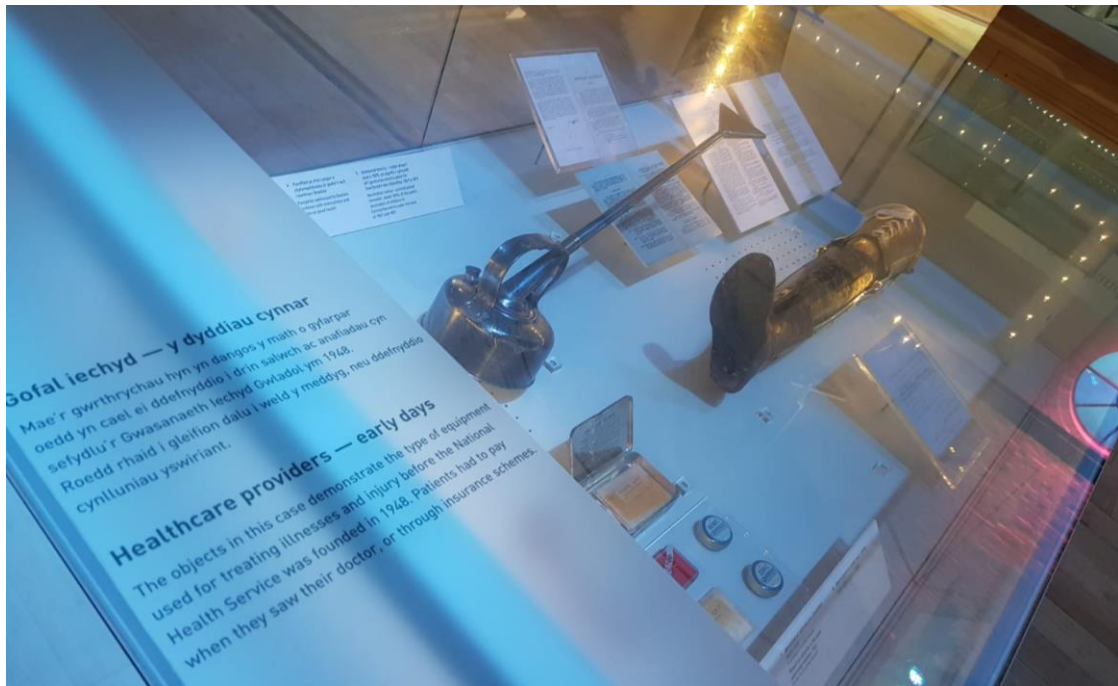
Seven different visitors took part in interviews at the National Waterfront Museum, Swansea. Interviews consisted of a short, informal conversation about their perceptions of museums in general before then made their own way around the museum's galleries, taking photographs of displays which caught their eye. These photos then framed a longer interview reflecting on their visit that day.

All seven photographed one particular display including a prosthetic leg, shown in figure 6.1. The text accompanying the display read:

“Healthcare providers – early days. The objects in this case demonstrate the kind of equipment used for treating illnesses and injury before the National Health Service was founded in 1948. Patients had to pay when they saw their doctor, or through insurance schemes”.

It was displayed alongside objects relating to medical history in general, and the history of the NHS more specifically. Looking at the photo he had taken, Nick described his memories of being fitted for a prosthetic leg in the 2010s. He recalled,

Figure 6.1: Display of a prosthetic leg at the National Waterfront Museum. Participant's photo (Niamh)



“It’s like when I went to get my first prosthetic, they had these, they had a group of them from like the 40s or something, and it was really weird seeing how old and bad they were. And like compared to my one now”.

He reflected on scientific progress in the form and function of prosthetics, such as the one he used to participate in sport. He also talked about singer, performance artist, and model Viktoria Modesta, who commissioned artists and sculptures to make prosthetic legs for her to wear. Looking at the prosthetic on display prompted him to reflect on developments in the materials and designs used for prosthetic legs, and how they enabled people to continue in their hobbies or express themselves.

Niamh’s reactions to the display were less positive. She expressed displeasure at the way the prosthetic had been interpreted and displayed. In particular, she disliked the way it had been used to explore the history of medicine:

“It wasn't about people. It didn't give us any sense of disabled people in their place in society. It was about an object of medicine, really?”

She explained that she had framed her photo of the display (figure 6.1) to highlight the display's focus on medical history and the birth of the NHS. Reflecting on her own experiences of acquiring an auditory prosthetic, she felt that the display did not communicate anything about what it was like to live with impairment or use disability aids in daily life; and that it portrayed medical interventions as a way of 'overcoming' disability. She said that she would have preferred an interpretation,

“In line with the social model in terms of talking about people's rights and access”.

Niamh argued that the museum's choice of representation reproduced a trend she encountered elsewhere in her life: namely, the dominance of medical accounts of identifying and treating disability. She observed,

“I think people who aren't disabled, don't know disabled people, just haven't thought about it, will always think of disability in medical terms”.

Niamh argued that this trope neglected disabled people's agency in managing their conditions. Furthermore, it legitimated practices which limited physical and sensory access, such as a lack of British Sign Language awareness. In this account, Niamh identified a 'discourse' in the Foucauldian sense of the term: a set of statements and practices which constitutes societal understandings of what disability is and how disabled people should be treated. In particular, she argued disability was understood as a medical problem requiring medical solutions. She felt that this discourse underpinned inequalities experienced by disabled people:

“So, you know, we find ourselves in this situation of, you know, we see ourselves as kind of deficient or we need to just take it on the chin each time we have difficulties gaining access to something. We have the same rights as everybody else, they're just often not being upheld”.

As such, interpreting the prosthetic leg as part of the history of the NHS reproduced a harmful discourse which trivialised the rights of disabled people to gain access.

Jo's reaction was different again. She questioned why the prosthetic had been included in the gallery:

“My inner cynic feels that there is a lot of things being pushed in, just to tick the boxes. And that does feel a bit as if it's there to tick the boxes”.

Jo was concerned that the display was an example of “political correctness”, which she perceived to have become more prominent in museum spaces in recent years. She observed,

“It appears that there has been a significant shift away from museums as stores of interesting stuff to if it doesn't have a name, and we can't spin a story about it, we're not interested”.

She felt that museums had developed a tendency to, “shoehorn [objects] in just to meet the political requirements”, which detracted from her experience of their galleries and exhibitions.

These discussions show that Nick, Niamh, and Jo expressed markedly different responses to the same display, drawing different conclusions from the interpretation presented in its accompanying text. The aim of this section is to explore these different response using Hall's account of ‘decoding’; and in particular, his accounts of ‘preferred’, ‘negotiated’, and ‘oppositional’ responses.

2.1.1 Preferred responses

Nick's response to the prosthetic leg can be understood as a ‘preferred’ reading of the display. While it was not possible to speak with the original curator of the display (since it has been in place for the life of the National Waterfront Museum), by juxtaposing the prosthetic with medical objects and discussion of the NHS, they seem to have interpreted it as an example of historical medical practices. Similarly, Nick drew on his own experiences of medical interventions to locate it as an artefact of medical history. The message drawn from the display, co-created by the curator and Nick, was that this

prosthetic represents a positive development in medical practice. This is presented in figure 6.2 as a 'preferred' response.

2.1.2 Confrontational responses

To develop a 'confrontational' response, the viewer decodes their message using the same codes and discourses used to by the creator to encode them; but rejects their suitability to represent the message. This can be seen in Niamh's reading of the display. She argued that interpreting the prosthetic as an object of medical history neglected its relationship with the person who wore it. As a result, the display did not represent her experiences of disability:

“Not in any meaningful way, not in any way that would give [visitors] any understanding of what life might be like if you need to use a prosthetic limb”.

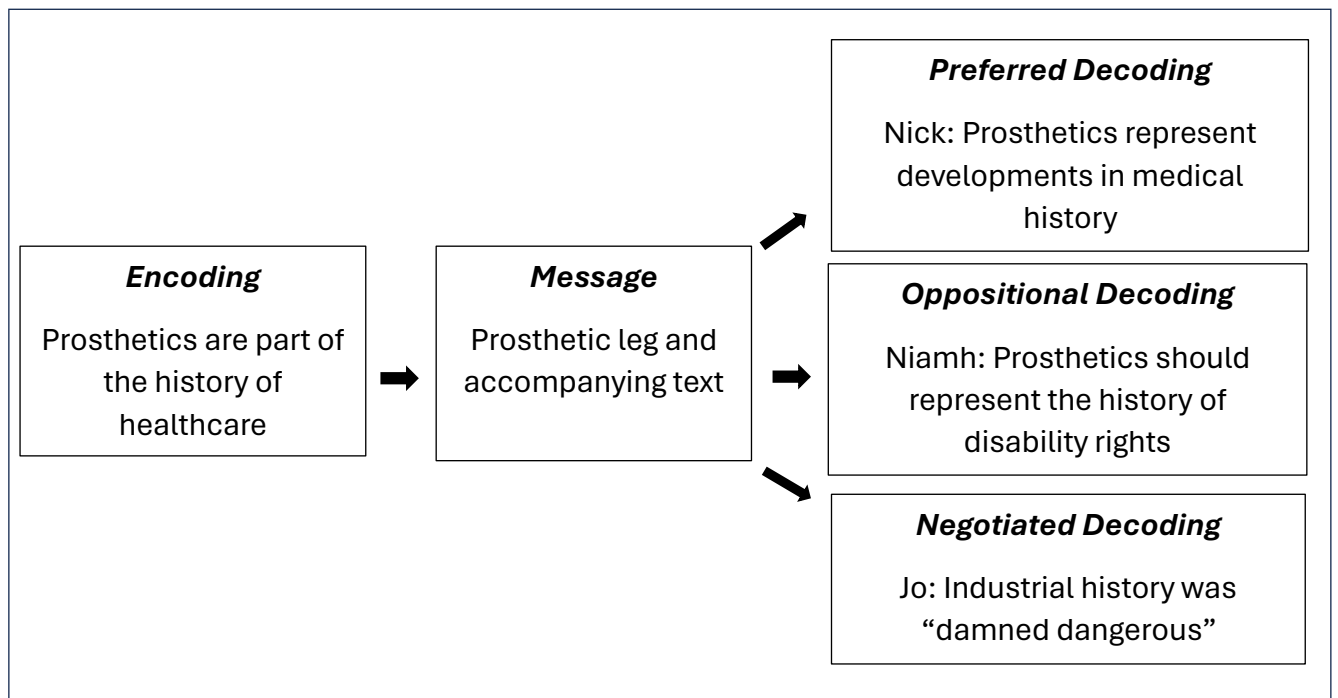
She felt that a different interpretation could have made the display more “authentic” to her own experiences of disability and more interesting to engage with. In particular, she drew on the social model of disability to reconstitute the message on display. She suggested,

“You could grow a bigger exhibition where you actually moved from that sort of old-style medical model of fixing people to a more social model and what that means in terms of people's independence and rights”.

Niamh argued that this alternative interpretation would have challenged prejudicial discourses which she felt pervaded society, in particular, the idea that disabled people should be responsible for overcoming access barriers or accepting them gracefully. She felt that this could have represented,

“You know, something that shows us as equal human beings with the same rights as everybody else, who should expect the same level of access, who have a positive role to play in society. Those are really, really important messages that we just don't really see at the moment”.

Figure 6.2: Decoding the prosthetic leg on display



Niamh’s response is illustrated in figure 6.2 as an ‘oppositional’ reading.

2.1.3 Negotiated responses

A negotiated response identifies and broadly agrees with the ideas used to encode the message but adapts them to fit more comfortably with the decoder’s world view. This can be observed in Jo’s response. She explained that when she first saw the prosthetic, she felt like it had been included as a token of “political correctness”. She suggested that museums across the UK increasingly included objects and interpretations to reflect political agendas; and argued that, for her, this detracted from the historical narratives on display. She explained that, in her experience,

“It appears that there has been a significant shift away from museums as stores of interesting stuff to if it doesn't have a name, and we can't spin a story about it, we're not interested”.

She characterised this as a “tension between facts and politics”. She explained that she preferred to see “objective” portrayals of history which focussed on objects and statistics. This distinction is discussed in more detail in chapter seven.

Looking at the photo she had taken of the prosthetic, she remarked,

“Oh, yeah, this is the disability bit because we have to do disability and we have to be a bit obvious about it”.

However, she reconsidered the display and her perspective on it changed. Reflecting on her visit, she argued,

“Yes, they have done the political stuff, but they have done it sensitively – sensitively within the industrial context rather than sensitively within the disability context. This is an industrial context museum. It's right”.

While she initially wondered if the object was there to “tick the boxes”, she decided that the display was in keeping with the gallery focus on industrial history. She explained,

“I mean, I can see the disability link. Because industrial history, a lot of work was damned dangerous. So I can totally see why they've got the artificial leg”.

Reflecting on the artefact and the interpretation presented alongside it, Jo concluded that it represented the significant danger faced by industrial workers and the role that medical care played in addressing the high incidence of injury and disablement. In terms of decoding, she ‘negotiated’ the codes used in the display to produce an interpretation which was meaningful to her. This process is illustrated in figure 6.2 as a ‘negotiated’ reading.

2.1.4 Co-creation of meaning

Figure 6.2 depicts the co-construction of preferred, oppositional, and negotiated ‘decodings’ of the display. In particular, it uses Hall’s model to show how a particular act of encoding, embodied in this case by the prosthetic and its accompanying text, can result in the production of three different responses. When the display was created, museum staff used their own understanding of what the object meant to create a message to share with visitors, drawing on their education, experience, and interaction

with societal discourses. However, the final ‘meaning’ of the display was not realised until it was decoded by visitors in the gallery.

This ambiguity has implications for how museums reproduce and/or challenge societal discourses in galleries and exhibitions. In particular, it shows how visitor agency in interpreting displays can change the ‘messages’ embodied by displays and interpretive text; and means that curators will not have the ‘final say’ in critiquing societal ideas explored in their work.

The diversity in these responses also highlights participant’s different understandings of the social role of the museum, on one hand, and the nature of disability on the other. For Niamh, it was important that museums challenged dominant stereotypes and prejudices. While she expressed disappointment at this particular display, she felt strongly about museums’ potential to bring different perspectives to a wide audience, change perceptions, and consequently drive societal change. She spoke passionately about exhibitions she had visited at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, which she believed had done just this. In contrast, Jo preferred galleries to present “objective” accounts of historical trends. She argued that museums had come to engage more with societal and political discourse since she was a child; and that this detracted from her enjoyment of galleries. This tension, and the implications of co-production of meaning for challenging/reproducing dominant discourse, are explored further in chapter seven.

Nick, Niamh, and Jo described how different ideas about the nature of disability framed their interpretations, drawing on their own life experiences and societal discourses. For example, Nick recalled his experiences of being fitted for a prosthetic, and Niamh discussed the social model of disability. Their different responses to the display, in part, reflected their difference views on the nature of disability and how it had affected their lives. Section three will consider how the participants spoke about their views and experiences about disability, and implications for representing disability in museums.

3. Discourses about disability

Section two explored how visitors drew on their own experiences and understanding of societal discourse to ‘decode’ meaning from a particular display. This section (and section three after it) explores how dominant social discourses define particular ways of knowing a topic; and in doing so, prescribe particular forms of identity, social interaction, and institutional practices (Foucault 1972, 1982, 1994, 2017). In particular, it is concerned with how visitors drew on discourses and experiences of disability to interpret the galleries they encountered at the National Waterfront Museum. These decoding processes revealed very different accounts of what disability ‘was’ and how it impacted on an individual’s life and identity.

The seven different visitors experienced disability in very different ways. Chris and Nick both used prosthetic legs, while Jared, Tom, and Jo all used wheelchairs. Niamh used BSL and an auditory prosthetic. While Jared and Niamh had lived with their conditions since birth, Chris, Nick, and Tom had become disability as a result of a traumatic accident, and Jo had developed mobility issues as an adult. Aside from these different experiences of impairment, factors such as age, gender, race, and financial resources which were not discussed as part of the interview will have informed their experience of disability. Indeed, research has shown that people consider their disability’s relationship to their identity and wider lives in a variety of ways (e.g. Watson 2010, Rhodes et al 2008). As such, the people who constitute the ‘disabled community’ are varied and heterogeneous. Participant accounts illustrated how these different discourses about disability influenced how they ‘decoded’ the museum during their visit.

3.1 Niamh

Niamh argued that disability should be understood as a social problem, located in exclusionary practices which bar access to social spaces and experiences. She referenced the ‘social model’ and lauded its focus on fighting for disability rights. To illustrate this, she drew on her own experiences of exclusionary barriers in the civic realm:

“That's what a lot of disabled people face. They can't get into the shop because there's a step or they can't get served properly because nobody knows how to use BSL, nobody knows how to speak clearly or just have basic deaf awareness”.

She suggested that these barriers came about in two ways. Firstly, she felt that,

“People who aren't disabled, don't know disabled people, just haven't thought about it”.

Secondly, she argued that when these difficulties were identified,

“Disabled people are somehow just meant to put up with that and not be a burden and not be difficult”.

Throughout our discussion, Niamh's use of language suggested a sense of connection to other people who consider themselves disabled, brought about by shared experiences of prejudice and exclusion. For example, she discussed her own experiences in terms of 'we' and 'us':

“We find ourselves in this situation... it's our right to have the same opportunities”.

She also framed societal perceptions of disability in terms of 'disabled' and 'non-disabled' people, for example,

“I think people who aren't disabled... will always think of disability in medical terms. And disabled people internalise that as well”.

This is reminiscent of Erving Goffman's (1963) argument that people use categories of difference to create 'stigmatised' identities. Niamh spoke about 'disabled people' as an identity created in relation to 'people who aren't disabled'. However, while Goffman (1963) argued that deviation from 'normal' is a source of stigma, Niamh seemed proud to claim ownership of her disabled identity. This echoed the logic of the 'social model' of disability which, influenced by its origins in rights activism, constructed disability as a shared identity in order to “distinguish allies from enemies” (Shakespeare 2006 p218).

Niamh argued that interpreting the prosthetic as an object of medicine was a missed opportunity to illuminate social barriers and prejudice face by disabled people. She explained,

“It was talking about how medicine can help people who are ill or disabled or whatever. And I thought that that would be something where you could actually move from that sort of old-style medical model of fixing people and helping people through to a sort of more social model and what that means in terms of people's independence and rights”.

She described understanding disability in medical terms as “old-style”; and characterised critiques of its social dimension as a progression in understanding the experiences of disabled people. She illustrated this point with a discussion of prosthetics:

“Those are tools for your independence and tools for you to have access and to live life on your terms rather than being seen as, you know, being seen as a deficit or a problem”.

She was concerned that interpreting prosthetics as, primarily, a medical intervention for a physical impairment – as opposed to a tool for addressing access requirement in social situations – framed disabled people as being at a “deficit”. As such, she felt that the framing of the display contributed to discourse which denied,

“Our right to have the same opportunities as everybody else”.

To illustrate this point, she described other times she had encountered disability representation in museums. For example, she recalled an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London:

“About the design of accommodation that supported independent living for disabled people”.

She spoke positively about this exhibition for the way it had challenged discourses which frame disability as a medical phenomenon, instead foregrounding historical narratives of being,

“In a position where somebody has questioned their capability to look after themselves or, you know, their right to live where they want to live with who they want to live with”.

She contrasted this with another exhibition she had seen in Glasgow of,

“Prosthetics and things like wheelchairs, adapted wheelchairs used by Paralympians”.

Much like her recollection of encountering the prosthetic on display at the National Waterfront Museum, she remembered that she had initially “appreciated” seeing disability objects on in the museum, but had been disappointed on closer inspection:

“Then when you looked at the way it was being portrayed, it was about, here are things that help disabled people rather than showing that these are tools of independence”.

Niamh felt that these medical discourses of disability focussed on individual deficit; and moreover, that they dominated cultural representations of disabled people. She called for museums to challenge this discourse and bring other ways of thinking about disability to a wider audience:

“In any movement, in any community, you talk about the causes and the things that were important to you. But your audience tends to be people who already care about that thing, too. So there often aren’t opportunities for disabled people to be talking to non-disabled people in a way that helps influence how they think about disability and maybe, you know, alter their attitudes a little bit”.

In this account, museums' roles as a public forum and an educational institution provide an opportunity to challenge prejudices and drive change. This is explored in greater detail in chapter seven.

3.2 Tom

Tom gave a very different account of his experiences of disability. Like Niamh, he reflected on barriers to exclusion which he encountered regularly, for example,

“Some places say wheelchair access and it might only be a slope like that to get in the door. A lot of people in the chair can't get up stuff like that. It's classed as wheelchair access but for some people it's not”.

Here he suggested that parts of the built environment are inaccessible to many disabled people – even when adjustments have made – due to ignorance regarding access needs e.g., the challenges of navigating steep slopes in a wheelchair. As such, he agreed with Niamh that some negative experiences of disability are constructed by design practices in the civic realm. However, Tom afforded a significant role to ‘impairment’ as a cause of his own negative experiences of disability. For example, he recalled,

“Not so long ago I used to get around on crutches which was good but, you know, now I've got a chair wherever I go... I try not to think about it and just carry on with life because I find the chair very frustrating... That's what mobility is for some people, freedom”.

In this excerpt, he associated his increased use of walking aids with a loss of personal freedom. While he felt that he was able to navigate the National Waterfront Museum relatively easily in a wheelchair, his frustration remained. He added,

“I'd rather get up and walk”.

While Tom photographed the prosthetic on display, his reflections on it were limited. Looking at the photo, he said simply,

“A prosthetic leg. For its day it was probably high tech”.

He quickly moved on to photos he had taken of displays exploring South Wales' mining and steel industries. He explained that these topics were very close to his heart:

“It reminds me when I used to work in the mines, when I put that big furnace in the steel works, that sort of thing. It brings back memories of when I was fit and working. So for me it brings back happy times. Oh, it was hard graft. It was happy times. I was physically able to do it, which is long gone”.

By representing Tom's life as a miner and steel worker, the displays prompted memories of his life before he acquired his disability. His account described a dichotomy in his life between before and after impairment, focussed on his loss of physical mobility. As such, acquiring his disability had a negative impact on his life, brought about by 'impairment' rather than 'society'.

Tom wondered whether disabled people in Wales' past had experienced the same feeling of loss. He suggested that,

“Probably a lot of disabled people years ago were housebound. Never got out. Relying on other people. It's nice to be independent”.

Tom's account is reminiscent of Cathy Charmaz' (2019) argument that neoliberal discourses champion independence and autonomy as characteristics of a 'good' life; and that these dominant societal ideas can encourage disabled people to lose self-esteem if they feel they are reliant on others for support. As such, while Tom's feelings of loss in relation to independence may seem to emerge from the impacts on his life, they may also be shaped by societal ideologies and practices. This highlights the complexity surrounding the social model's distinction between impairment and disability, critiqued in academic literature by Tom Shakespeare (2006), Dan Goodley (2017), Liz Crow (1996), and others.

Tom felt that disability representation in museums would necessarily be limited by the lack of freedom experienced by disabled people in history. He hypothesised that many would have been house-bound and underrepresented in broader narratives of industrial and social history. He argued that Wales' industrial history,

“... was all about working steel works and mines and able-bodied people really. Not an awful lot about disabilities back in them days”.

This excerpt suggested that historical barriers to access removed disability from the public eye. He reflected that, to some extent, this remained true today:

“People don't think about disabled people unless you're disabled or you know someone who's disabled. I find the general public don't think about disabled people”.

This sentiment was shared by other visitors to St Fagan's Museum of National History, discussed in section four.

3.3 Chris

Like Tom, Chris' response to the prosthetic leg was limited. He observed that,

“It's pretty cool to see what the old guys had to get around on”.

Nonetheless, he quickly moved on the next photograph he had taken. He explained that, while he used a prosthetic leg himself, he did not feel a personal or affective connection to the display. He explained,

Chris: “You get more of a connection with something when you've got a personal link. Like, I've been up in Edinburgh and, you know, being in the military museums up there, being ex-military myself. There was a lot of personal take away from that”.

MH: “You feel more of a personal link, say, to that military history than to, for example, looking at the prosthetic leg in terms of –”

Chris: “Yeah, I would do. I mean, like, you know, I've got a lot of interest in disabilities and things like that. But I was a person first and before that, you know, I was a soldier for 17 and a half years”.

In this dialogue, Chris argues that his disability is not part of his identity in the same way as, for example, his experiences in the military, or his love of sport:

“You know, it's just like rugby's like a big part of my life. And, you know, like, I have that connection and this is something that's happened to me”.

While Chris felt that his disability had a significant impact on his life, he argued that it was not a significant part of his identity.

Similarly, he reflected on how his disability interacted with other parts of his life:

“I suppose having a disability that people – primarily you're a parent and a husband and stuff and you still want to play an active role. Yeah, I try and keep doing the things that I normally do, even if they can be a little bit tough”.

While he acknowledged that his acquired disability had changed his daily life, he refuted the idea that it had changed his identity. He argued that,

“Disabilities, race, you know, sexual orientation's second, isn't it? If you're a good person, or you've achieved something, then that's of note and everything else is second”.

He felt that the passions he had chosen in life, in particular his military career and his love of rugby, had a significant impact on his identity; but that his disability had affected his circumstances rather than his sense of self.

Chris wondered if this relationship with his disability was shaped by the fact that he acquired it as an adult. He reflected,

“I lived for a long period of my life without a disability. And I've lived for quite a while with a disability now. So, I don't know whether my sort of outlook is different to somebody that was born with a disability”.

Indeed, Jared shared a similar thought from a different perspective. He explained that disability had been a part of his life from birth:

“It’s hard to say from my perspective, because obviously, it's something I'm used to... say if it's an acquired disability, they probably notice more, because, you know, they've spent life as an able-bodied person, and, you know, not had that worry about isolation in regards to, you know, knowing other people that have similar issues, problems”.

In these excerpts, Chris and Jared question how their different experiences of disability have shaped their perceptions. However, Jared suggested that people with acquired disabilities would feel a lack of representation more keenly than those who grew up with their impairments – a hypothesis not fulfilled by Chris’ account of his experiences. Nonetheless, these discussion emphasise the diversity within ‘disabled communities’.

Like Niamh and Tom, Chris suggested that social discourses played a negative role in the lives of disabled people. For example, he felt that society expected somebody with a disability to achieve less than somebody without one:

“You'll have the individual with disabilities who believes that they can't do it, might be working with a teacher who'll say my children wouldn't be able to do that because they've got disabilities. You've got parents saying, I couldn't, I couldn't, I couldn't. You get caught in that”.

This excerpt identified different discursive formations which depict disabled people as ‘less able’. Chris felt that these societal expectations perpetuated negative stereotypes and limited the opportunities offered to individuals; by way of example, he suggested teachers expecting less of disabled children in mainstream schools. As a consequence, dominant discourse limits the opportunities presented to disabled people, and encourages them to limit their expectations of themselves.

Chris agreed with Niamh that museums had the potential to challenge such discourses. In particular, he described a display he had seen in the National Waterfront Museum that day. The display consisted of panels and videos regarding community engagement work between the museum and ‘special schools’ catering for pupils with sensory and behavioural disabilities in the Swansea area. He remarked,

“The first thing I looked at was about a special school. They’ve got a presentation along there and one of the videos highlighting an absolutely excellent school in Swansea, showcasing in their work”.

He expressed surprise at seeing this in the museum, since he didn’t expect to see current communities represented in the displays. Reflecting that it could bring new perspectives about alternative education and disabled children to broad audiences, he described the display as “massively impressive”.

3.4 Disabled ‘community’

Niamh, Tom, and Chris all spoke about experiences of barriers and exclusion they encountered as a result of their disability; but shared different accounts of how these barriers came about. Niamh and Chris both described how dominant discourses, comprised of statements about what disabled people were like and institutional and social practices associated with them, resulted in barriers in the built environment and social interactions. While Tom agreed that cultural ideas about disability impacted on his experiences of navigating social spaces, his account focussed on the significant impact that impairment had imposed on his life and sense of self.

Niamh felt that shared experiences of prejudice and exclusion fostered a sense of community amongst people with disabilities and spoke about disabled people as “us” and “we”. On the contrary, Chris felt that his disability had shaped his circumstances but not his identity. As such, Niamh and Chris provide different accounts of constituting themselves as ‘subjects’ within disability discourses (Foucault 1982, 2017). Reflecting on discursive statements and rules about what it means to be disabled, they constructed social identities for themselves and other people living with a disability.

These accounts illustrate the heterogeneity of disability communities and their experiences; and serve as a reminder that there is no single ‘disabled community’ to be represented, instead a varied range of experiences clustered around an amorphous idea of what it is to be disabled.

4. Access, absence, and discourse

In *'The History of Sexuality'*, Foucault (1976) discussed the role of silence in societal discourse. He observed,

“Silence itself—the thing one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies” (Foucault 1976 p27).

As such, silences – the things not said about a topic, which are considered either irrelevant or taboo – are as much a part of a discourse as what is said, constituted by the same rules which define what can be said about a subject and what should be omitted (Hall 2013a).

This section is concerned with instances where participants felt that consideration of disability was conspicuous in its absence. It begins with examples where disabled people had been omitted from historical narratives displayed in the galleries; and then turns to experiences of barriers to access and their discursive impacts on representation of disability.

4.1 Silence and discourse

4.1.1 Missing threads

Michael and Gabby visited St Fagan's National Museum of History, in particular the 'Wales is...' and 'Life is...' social history galleries. Like visitors to the National Waterfront Museum, they were encouraged to look around the galleries and take photos, which were used to frame a discussion following their visit.

Reflecting on the photos he had taken of the gallery, Michael explained that a video display he encountered in the 'Wales is' gallery had caught his eye (figure 6.3). The video depicted an interview with a senior soldier and explored the history of Welsh military

regiments. In one section, the video addressed the experiences of soldiers who were injured in combat. Michael was disappointed that the video talked about these soldiers but did not include their voices or testimony. He observed,

“One of the captains [was] talking about what happened to some of the soldiers who were injured. But again, the voice of – they could so easily have had the voice of someone who was left injured”.

He compared this video to other displays in the gallery on Wales’ mining history, including a panel on the Senghenydd pit disaster (figure 6.3). He argued,

“There’s several points that relate to particular mining disasters, it talks about the number of men and boys killed in a number of them I think – but again it doesn’t talk about how the injuries affected – did people survive and have to live with injuries from those?”

In both cases, he argued that the voices of disabled people had been omitted from interpretation of historical narratives, describing them as “a missing thread of the story”. He felt that disabled people would have played important roles in aspects of Welsh history included in the gallery, such as agriculture, mining, and military life, but had been omitted from the narratives on display.

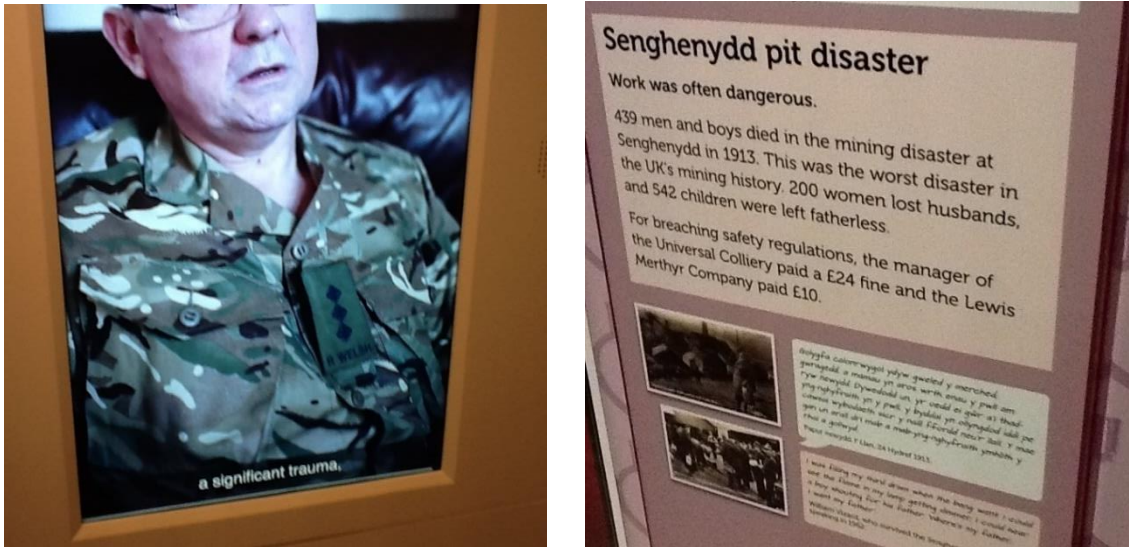
In doing so, he felt that the displays obscured their contribution to historical industries and neglected parts of Welsh history. He argued,

“In terms of representing how people lived and died, why they were such strong communities, because they lived really hard brutal lives and people would have had to rely on each other... The exhibits that we looked do touch on war and on death and children going down the mines. So it’s not as if those things aren’t there, it’s part of the story about those things is missing”.

In this excerpt, Michael suggested that exploring experiences of disability in mining communities helps understand the broader picture of how they lived. As such, omitting these experiences also omits some of the close social ties which underpinned the lives

Figure 6.3: Photographs of displays at St Fagan's National Museum of History.

Participant's photos (Michael)



of miners and their families. Furthermore, the galleries engaged with discussions of loss of life from war and dangerous injury; but omitted the stories of disability that these events incurred. This amounted to a “missing thread of the story”.

He reflected on why these stories were missing:

“Is it part of the world view of those who collate the exhibitions? Do they see, when they look at those bits, those stories they’re representing between life and death, living with injury and ill health?”

Michael suggested that curators had not included these “threads” of the story because they did not “see” them when they imagined historical mining communities. He felt that this mirrored present-day discourses which render disabled people “invisible”, encouraging people to hide their experiences of prejudice, exclusion, and impairment in their social interactions. He said,

“Because I suffer from chronic pain, it’s not something that necessarily – though I guess sometimes my gait when I walk isn’t particularly, it makes me stand out a bit. So that’s something I’m very conscious of”.

In this excerpt, Michael reflected on the sense of self-consciousness he felt as a result of his disability. He suggested that societal stigmas around ‘standing out’ encouraged him to disguise his disability.

Gabby also felt that “there was nobody disabled represented” in her visit to the museum, and that this ignored people in historical Welsh communities who had experienced disability. She argued,

“They exist. They were there. But it never seems to be pointed out”.

Like Michael, she felt that disability would have been a significant part of people’s lives in Welsh history. She suggested,

“In an age before we had the medicine levels that we do these days, I’m sorry but nearly everybody is going to have something”.

She described a social media account she followed on a regular basis which discussed historical artworks of disabled people and explained, “I find that fascinating”.

Like Michael, she felt that this lack of representation mirrored wider social trends which marginalised disabled people and their experiences. She argued,

“It’s so normalised not to think of them that we don’t even notice when they’re not there. Because it’s normal for them to not be there”.

She reflected that she had not noticed this absence in previous visits to the museum; and furthermore, did not think she would have noticed if she hadn’t known the subject matter of this project. This provoked an emotional response:

“It makes me angry. And I wouldn’t have thought about it if we weren’t having this discussion. And that itself makes me angry... we’re marginalised because we’ve been pushed to the margins”.

Like Niamh and Tom, Gabby felt that people without disabilities did not think about the consequences of living with a disability. She said,

“The only reason we’re interested in it, or one of the things that has led the both of us into it, is that we’re both disabled. I can guarantee that the majority of the population, it’s never even occurred to them”.

Both Michael and Gabby characterised disability as something “one declines to say” (Foucault 1976 p27). This was the case in both the galleries at St Fagan’s National Museum of History and their representations of Welsh history, and in Michael and Gabby’s accounts of their everyday lives.

How does this relate to the concept of discourse? In his account of disability (mis)representation, Tom Shakespeare’s (1999) argued that popular representations in media and culture construct disabled people as ‘other’ because,

“People with impairment can represent the victory of body over mind; of nature over culture; of death over life” (Shakespeare 1994 p289).

He wrote that stereotypes and popular tropes regarding disability obscure the richness of disabled lives because they sit awkwardly alongside human fears of frailty, injury, and fatality. As such, popular discourses about the triumph of ‘mind over body’, ‘culture over nature’, and ‘life over death’ prescribe rules which forbid talking about disabled experiences which challenge them.

Similarly, Cathy Charmaz (2019) argued that political neoliberal discourses emphasise the importance of self-sufficiency and individual responsibility. As such, narratives which foreground how,

“They were such strong communities, because they lived really hard brutal lives and people would have had to rely on each other” (Michael),

present a challenge to dominant discourse and are consequently silenced.

In both of these cases, discursive rules prohibit representing the “missing threads” identified by Michael; and the people “pushed to the margins” in Gabby’s account of her visit.

4.1.2 Implications for representation

Michael and Gabby agreed that the displays at St Fagan's National Museum of History should include greater representation of disability. Michael argued that information and stories about disabled people would "add to the richness" of the existing galleries. As such, increasing representation is motivated by developing richer, more nuanced interpretations of history. Gabby argued that bringing disability into the galleries could help contest societal discourses which marginalised disabled people in present-day society. She argued that museums had a responsibility to display and challenge these discourses as part of their educational role. She said,

"Museums come under the heading of education. And yes, I think education has a major responsibility for – I don't want to say being inclusive, inclusivity seems to be a buzzword. But it is their responsibility to make every member of society reflected in society".

As such, Gabby argued that museums should be motivated to increase disability representation by patterns of inequality and exclusion in wider society. This argument will be explored in greater detail in chapter seven, which addresses the different ideas about the museum's social role raised in the interview and focus group data.

4.2 Physical access as discourse

In his lectures at the College de France, Foucault observed,

"It is arbitrary to try to dissociate... the practice of social relations, and the spatial distributions in which they find themselves" (Foucault 1984 p246).

Since discourse unfolds in context, the physical environment plays a role in its creation, dissemination, and reproduction. This was illustrated in Jared, Gabby, Harriet, and Ryan's accounts of accessibility, and its affective and discursive impacts on their visits.

4.2.1 Discursive statements about the museum

Jared visited the National Waterfront Museum, housed in a listed warehouse connected to a purpose-built main building, opened in 2005. He spoke highly of the accessibility provisions made in the museum. For example, he felt that the museum compared positively to other buildings he had encountered:

“You know, some places I go into – like the museum across the way, it’s very cramped. Getting around is quite awkward. But this place, it is really good to get around”.

As a result, he often brought visiting family or friends to the site because it was relatively accessible compared to other public spaces in the city. He said,

“If we want to have a wander around, we might wander around in here. For a public place, a public building, it's very much an accessible place... So, I think that is important”.

He explained that good physical accessibility was a significant reason why he visited the museum regularly.

On the other hand, when Ryan visited the National Museum Cardiff, he had difficulty entering the building using his wheelchair. The National Museum Cardiff is the oldest of the three interview sites and was accessed by a set of stairs leading to its front entrance (figure 6.4). On the day of Ryan’s visit, the lift bypassing these stairs was out of order. To enter the building, an intercom by the lift summoned a member of staff who opened a service entrance. This led to a long slope, which in turn led to the foyer of the museum⁴.

After this experience, Ryan requested not to visit the galleries, instead skipping straight to his interview in the museum’s foyer. As such, while he was able to access the museum (with assistance), the difficulty he experienced deterred him from looking around its

⁴ In 2023, a slope was installed to bypass the stairs and improve access for wheelchairs and pushchairs.

Figure 6.4: Entrance to National Museum Cardiff (Cardiff University 2016)



galleries. Ryan reflected that poor accessibility at the National Museum Cardiff (and St Fagan’s National Museum of History, during his previous visits) had contributed to his disinterest in them. He argued,

“[Accessibility] makes it more interesting because people can get around and see more stuff that they may not be able to. Like I know in St Fagan’s, I know when I’m down there, I can’t get down to the houses down there⁵”.

As such, lack of accessibility prevented him from engaging with the museum fully, making the visit less rewarding.

⁵ Beyond the entrance building housing the ‘Wales is..’ and ‘Life is...’ galleries, St Fagan’s National Museum of History comprises historical buildings collected from around Wales and reconstructed in parkland. Different paths between these buildings are surfaced with tarmac, gravel, and cobblestones.

Harriet shared a similar experience of visiting the National Museum Cardiff using a wheelchair. She recalled,

“When you go into a building and it’s really difficult to as much as get through the door, it doesn’t matter what you’re showing, you’re already disregarding a section of people. I mean in this particular museum, sometimes you have to get people to help you three different times before you see anything”.

Difficulty moving around the museum in her wheelchair not only made it difficult to get into the galleries; but also made her feel disregarded and unwelcome. She explained,

“It’s about making sure that when someone comes into a museum they don’t come in and immediately think, ah, this isn’t for me”.

These concerns were not limited to accessing the museum building. At St Fagan’s National Museum of History, Gabby spoke about her difficulties in exploring the ‘Life is...’ and ‘Wales is...’ galleries in her wheelchair. These galleries are housed in a purpose-built

Figure 6.5: Mirror on display at St Fagan’s National Museum of History. Participant’s photo (Gabby)



building opened in 2018. She recalled,

“The mirror didn’t tilt, I couldn’t see myself in it. In the one upstairs with all the clothes and the living and stuff, there were things on the floor I kept rolling over. The floor was not flat. There were signs in places where me, in a wheelchair – I couldn’t read them”.

The mirror she described is part of a display intended to help visitors picture themselves as a Neanderthal (figure 6.5). She noted,

“I know it might be aimed at children. But some children are in wheelchairs. All it needed to be was a tilt mirror”.

Like Harriet, Gabby described how encountering these barriers made her feel disregarded by the developers of the gallery. She said,

“We’ve been given the barest minimum thought and that’s with purpose-built new things”.

In these examples, physical problems of accessibility influenced how visitors engaged with museum galleries; and the feelings they expressed about the museum.

Jared spoke positively about his experience at the museum and as such visited regularly, either to look at galleries and temporary exhibitions or simply to be in a public space with friends and family. Ryan, Harriet, and Gabby shared examples of when they had struggled to navigate the museum and how this discouraged them from using museum spaces. Moreover, these experiences expressed discursive ‘statements’ about the museum and its approach to disabled visitors. These are presented in figure 6.6.

Drawing on visitors’ accounts of the building, it can be argued that Jared’s positive experiences of moving around the National Waterfront Museum expressed that the museum was a pleasant forum for social interaction and welcoming for wheelchair users. Meanwhile, Ryan and Harriet’s negative experiences of moving around the National Museum Cardiff expressed that the museum was not intended for wheelchair

Figure 6.6: Discursive impacts of physical accessibility

	Experience	Statement
Jared	“But this place, it is really good to get around”	The museum is welcoming to wheelchair users
Ryan	[Of the doors to the gallery] “Even though I can push into them and use my feet it’s still hard”	Navigating the museum may not be worth it
Harriet	“You have to get people to help you three different times before you see anything”	The museum “wasn’t for [me]”
Gabby	“There were signs in places where me, in a wheelchair – I couldn’t read them”	Disabled visitors have been given the “barest minimum [of] thought”

users, and that the effort expended to navigate the building may not be worth it. Similarly, Gabby’s difficulty in reading displays at St Fagan’s National Museum of History expressed that wheelchair users had not been given much thought in design processes. These statements contributed to visitors’ perception of the museum; and in turn, influenced whether they would visit again.

4.2.2 Physical environment as a discursive text

Harriet argued that accessibility difficulties she encountered echoed wider patterns of disability representation, and absence, in the galleries she visited at the National Museum Cardiff. This site is home to AC-MW’s natural history and art collections; Harriet

visited the art galleries housed there. She felt that the choice and interpretations of artworks relied on dominant perspectives about art, which she characterised as,

“People who had the most time and money to focus on painting and people who’ve had the time and money to spend on paying other people to paint. And whenever something descends into whether you have the time, money, and social cache to do it, it becomes inherently – in our society anyway – dominated by white, wealthy men”.

As a result, she argued, the galleries overrepresented wealthy elites and underrepresented art by and of marginalised communities. She expressed disappointment at this approach:

“By portraying – it’s not even portraying a wider perspective, by showing people what life is really like, you’re offering that much broader perspective and you’re actually giving people something valuable. And if don’t do it, you’re, at least indirectly, silencing the perspectives of people who really don’t need the extra help in being silenced”.

As such, she felt that the galleries reproduced societal prejudices and power dynamics rather than challenging them. Consequently many historical communities, including disabled people, were disregarded when it came to choosing art for display. Similarly, she felt that parts of the built environment of the National Museum Cardiff disregarded disabled people, particularly the heavy double doors which separated the foyer from the gallery. Her account suggested that the paintings on display and the doors within the building were both aspects of a discourse which disregarded disabled people and excluded them from the art canon.

Material aspects of the museum also played a role in Jo’s account of changing curatorial practices in museums. Reflecting on her trip to the National Waterfront Museum, and a recent trip she had made to the Science Museum in London, she argued that both institutions were undergoing significant change. She recalled,

“There's an awful lot of open space and not a lot of content nowadays. It appears that there has been a significant shift away from museums as stores of interesting stuff to if it doesn't have a name, and we can't spin a story about it, we're not interested”.

In Jo's account, change was embodied in both the content and interpretation on display, and the material layout of the gallery. Both reflected a discursive shift: from a focus on artefacts to a focus on social history narratives. As a result, galleries contained fewer objects and more open space.

As such, the choice of objects on display and their interpretation and the physical environment of the museum can both be considered as ‘texts’ within a discourse. This is represented in figure 6.7. In these examples, Harriet and Jo drew on the built environment of the museum and the physical orientation of gallery spaces to develop their understanding of the museum's purpose. Alongside the choice and interpretation of

Figure 6.7: Physical environment as a discursive text

	Harriet	Jo
Discourse	Disabled people are not considered	Shift in focus from objects to stories
Objects and interpretation	Artwork represents historical communities “with the most money and time”	Narrative interpretation of objects
Physical environment	Difficult to navigate in a wheelchair	Fewer objects and more open space

artefacts on display, the physical environment of the museum acted as a discursive text, expressing statements regarding the nature of the museum and its social role.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has used Hall's encoding/decoding model and Foucault's concept of discourse to explore themes emerging from interview data co-created with disabled visitors to the museum. Beginning with diverse responses to a prosthetic leg on display at the National Waterfront Museum, it explored how processes of decoding occurred in the complex co-creation of meaning in museums galleries. Furthermore, it reflected on how participant's responses to the display were influenced by different ideas about the nature of disability and the idea of a 'disabled community'.

Turning to representation of disability in galleries at St Fagan's National Museum of History and National Museum Cardiff, it engaged with participants' observations that disabled people had been omitted from accounts of Welsh history, particularly in relation to military and industrial history. It considered how barriers to physical access encountered by visitors played a part in constituting a discourse which disregarded experiences of disability; and how this discourse mirrored the experiences participants encountered elsewhere in social and civic situations.

Chapter seven will now address questions about the changing social role of museums, which have arisen in this chapter and chapter five alike.

Social Role of the Museum: Representation and Local Communities

1. Introduction

Following their individual interviews, four members of staff and three visitors met for an online focus group session to discuss significant themes emerging from early stages of data analysis. The aim of this session was twofold. First, it intended to embed reflexive practice in the analysis process. Clive Seale and David Silverman (1997) identify ‘authenticity’ as a measure of rigour in qualitative research. Following their argument, this session explored whether initial insights emerging from the interview data felt authentic to research participants. Second, it brought staff and visitors together to discuss communication in museum galleries. Understanding these communication processes as collaborative co-constructions of meaning, this session was concerned with bringing perspectives from both parties together. This chapter reflects on themes emerging from this session, though it draws on data from interviews as well.

In particular, this chapter reflects on the different roles which participants afforded to museums in general, and AC-MW in particular. Staff and visitors alike expressed different expectations of what they wanted to encounter in galleries and exhibitions; and how they felt the museum should serve local communities and wider society. For example, some participants felt that museums had a role to play in challenging prejudice and stereotypes in wider society by representing counter-narratives. Others argued that museums should be concerned with unbiased accounts of historical fact, providing a variety of perspectives, and avoiding taking a normative stance. Staff participants also shared their perspectives on the purpose and practice of community engagement, with different approaches emerging in the context of St Fagan’s National Museum of History as compared to the National Waterfront Museum.

The chapter begins with participants’ accounts of the museum’s social role in regard to representation. Visitors and curators agreed that AC-MW had an important role in

educating visitors about Wales' past. However, there was disagreement about its role in addressing contemporary issues and representing difference. For some, displays and interpretation should challenge negative societal discourses and seeking to support marginalised communities; in particular, they felt that museums had an opportunity, and a responsibility, to highlight and contest disability discrimination they experienced in their daily lives. For others, museums should be neutral spaces where visitors encounter 'facts' and draw their own conclusion about past and present. This section analyses these arguments using the concept of governmentality and explores the discursive construction of 'facts' and 'bias' in discussions about museum content.

The chapter then turns to the variety of social roles carried out at AC-MW and the different ways staff members, in particular, described their work with local communities. In particular, it considers differences in accounts of community work at the National Waterfront Museum, Swansea, which focussed on providing community spaces and services; and at St Fagan's National Museum of History, where the focus was on bringing new voices and perspectives into collections, displays and exhibitions. This section suggests that these differences are connected to participants' accounts of the different origins and founding ethos particular to the two sites.

Finally, the chapter will draw some conclusions across these discussions, reflecting on the complex nature of the museum's social role. Finally, it will introduce chapter eight, which will reflect on themes emerging from chapters five, six, and seven, how they interact with the existing literature explored in chapter two, and what this thesis hopes to contribute to this literature.

2. Negotiating representation

During the focus group session, participants discussed the role(s) that museums can play in representing marginalised communities, contemporary discussions, and social inequalities – such as those experienced by disabled people. It was agreed that museums should engage with such issues; but participants gave very different accounts of how they should go about it. At the heart of this disagreement was a conflict between

remaining impartial and taking a normative stance. Indeed, Robert Janes and Richard Sandell (2019a) argued that, since the 1990s, museum scholarship had questioned,

“The myth of museum neutrality and objectivity” (p23).

In particular, it challenged the long-held belief that museums must maintain impartiality in their work to avoid bias, ‘trendiness’, and coercion by special interest groups. Furthermore, it argued that developing museum collections and exhibitions requires decision-making which is inherently political in nature; and that striving for neutrality undermines museums’ potential to contribute positively to society (Janes and Sandell 2019). Similarly, Lynn Wray (2019) observed that the promise of impartiality is underscored by “utopian beliefs” (p323) that museums are able to present purely factual information and represent different perspectives and values equally; and that it is not ethical for museums to make such promises to visitors. However, research by Ashilde Brekke (2019) and Fiona Cameron (2008) suggested that for many museum professionals and visitors, impartiality remains a matter of professional integrity and institutional credibility.

In the interview data, several participants echoed Janes and Sandell’s (2019) argument that museums have the potential, and a responsibility, to act as a forum for constructive discussion of social issues. For example Jacqui, a curator at St Fagan’s National Museum of History, said,

“For me, it’s about being a civic space. We have a civic role. And we have a responsibility to uphold the human rights of people within that civic realm. So that means that, you know, we’re there to be part of that dialogue”.

She reflected that the last thirty years had witnessed the encroachment of private developments like shopping centres into public spaces; but that museums remained part of the (now diminished) civic realm. As such, they have a responsibility to take part in public dialogue. She continued,

“What we are there to be is to show, to allow that dialogue to happen. To allow people to feel that they can have their say and that they are represented... And we

are going to say when we don't agree with things. I think it's disingenuous to say that by saying nothing you're being neutral".

Jacqui argued that AC-MW's galleries and programming should engage with marginalised communities and contemporary issues. She suggested that they should represent plural perspectives and values, but ultimately present a normative stance in social debates.

Similarly, Jared, who visited the National Waterfront Museum, felt that museums had both an opportunity and a responsibility to raise awareness of and counter social prejudices, like those he experienced as a power chair user. He said,

"That's what a museum is, it's a place of learning that is open to everybody. So if anywhere should be like, you know, at the forefront of reducing stigmas and stereotypes, it's a place where it's a public learning place".

Despite this agreement, there were differences in opinion as to how this role should be fulfilled. For example, during the focus group session, discussion turned to the potential for AC-MW to engage with – or even participate in – activism around contemporary issues. Alex, a curator at the National Waterfront Museum, felt that taking an activist role had been written into museum policy, but was unsure how it would look in practice. He said,

"It's a very much a core part of not just now, but our new 10 years strategy too. As far as what would be generically known as activism being part of our key objectives. What it actually ends up as, what it results in I should say, I think, is going to be extremely interesting".

Here he is referring to AC-MW's '*Strategy 2030*'; a policy document describing six core principles which will guide the museum's work over the present decade. These are: to make sure everyone is represented; to inspire creativity and learning for life; to help protect and restore nature and our environment; to support wellbeing through inspirational places and experiences; to discover and explore the museum digitally; and to build global connections (AC-MW 2022). These principles frame the museum's social role in a number of ways, including creating inclusive content and programming which represents 'everyone', delivering lifelong education, and supporting individual and

community wellbeing. The document also recognises AC-MW's close ties to Welsh government:

“This strategy directly supports the ambitions of the Welsh Government’s Programme for Government, and the goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015)” (AC-MW 2022 p9).

Furthermore, it states,

“We’ll actively support communities who experience inequalities or racism by delivering the Welsh Government’s Race Equality, LGBTQ+ and other equality action plans” (AC-MW 2022 p14).

As such, the strategy presents a commitment to taking a normative stance against racism and other forms of prejudice and inequality. Whether this amounts to museum activism is somewhat difficult to quantify. Erica Robenalt et al (2022) observed that,

“It is a slippery term, containing an inherent subjectivity” (p401).

They argued that activism in museums takes three forms: museum activism, defined as museum practice which aims to influence or alter the future, engaging with social needs; museums in activism, occasions where museums become sites of protests; and museums of activism, in which the museum collects and displays content memorialising contemporary activist groups.

Indeed, participants presented instances of these forms of activism in AC-MW's practice. For example, Eleri recalled,

“When Extinction Rebellion danced around Dippy [a dinosaur skeleton on display in National Museum Cardiff] in the main hall, there were people who were uncomfortable with that”.

Similarly, Bashir described how,

“We had a collection of billboards and other objects from the BLM movement, but we also recorded some of their activists who were there... we want to put a display on”.

These examples depict the museum in activism and a museum of activism, respectively.

Eleri recognised that some museum staff and visitors held reservations about the museum’s work with Extinction Rebellion activists, but argued that activist practice was integral to AC-MW’s contemporary role in Welsh society. She suggested another example:

“You have to stand by what you think is right. And, you know, we’ve said we believe in having an anti-racist Wales, and so we stand by that. We stand by looking at the Picton portrait that we have, for example. The community have worked on that, it’s been their decision, what happened to that. Do we take it down? The decision was to reinterpret it, actually, because the narrative is important to be told”.

This excerpt referred to the *‘Reframing Picton’* project carried out at the National Museum Cardiff. Following Black Lives Matters protests across the world, and in particular response to protestors removing a statue of Edward Colston from the streets of Bristol, the museum chose to reevaluate a large portrait of Thomas Picton held in the museum. Picton was born in Haverfordwest, West Wales, in 1758 and went on to become governor of Trinidad. His brutality in this role was recognised even in his own lifetime, including the torture of a fourteen-year-old girl accused of theft. The project worked with the Sub-Saharan Advisory Panel’s Youth Leadership Network and Trinidadian artists to develop an exhibition displayed at the site between August 2022 and January 2025 (AC-MW, no date b).

Despite these existing examples, Alex expressed discomfort about activism within the museum. He explained,

"This session [referring to the focus group session] has really been about – not exactly contested stories, but multiple stories, and multiple interpretations, and the difficulties of getting that balance. And I think once we move into being a more

activist museum service, then those issues will amplify more and more. Because in a way they open up much bigger discussions about balance, about fairness, about finding a way forward with what you do with some of those collections”.

Alex was concerned that activist practice may privilege some perspectives while silencing others, alienating some visitors from the museum – ironically, reproducing the very problem that it sought to address.

As such, the focus group session in particular, and the interviews more broadly, suggested two divergent arguments about how the museum should engage with contemporary social issues: as an impartial arbiter of facts and multiple perspectives; or taking a normative stance and campaigning for change. To explore these ideas, this section draws on Michel Foucault’s work on discourse (e.g. Foucault 1971, 1972, 1978); and, furthermore, in Stuart Hall’s (2013a) discussion of the ‘elements’ which comprise a Foucauldian discourse. In particular, it uses these elements as a structure to explore discursive constructions of the ‘objective museum’ and the ‘normative museum’ in the interview and focus group data. In addition to this, it explores the implications of these different discourses for representation in the museum generally, and disability representation more specifically.

2.1 The ‘objective’ museum

2.1.1 Statements about the topic

For several participants, namely Alex, John, Laura, and Jo, it was important that the museum remain balanced and objective in its interpretation and displays. This involved collecting and displaying different perspectives; and avoiding privileging one particular view. John, a curator at the National Waterfront Museum, argued that museum professionals should collect artefacts and oral histories from across society and display them impartially. In doing so, they gave visitors a forum to explore different perspectives, and the information they needed to reach their own conclusions on societal issues. He argued,

"We have to be bit like the BBC. You know, we collect the activism part [referring to placards, oral histories, photographs, etc. collected at protests and similar events], but we've also got to tell the story of the people who were against it. We've got to give the opportunity both sides of any argument".

He illustrated this argument with current events:

"We can follow Black Lives Matter, we can look at all of these things and collect that information, but I think we also should give a voice to people who don't think that all statues should be thrown in the dock".

He recalled his own experiences documenting a protest opposing wind farms, wearing a jacket emblazoned "filming today's event for the children of tomorrow". He explained,

"That is what I think I'm doing. I'm actually collecting things and saving things for future generations".

As such, he argued that collecting practices should be objective: gathering artefacts and testimony from both sides of an argument in order to provide the most complete account possible to future generations. Similarly, he argued that exhibitions and galleries should present contrasting perspectives. He said,

"People may say, what, are you sitting on the fence, but our job, if you like, is to collect everything and let people make up their own mind".

In this account, evaluating different perspectives and deciding the truth of the matter is the purview of visitors, not curators. Curators are responsible for gathering all sides of an argument and putting them on display.

Jo, a visitor to the National Waterfront Museum, shared a similar sentiment. She explained that she expected museum galleries to provide her with impartial facts in order to form her own opinions. She argued,

"As a visitor I would expect a museum to be a neutral observer of the materials of the time. I think it should be a recorder of history. And then provide people with the

information – the information to understand the decisions that were made at the time”.

While this shared similarities with John’s account – presenting artefacts and information in an impartial way and letting visitors draw their own conclusions – she did not expect museums to engage with “both sides of the story”. Instead, she hoped to encounter objective “facts” which could be used to describe historical themes, events, or people. Indeed, she drew a distinction between “facts” and “lived experience”:

“In some ways it depends on whether an exhibition is looking at the facts of what has happened, or the lived experience of what has happened... sometimes you need a little bit of distance in order to present the facts”.

In this excerpt, Jo privileged academic study and research over lived experience as a way of knowing historical events; and furthermore, associated impartiality and “distance” with credibility and authority.

Similarly, Laura, a fellow visitor to the National Waterfront Museum, associated objectivity with the museum’s authority as a source of information. She explained,

“I think when I see something on television or on the Internet I would usually fact check it, but I don’t think I would fact check a museum. You would kind of go to them for the fact checking. I would perceive museums as being more objective”.

In this excerpt, Laura identified the museum as different amongst other cultural institutions and media. In particular, she argued that its “objective” approach makes it more credible than other sources of information.

Laura and Jo gave different accounts of how this could be translated into museum practice. For Laura, it was about recognising the milieu of voices providing different accounts of a history and “objectively” selecting voices which provided a balanced account. She said,

“There are bound to be plenty of people who haven’t had their photo taken at a particular time or haven’t been able to write down their experience in a way that’s very succinct. Whose voices aren’t being heard, and that’s where I’d kind of expect a museum to step in and portray things objectively”.

In this account, a curator uses their professional skills and experience to identify which voices have been silenced by history. Subsequently, they reach out to these groups, either through archival study or oral histories, and offer them a platform to share their perspective.

Alex, a curator at the National Waterfront Museum, provided his own twist on this discourse. Like John and Laura, he suggested that galleries should provide visitors with an opportunity to draw their own conclusions on a subject. He reflected,

“People will bring to this material their own opinions, but also to some extent their own reinterpretations and I think that's how it should be. The idea is that what we're doing is providing a range of data so that people can assemble their own narrative”.

However, he argued that museums had a responsibility to bring to bear “detailed, factual, empirical, historical research” to frame these meaning-making processes, explaining,

“If you don’t keep your eye on that historical fact, historical narrative... I think that’s a dereliction of duty”.

Laura and Alex argued that galleries should present a balanced and objective account of history, identifying the voices which “aren’t being heard” and attending to these gaps; and framing different perspectives with historical fact. These accounts suggested that meaning is co-constructed by museum staff and visitors in gallery spaces; however, they privileged one particular meaning over others, identifying it as ‘fact(s)’.

2.1.2 Subjects and practices for dealing with them

In many ways, this discourse was personified by the figure of the professional curator. They were responsible for collecting objects and accounts in an objective, balanced way. Margaret Anderson (2002) identified a similar discursive construction in existing museum studies literature. She suggested that,

“Historians have been trained to consider bias in interpretation, to weigh the evidence as impartially as we can reasonably claim in this postmodern, post-colonial world and to construct our theses accordingly. Or at least that is the theory” (p179).

As such, museum staff bring to bear professional skills and experiences to develop impartial accounts of history. This creates opportunities for visitors to reflect on balanced accounts of history and draw their own conclusions.

This discourse includes two other subjects, who use the museum as an educational resource. The first is the visitor, who reflects on the information gathered and presented by curators to reach an informed decision on societal debates. In the museum, they find a forum for encountering diverse perspectives, skills for critical thinking, and the opportunity to put them to use to understand historical and contemporary narratives. By providing this opportunity, the museum plays a social role in facilitating constructive discussions about important issues in wider society. The second can be somewhat nebulously described as ‘future generations’. This group was particularly important to John, who reflected,

“What I collect will be, in a hundred years’ time, will be what people will look at. So it is quite a big responsibility from that point of view”.

He explained that his approach was motivated by desire to leave behind an objective, balanced account of current affairs and debates.

Arguably, ‘facts’ can also be identified as a subject in this discourse. John, Alex, Laura, and Jo described communicating facts as one of the core tenets of the ‘objective

museum'. Alex argued that facts were generated from rigorous scholarly research; and Jo differentiated facts from lived experience. Facts provided insight into historical and contemporary issues and allowed visitors to make informed decisions.

Alex reflected on the complexity of providing a nuanced, balanced account within the context of a gallery or exhibition. In particular, he discussed the example of the '*Pit Head to Sick Bed*' exhibition, which explored experiences of disabled people in South Wales' coalmines. He recalled,

“The team that put together research on disability and mining have ended up writing two books on that subject, and you know that's where the definitive, multi-voiced story really can emerge. And all of their work ended up as a temporary exhibition which comprised of twelve panels, with 150 words each plus photographs and a few artifacts and the, if you like, permanent legacy of that in our in our galleries is one panel”.

This statement described the process of summarising and crystallisation that the project team went through to develop text for the gallery; as well as providing an example of 'encoding' as it occurs in museums. The project team, many of whom were primarily employed in university research rather than museums, developed interpretative panels in line with AC-MW's 150-word limit to accompany the objects and images on display. The same material provided the basis for two academic books with a substantially higher work count. This provides an example of a specific 'technical infrastructure' embedded within the museum and its impact of processes of encoding and communication.

Reflecting on this, Alex argued that exhibitions should “stimulate, intrigue, engage” visitors; and sign post them towards more detailed sources of information. He explained,

“There's a key phrase used in museum work, which is an exhibition should not be a book on the wall. Because actually, when you're on your feet in a dark room, possibly with a family with you, that's not the place to get into a multi-layered debate about things, I think”.

In particular, he argued that the skills and processes used to develop a nuanced account of a topic were different to those used to develop a concise and accessible exhibition:

“If you work with people so that all that sort of concert of voices can come through, that’s almost a very different technique than the reduction and crystallization of thought that goes into an exhibition”.

Indeed Isaac, part of the team who researched and developed the exhibition, described the difficulties of representing complex historical narratives within the word limit. He recalled:

“We found a complicated picture of people returning to work, disabled miners working underground and on the surface. So we wanted to kind of tell that story, get people to understand the complexity of disability history. And obviously, the museum from outset was telling us, right, you’ve got 150 words on a panel, that’s the absolute maximum. So that was a real challenge for us”.

In particular, Isaac wondered whether they had been able to foreground different ways of thinking about historical disability. He explained that one of the core aims of the project was “to challenge the idea of disability as tragedy”; but that expressing this critique within the museum’s word limit had been difficult. He reflected,

“I think you forget how other people come to that and still find it very shocking, anything on disability. And to think about disability about any other way than as a personal tragedy for the people involved... you know the tragedy model was there, but it wasn’t the only way of looking at disability in the sources we were looking at”.

He was concerned that the counter-narratives developed in the project – that disabled people had remained economically and socially active in mining communities – were lost in the process of distilling information down to become suitably concise.

Alex’s account of ‘signposting’ visitors to other sources of information (citing books and documentaries as examples) contrasted with Laura’s suggestion that she would visit a

museum to ‘fact-check’ other media, such as books and television. As such, while they agreed that museums were an authoritative source of information, they disagreed on its position in the wider socio-cultural milieu.

2.1.3 Implications for representation

In the objective museum, representation is achieved through collecting and interpreting museum content in a way that is balanced and objective, telling every side of the story. The goal is to provide visitors with the facts they need to develop informed opinions on historical and contemporary issues. Jared reflected on how this affected representation of disability in museums. He suggested,

“At some point, there needs to be a voice of somebody with those experiences easily accessible. Purely because, from my point of view, we often don't get voices heard as much... it's a very difficult kind of balance, I think it's the right word, to get because, yes, you got to get the facts across in a professional way”.

Here, he characterised representation as a “balance” between providing a platform for marginalised voices to share their experiences and expressing historical fact in “a professional way”.

This discourse privileged curatorial voices over community accounts. While it is a curator's responsibility to collect and display diverse perspectives, this process is guided by their professional expertise and objectivity. This calls to mind Rose Paquet Kinsley's (2016) account of social justice in museums. She argued that many marginalised communities are under- or misrepresented in museum content; and characterised this as ‘recognition injustice’. Furthermore, she argued that most museum responses address this by increasing representation of these communities with temporary exhibitions: an approach which addresses instances of injustice but leaves the underlying framework which generated them in place. In particular, she suggested that continuing to privilege curatorial voices perpetuated power relations which prevent transformational change.

Some participants, in particular Eleri and Jacqui, questioned whether museum practice can be balanced and impartial. Indeed, John reflected on the subject nature of collecting and interpreting objects:

“Different people will place different value on things. So it’s really, it comes down to me being subjective in a way about what I collect”.

Considering further that some communities face more barriers than other in engaging with practices of collecting and curation in museums (Lynch 2011, 2014), it could be argued that the ‘objective’ museum presents an idealised account of communication in museums which cannot be realised.

2.2 The ‘normative’ museum

2.2.1 Statements about the topic

Jacqui, a curator at the National Museum Cardiff, argued that museums should take a normative stance on important societal issues and share them in their galleries and exhibitions. She stated,

“We are going to say when we don’t agree with things. We are going to say, no, racism is wrong. And we should be saying that”.

This is markedly different to John’s approach, which called for a balanced and impartial approach to museum practice. Indeed, Jacqui argued that political choices were imbued throughout the museum, saying,

“By saying nothing, you’re being political as well. How you structure and design your services, where you put your funding, they’re all political decisions”.

Furthermore, she suggested that as publicly funded institutions, museums were part of a wider political landscape. She reflected,

“We’re a public service, we should be publicly accountable and that means we should be holding those values. And we should be accountable to people. We’re owned by them, let’s face it”.

Her colleague Eleri agreed that “museums have never been non-political”. Furthermore, Eleri argued,

“We shouldn’t just represent the campaign, we need to be part of the campaign as well”.

She expressed pride at how AC-MW had engaged with groups like Black Lives Matters and Extinction Rebellion to bring activism into the museum.

Niamh, a visitor at the National Waterfront Museum, agreed that museums should take a normative stance and address prejudices and inequalities in society. She argued that galleries and exhibitions provided a forum to address preconceptions and exclusionary practices faced by disabled people. She reflected,

"In any movement, in any community, you talk about the things that were important to you but your audience tends to be people who already care about that thing, too. So there often aren’t opportunities for disabled people to be talking to non-disabled people in a way that helps influence how they think about disability”.

She argued that the museum’s identity as a public forum provided an opportunity to raise awareness of the types of discrimination faced by disabled people and to bring narratives which challenge preconceptions about disability to a wider audience. She recalled an exhibition she had seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, about the design of independent living spaces for people with disabilities. She felt that the exhibition had prompted visitors to re-consider disabled experiences from a new perspective. She argued,

“For a non-disabled person who's never had much contact with disabled people, who’s never been in a position where somebody has questioned their capability to

look after themselves. They've never had a people come to them and say, well, we don't think this is the best thing for you. We're going to decide for you instead”.

Jared, who also visited the National Waterfront Museum, shared a similar sentiment. He suggested that museums could raise awareness of the negative stereotypes of disability he experienced as a powerchair user; and in doing so, decrease the exclusionary practices he faced in social interactions. He explained,

"If you have somebody who's going into museum who doesn't have a lot of exposure to people with disabilities, you know that might be the only opportunity that they get to listen to somebody from that demographic. And if, you know, at a future point they do come across somebody from that demographic in person, they understand that okay, you know they've got a voice, they can talk for themselves. And, you know, often if I'm with somebody and I go to talk somebody or somebody comes to me they often speak to the person, expecting them talk for me”.

In these accounts, Niamh and Jared both suggested that exclusionary practices they have experienced as disabled people are rooted in unfamiliarity and ignorance. As such, museums can use their status as a forum and authority for education to drive change. This suggested that museums can not only contribute to social debates, but directly address experiences of social exclusion by changing popular perceptions.

Harriet, talking about her visit to the National Museum Cardiff, shared a similar argument that museums had the potential to champion marginalised perspectives and bring them to new audiences; and furthermore, a responsibility to do so. She suggested that they were obliged to do so by their status as a public institution and place of education. She said,

“By portraying – you’re offering that much broader perspective and you’re actually giving people something valuable...If you’re saying that you’re an institution for the public then to some extent I think one of the metrics for your success is the extent

to which you're not just showing such a very narrow strata of things within what you're showing".

She reflected that historical practices of collecting and interpreting had reproduced wider social discourses and power dynamics which marginalised some parts of society. For example, she observed,

"There is a reason why the biggest and the most famous museums don't focus on the most intricate quilts that people have made over the years. It's not because they're not just as difficult or time consuming, it's because when you have something that's being done by women as a functional object and then they are expressing themselves through it, it gets demoted to a craft".

She felt that dominant perspectives in the history of art entrenched power dynamics from society, arguing,

"The things that are considered the worthiest art default towards the things that white men do".

Harriet felt that present-day museum professionals had a responsibility to address this imbalance by incorporating alternative voices and perspectives into galleries. She said,

"If don't do it, you just... you're, at least indirectly, silencing the sort of perspectives of people who really don't need the extra help in being silenced".

Her account was reminiscent of academic work by Dan Hicks (2020) and Hannah Turner (2020) that present-day collection, curation, and engagement practices should address legacies of colonial violence and power imbalances in museum history. Furthermore, she suggested that continuing to exclude these narratives from galleries meant that museums were complicit in reproducing exclusionary discourses from wider society.

Esther, a curator at St Fagan's Museum of National History, similarly criticised past museums practices for reproducing exclusionary social discourses and disregarding some parts of society. On the subject of the Windrush and its passengers, she said,

“It can leave you feeling angry at your profession. Thinking, how have generations of people being unremembered in civic life, in archives, in museums, in public monuments, or whatever. It’s our duty to make sure that we do everything in our possibility to help people to tell their stories”.

Harriet and Esther’s accounts attributed responsibility to current staff to address historical patterns of collecting and interpretation and bring marginalised voices to the fore. They also call to mind Michel Foucault’s (1970, 1982a) and Beth Lord’s (2006) discussions of museums as ‘heterotopias’. Foucault argued that,

“[Heterotopias] destroy syntax in advance, and not only the syntax with which we hold together sentences but also that less apparent syntax, which cause words and things to hold together” (1970 pxviii).

In his essay, ‘*Of Other Spaces*’ (1982a), he classified museums, along with libraries, as,

“Indefinitely accumulating time... a place of all time that is itself outside of time” (p26).

Lord (2006) argued that this description is overly focused on the form of nineteenth and twentieth century practices and ignores recent developments in museology. Instead, she argued that museums are heterotopias in that they display difference: they reveal the different between objects and ideas, displayed for public inspection and contestation.

In Esther and Harriet’s accounts, historical museum collections and galleries have reproduced and reinforced social discourses rather than contested them. For example, Harriet argued,

“What we have decided is the art canon is completely arbitrary and over the years, it’s just turned out that people who had the most time and money to focus on both painting. And whenever something descends into whether you have the time, money, and social cache to do this it becomes inherently – in our society anyway, dominated by white, wealthy men”.

As such, she suggested that art collections, in particular, have been produced by, and in turn reproduced, dominant discourses and power relations. However, like Esther, she felt that they can reveal and contest these ideas by displaying them alongside alternative perspectives. Furthermore, she characterised this as an important responsibility of curatorial practice:

“Museums absolutely owe it to, they owe it to everyone to not let the lazy thinking about what is important be the sort of dominant perspective all the time”.

She identified examples of this in the art gallery at National Museum Cardiff. In particular, she reflected on photographs of Marilyn Monroe and how they represented the actress' struggles with depression (for example, the image shown in figure 7.1). She said,

Figure 7.1: Photograph of Marilyn Monroe on display at National Museum Cardiff.

Source: [USA. Nevada. US actress Marilyn Monroe on the Nevada Desert going over her lines - Collections Online | Museum Wales](#)



“If you think about the photographs of Marilyn Monroe you start to get into the weird sort of fetishizing of the beautiful sad lady? But they are, I suppose, explicitly attempts to portray someone who was obviously in a lot of ways profoundly disabled as exhibiting some of the signs of that if you look at especially the one at the bottom that suggested loneliness in a lot of ways”.

In this excerpt, Harriet identified two different societal discourses represented in the collection of photographs: a “fetishisation” of depression bound to images of female youth and beauty; and an exploration of the relationship between loneliness and mental health. By contrasting these discourses in its photographic portrayal of Marilyn Monroe, the museum acted as a heterotopia.

2.2.2 Subjects and practices for dealing with them

In the normative museum, museums professionals are intermediaries between different parts of society. They collect marginalised experiences and perspectives and display them to raise awareness and foster social cohesion. A civic institution with civic responsibilities, the museum as a whole provides a forum for sharing perspectives which have been marginalised by dominant understandings of past events and contemporary issues. As such, museum professionals are a sort of activist. Indeed, ‘social injustice’ is an important object in this discourse. Societal inequalities and prejudices are not simply perspectives to be collected, displayed, evaluated: they are social problems to be tackled with the museum’s walls. Identifying and displaying such injustices is an important function of the museum and its staff.

Visitors in this discourse fall into two categories: members of marginalised communities, and those ignorant of the experiences of this group. The former group are the subject of community engagement practices to bring their knowledge into galleries and exhibitions; and the latter are to be presented with new perspectives to challenge social issues. Visitors will move across these categories with regards to different topics and discourses.

While the ‘objective’ museum sought to address social inequality and marginalisation by bringing marginalised voices into existing discussions, the ‘normative’ museum seeks to

privilege them in order to redress dominant societal discourses and the museum's own past. As such, reflecting once more on Paquet Kinsley's (2016) work, the goal is to undermine societal power dynamics and effect transformational change. Notably, however, curators still hold a position of authority in this discourse: they use their professional skills and knowledge to identify social injustices and address them.

2.2.3 Implications for representation

In the 'normative museum', responsible representation is achieved through identifying and seeking out marginalised voices and using community engagement practices to bring their experiences into galleries and exhibitions. The goal is to challenge social discourses which contribute to discrimination and social exclusion.

Niamh gave an example of this in practice in regard to disability representation. She recalled another exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, she had visited years earlier on the life and art of Frida Kahlo:

“That was just astonishingly good. There was one room that had lots – some of the casts and prosthetics and stuff that she wore, and she decorated them all up. And I think what I really liked about that is that it showed her immense talent as a woman, as an artist. But the way that it represented her disability was done really well. So it wasn't done, as you know, despite this terrible, tragic thing. It was, she owned it and she bought into her art. And it showed you how she did that”.

In this example, the exhibition contrasted different discourses about disability to illustrate the complex ways that Kahlo experienced life as a disabled woman – for example, contrasting medical interventions such as casts and prosthetics with artistic expression. Niamh argued that the exhibition questioned preconceptions that living with a disability was “this huge tragedy that she had to overcome”.

2.3 Commonalities and differences

The discourses of the ‘objective’ and ‘normative’ museums, as described here, have many characteristics in common; but important points of divergence. Figure 7.2 summaries some of their key features.

Both discourses argue that museums have a role to play in sharing different perspectives to foster constructive discussions in society and combat prejudice. However, they employ different approaches to do this. In the objective museum, the goal is to collect and display a balanced account which affords equal weight to the perspectives of different individuals and communities. However, ‘facts’ derived from scholarly study and research hold a privileged position in framing these different discourses. In the normative museum, the goal is to identify marginalised communities, experiences, and perspectives, and provide a forum for them to reach new audiences. These accounts are given a privileged position in collections and galleries to challenge dominant societal discourses and relationships.

Similarly, both discourses argue that education is a crucial part of the museum’s social role: whether this is teaching the skills and information needed to critically evaluate different perspectives; or raising awareness of social injustice and marginalised voices (in the objective and normative museums, respectively). As such, both discourses afford a significant degree of authority and power to museum staff, who are characterised by the professional skills and experience needed to identify which societal discourses must be collected and displayed. In the objective museums, these discourses are characterised as ‘facts’ which frame different perspectives on a topic; in the normative museum, they are social injustices which must be addressed.

The two discourses diverge in how they approach the issue of representing diversity and different perspectives and experiences in society. In the objective museum, all lived experiences are depicted as equal; while in the normative museum, the focus is on privileging voices which have historically been silenced. This can be explored using the idea of governmentality.

Figure 7.2: Discourse about representation

	'Objective' museum	'Normative' museum
Statements	<p>Museums should be balanced and objective, telling every side of the story</p> <p>They should provide visitors with the facts and skills they need to develop informed opinions</p>	<p>Museums should identify and seek out marginalised voices and present their experiences in the museum</p> <p>They should challenge social discourses which contribute to discrimination</p>
Subjects	<p>Curators should be critical, objective, and motivated by rigorous research</p> <p>Visitors acquire skills to become critical and impartial in social discourse</p>	<p>Curators should be part of movements which challenge social inequality</p> <p>Visitors share and acquire information to challenge preconceptions and stereotypes</p>
Representation	<p>Museum content should show all sides of the story impartially</p>	<p>Museums should champion marginalised voices and show their side of the story</p>

2.4 Governmentality and heterotopia

Foucault (1978a) described ‘governmentality’ as the different assemblages of historically located processes, relationships, and logics which underpin rule and government. These different approaches to governance,

“[Result] on the one hand, in the formation of a whole series of specific governmental apparatuses, and, on the other, in the development of a whole complex of *savoirs*” (Foucault 1978a p103).

As such, they are constituted by different networks of institutions, practices, and forms of knowledge.

In his account of the evolution of the public museum Tony Bennett (1995, 1998, 2020) used Foucault’s work on governmentality to explore how nineteenth and twentieth century museums used classification and exhibitionary practices to encourage visitors to adopt certain ways of governing their own behaviour. He argued that they were,

“Orientated towards the production of a population that would not only be governable but would freely assent to its own governance” (2020 p4).

The discussions of the ‘objective’ and ‘normative’ museums presented in section two engage with relationships between power and knowledge; and its implications for representation and governance of social issues. They depict the museum as a public institution with an opportunity and a responsibility to represent society in ways that would positively contribute to social cohesion. Yet they draw on different governmentalities to characterise their impact on visitors and social behaviour. These are summarised in figure 7.3.

In the ‘objective’ museum, the museum provides balanced accounts of different perspectives and experiences related to a topic; and frames them with ‘facts’ drawn from empirical research. Its goals are to educate visitors about historical and contemporary themes, events, and figures; and beyond this, to develop in visitors a set of ideals –

Figure 7.3 Governmentality in the ‘objective’ and ‘normative’ museums

	Objective	Normative
Mode of representation	Balanced, impartial accounts of both sides of the story Framed by empirical fact	Normative stance on social issues Framed by social inequalities
Impact on social behaviour	Visitors evaluate plural perspectives and draw conclusions	Visitors encounter information which challenges prejudice

balance, impartiality – which encourage them to engage in civic life in a certain way.

On the other hand, Jacqui argued that museums should “stand by what they think is right”. The ‘normative’ museum seeks to identify social injustices, in particular recognition and epistemic injustices in which communities are mis- or underrepresented in societal discourses; or do not have the power to shape their own representation in socio-cultural milieux (Fraser 1995, 2007; Fricker 2007, 2017; explored in the context of museum studies in chapter two). These injustice claims then frame the collection and display of previously marginalised communities, knowledges, and experiences. Its goals are to use education to reduce ignorance in order to combat prejudice and stigma; and to combat prejudicial and exclusionary discourses.

In both discourses, museums play a role in addressing social injustice, prejudice, and marginalisation; but the ‘governmentality’ by which they do so differs. The ‘objective’ museum encourages visitors to engage with social issues in an impartial and empirical way to facilitate debate; while the ‘normative’ museum encourages them to reconsider

their own prejudice and ignorance by presenting them with alternative perspectives on historical and contemporary events and communities.

3. 'Community' at St Fagan's National Museum of History and the National Waterfront Museum

Chapter five explored discourses about community engagement, and the power dynamics and understandings of expertise associated with them. In particular, it argued that, in the interview data, museum staff expressed two competing discourses: one championing community expertise drawn from tacit knowledge and lived experience which characterised curators as 'facilitators' in engagement work; and another privileging expertise derived from professional training, empirical study, and research held by curators. Moreover, they suggested that community engagement was only one way in which AC-MW carried out its civic role. This section is concerned with the different ways that the National Waterfront Museum has positioned itself as serving its community compared to St Fagan's National Museum of History, as expressed by the staff members who work there.

3.1 *The National Waterfront Museum: a community hub for Swansea*

In 2019, the National Waterfront Museum opened a temporary exhibition called '*Pobl*⁶', which highlighted some of the different community groups which met at the museum. John recalled the event fondly:

“The Lord Mayor of Swansea came down and he made a speech, and one of the nicest things he said was he considers this to be Swansea's community centre. He said because so many communities come and use the building”.

He felt that the museum played an important part in civic life in Swansea by welcoming a wide range of groups to use its spaces for a wide range of uses. He shared some examples, including a club for children who used wheelchairs, and ballet classes for refugee children. He argued that these activities brought in “different groups who may

⁶Welsh for 'people'

never go into a museum”; and contributed to the wellbeing of local communities by offering a range of public services.

His colleague Ava shared a similar sentiment. She recalled,

“A lot of people have given feedback that [the National Waterfront Museum] is a bit of a central community-based hub”.

Like John, she gave examples of some of the diverse activities carried out at the museum, many of them developed in and around the Graft Community Garden, a green courtyard in the heart of the museum (shown in figure 7.4). These included,

“A mental health support group for young people, they’re going to start a new project with us in the garden where they’ll sort a manage an area of the garden... we’ve got some young lads who are looking after the bees, they were doing bee keeping skills. And they were from a disengaged unit within the school”.

Figure 7.4: The Graft community garden, National Waterfront Museum (AC-MW 2011)



She explained that her approach to working with communities was about more than just “museum stuff”. She argued that the variety of ways that the museum engaged with its local area were an important part of its identity, saying,

“I think our strengths are the wide variety of events and activities we host. They’re definitely our bread and butter, those things are the things which draw in our local visitors... it does work in terms of our local audience really returning to the site which – a lot of the sites, they don’t have that at all”.

She described the reputation that the museum had developed as a hub for volunteering and community groups, explaining,

“Our name has become really well known for doing this kind of work. Like now with the garden, the volunteer sector in Swansea is always in touch saying, can we get more involved”.

She felt that providing these opportunities for volunteering and hosting different classes and services for community groups was an important part of the museum’s ethos. Reflecting on this, she said,

“I think our ethos has always been – and partly because we’re connected to Swansea Council as well – that we need to fulfil a very specific role here”.

Indeed, Alex recalled how the museum’s relationship with Swansea council had shaped its development. He began by explaining how the council was involved in the funding and oversight of the museum:

“The project to create the museum was not just jointly funded initially by a partnership between Amgueddfa Cymru and Swansea Council, but actually is an ongoing partnership. They put in about 25% of our running costs each year. And there is a partnership limited company, charitable limited company by guarantee not-for-profit and all of that which has its own board comprising of three elected members from Swansea and three trustees from National Museum Wales”.

The development of the National Waterfront Museum was both a key part of AC-MW's industrial strategy and a flagship for regeneration of Swansea's maritime quarter (Mason 2007). As such, it has been associated closely with local government and neighbourhood renewal goals since its inception. Alex recalled his experiences of the museum's early days in 2005:

“The agenda was to get it running and to get it integrated into the cultural life of Swansea... I remember looking – standing up on the first floor looking down at that main hall and thinking what I'd try and do was turn this into the equivalent of a village hall for Swansea”.

This excerpt highlighted the importance of the relationship between the museum and its locale, along with its role as a community hub. Similarly, John felt that the museum's relationship with Swansea Council was important in shaping the character of the site, noting,

“We're in partnership with the city and council of Swansea – I think it's the only national museum in the country that is”.

He also reminisced about the museum's opening months in 2005. He recalled,

“We kind of branched out and became our own thing. We had a new head of the museum, and he had his ideas, and we became more community focussed”.

Like Alex, he felt that the goal of creating a community space shaped the museum and set it apart from other AC-MW sites. As well as providing a hub for community activity, John felt that the museum played a vital role in the local economy:

“We're worth about seven, seven and a half million pound to the local economy. Basically, we're providing a tourist attraction. I suppose as a sort of side-shoot to that now, really, is we're preserving Welsh culture and Welsh history as best we can”.

This statement illustrated the high level of importance John afforded to the museum's economic and regeneration roles.

Alex, John, and Ava all spoke about the importance of local communities in their work. In particular, they argued that the museum provided a hub for local services and volunteering; and contributed to the regeneration of the city and its environs. Furthermore, they argued that this focus on serving local communities set the site apart from other museums in the AC-MW network, making the National Waterfront Museum distinctive in its approach.

3.2 St Fagan's National Museum of History: innovating ways of working

Staff at St Fagan's National Museum of History also reflected on the site's identity within AC-MW. Gareth, Esther, and Eleri all felt that the site had one of the strongest reputations in the museum network. Gareth stated,

“As a brand, it has been argued that St Fagan's is stronger than the whole of Amgueddfa Cymru, if that makes sense”.

They also argued that the site played an important role in innovating new ways of working which were later disseminated across AC-MW. For example, Gareth felt that the site had led the way for other sites with its approach to co-curation with third sector groups. He described the site as “a catalyst for change” and felt that “what we start at St Fagan's usually is adopted or permeates out to other places”.

He gave an example of the Bryn Eryr project, the rebuilding of an Iron Age farmstead from Anglesey. He recalled,

“Over the course of building it we worked with, we had 130, maybe more, volunteers. So that visitors and others had ownership of that building. It was linked to diversifying our volunteers programme. To give opportunities to people who had experienced homelessness or were recovering from drug or alcohol addiction, and so forth. Learning disabilities, and so forth”.

He felt that this project had been at the forefront of work diversifying the demographics of the museum's volunteers.

Esther also felt that St Fagan's National History Museum played a role in leading innovation across AC-MW. Describing it as "one of the flagship constituent museums of Amgueddfa Cymru," she suggested that,

"A lot of ways of working and methodologies that become part of our way of working at St Fagan's have now been rolled out to other sites".

Reflecting on the process of redeveloping the site, which spanned six years and cost £30 million, Eleri argued that the museum had been pioneering new relationships with communities since its inception in the 1940s. In particular, she cited Iorwerth Peate's original vision for the Welsh Folk Museum:

"When we were redeveloping St Fagan's we re-read a lot of Iorwerth Peate's original thinking which was about – perhaps what we would define as Welsh people has changed, but it was about a museum for the people and to be useful to society. So in a way I think there's a strand of it that's always been there".

She felt that Peate's early work focussed on representation of Welsh national identity and stewardship of Wales' material culture and language. She argued that this identity had remained as part of the ethos of the museum, though it had evolved over time:

"It was built as the people's museum. Perhaps the definition of who was represented there was narrow. The redevelopment is on a journey to doing this, to make it a museum that is representative of all the people of Wales".

Like Eleri, Esther felt that Peate's original vision was still relevant to St Fagan's National Museum of History and its ethos as a museum. In particular, she described his work collecting oral histories and objects from rural Welsh communities using questionnaires and events like the National Eisteddfod. She said,

“You can critique and challenge Iorwerth Peate’s original vision, but he was, I guess, a man of his era. And, you know, for him the underrepresented community in National Museum Wales was Welsh speaking, rural Wales. He was, essentially, you could argue, from the prism of his own experiences, decolonising National Museum Wales in that it was a very British sort of colonial looking institution”.

In this excerpt, she drew parallels between Peate’s work to collect and represent culture from rural, Welsh-speaking Wales to present-day work addressing legacies of colonial history in AC-MW’s collections and galleries; and to represent the experiences of marginalised communities. As such, Eleri and Esther both felt that pioneering new ways of working with communities across Wales had been part of St Fagan’s National Museum of History since its inception; and that this made the site distinctive within AC-MW.

3.3 Engaging with communities and origin stories

Reflecting on this discussion, one can identify different discourses about the museum’s social role at different sites with AC-MW. While staff at both sites felt that serving their communities was an important part of their work, they presented different ideas about how this should be achieved. Furthermore, staff at the National Waterfront Museum and St Fagan’s National Museum of History felt that the sites had a distinctive identity within AC-MW; and gave accounts as to how these identities were bound in the ‘origin stories’ of the two sites. These discourses are summarised in figure 7.5.

Staff at the National Waterfront Museum felt that the diverse array of public services, community activities, and volunteering opportunities hosted at the site were an important part of how they served a productive role in the social and political landscape.

Ava, in particular, argued that the museum was about more than “just museum stuff”, contributing to public life by using its resources to support local causes. This ranged from regular volunteering groups in the Graft Community Garden to hosting large events like LGBTQ+ Pride.

Figure 7.5: Community engagement identities at NWM and NHM

	National Waterfront Museum	National Museum of History
Social role	Community hub	Representing diversity
Origins	Relationship with Swansea council	Iorwerth Peate's vision
Practices	Diverse outreach activities	Co-collection, co-curation

While staff at St Fagan's National Museum of History also discussed volunteering opportunities, they attributed greater emphasis to developing diverse representation in the collection and displays by carrying out co-collection and co-curation activities with a wide range of partners. This was typified by the participatory methods employed in the redevelopment of the site. Eleri recalled,

“We created what we called at the time participatory forums. So they were forums of community partners and young people who stayed with the project”.

Indeed, Eleri and Esther both felt that the participatory forums and partnerships with community groups (including Mencap and Scope) were an important part of how the site served its social role as a public institution.

Despite the differences in these accounts of community work in the museum, both drew on narratives about the origins of their site as an explanatory factor. At the National Waterfront Museum, staff felt that the site's relationship with Swansea Council from the outset of the museum had shaped its approach to providing a community hub for Swansea and its surrounding areas. Similarly, staff at St Fagan's National Museum of History drew on discourses around Iorwerth Peate and his role in founding the site to

support their framing of community work as a way of protecting Welsh culture and presenting Welsh voices.

The two discourses have different implications for disability representation in the museum. At the National Waterfront Museum, staff engaged with disability groups by hosting community groups like Whizz Kids, a charity from children who use wheelchairs. On the other hand, staff redeveloping St Fagan's National Museum of History invited disability charities to contribute to planning processes and decisions. Eleri explained,

“We realised that the staff team didn't have this expertise, actually. So Vision Sense are people, it's an organisation run by disabled people to make access in all its different forms part of initiatives and projects. So that's their specialism”.

These examples represent the sites' different approaches to engaging with disabled communities: providing community spaces and public services; and consulting with disability communities in decision-making process, respectively.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has considered some of the different ways that staff and visitors spoke about the museum's social role in the focus group and interview data. In doing so, it has highlighted some points of consensus and contention as to how AC-MW should interact with its surrounding communities. Notably, it was a point of unanimous agreement that the museum had a responsibility to contribute to civic life in Wales. Participants argued that its public funding and its perceived identity as a place of public learning provided both an opportunity and a responsibility.

However, there was disagreement as to what this role should be. Participants shared different ideas of what responsible representation in general, and disability representation in particular, would look like. Some felt that museums had a responsibility to provide a balanced, neutral account of historical and contemporary issues to foster social debate. Others felt that they should take a stance on issues of social exclusion and discrimination, contributing their own opinion to such debates.

Furthermore, staff at individual sites within AC-MW shared different accounts of the activities they carried out to meet their responsibilities as a civic institution. For example, the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea characterised itself as a community hub, providing facilities for a broad range of community groups including gardening and apiculture; while St Fagan's National Museum of History considered representation to be an important part of their social remit, particularly increasing diversity in their collection and interpretation.

Chapters five, six, and seven have presented a complex picture of communication and representation in museum practices and spaces, drawing out and analysing key themes from the interview and focus group data. Chapter eight will reflect on these discussions, along with reflections on existing literature from chapters two, to draw some conclusions across this thesis; and to sketch out the contribution this project hopes to make to existing academic literature.

Conclusion

1. Introduction

This project set out to explore different factors and processes influencing the co-creation of meaning in museum collections, galleries, and activities. Using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, it discussed some of the frameworks of knowledge and technologies and relationships of production used to develop interpretations. Chapters five and six considered how museum professionals develop collections and exhibitions; and how visitors encountered and interpreted gallery content. As such, it understood the 'messages' shared by museums as a collaborative achievement including curators, visitors, and wider societal discourse.

In particular, it was concerned with how AC-MW represented disability and disabled communities. This included reflections on the museum's collection and catalogue, a temporary exhibition on disability in historical mining communities, and representation in social history and art galleries. Like other research in this area, it found that disability representation was largely absent from AC-MW's galleries. Visitors at National Museum Cardiff and St Fagan's National Museum of History argued that disabled people were conspicuously absent from displays; and that this reproduced experiences of marginalisation they experienced in everyday life.

At the National Waterfront Museum, a prosthetic leg on display provided an interesting case study. In some cases, the prosthetic and its interpretation started conversations about scientific progress and creative expression. For others, it reproduced discourses which centre medical interventions in experiences of disability and neglect its social and civil rights dimensions. These discussions raise questions about museums' relationship with societal discourses in general, and stereotypes and prejudice in particular; and whether current practice challenged or reproduced current imbalances in power/knowledge.

It also identified two competing perceptions of how museums should approach representation in their practice. One discourse argued that museums in general, and AC-

MW specifically, should employ a partisan approach to this work, challenging prejudice and social exclusion by privileging counternarratives about marginalised communities. The other argued that museums should present a balanced account of historical and contemporary societal constituted of 'facts' created through rigorous empirical research. These different discourses were expressed by staff and visitors alike; and show that the social role of the museum remains a subject of debate.

Similarly, the role of community engagement in developing collections and interpretations was contested within the data. While all staff participants considered it an important part of their work, they offered different accounts of what it should achieve. For some, it provided a valuable knowledge framework which could be employed to develop more nuanced, insightful interpretations of artefacts. For others, it was a technology for fostering community development by developing visitors' evaluation and communication skills and providing a forum for societal debate. While these accounts were not mutually exclusive, they expressed different discourses about the nature of 'expertise' and how it should be employed in museums.

This chapter will consider some key themes which characterise this thesis. First, it discusses the perceived absence of disability representation and its relationship with societal discourse. Second, it discusses how accounts of community engagement related to processes of 'encoding' in museum practice. Third, it considers how complex, personal perceptions of the nature of disability influenced 'decoding' and co-creation of meaning in gallery spaces.

Following this it will reflect on the limitations of this project and suggest areas for improvement or future research; and finally, it will provide some personal reflections on the research.

2. Key themes

2.1 Absence of disability representation

As discussed in chapter two, previous research has argued that disabled people are underrepresented in the majority of museums. For example, Annie Delin (2002) observed,

“The absence of disabled people as creators of art, in images and in artefacts, and their presence in selected works reinforcing cultural stereotypes, conspire to present a narrow perspective of the existence of disability in history” (p84).

Delin argued that portrayals of disabled people are largely absent from UK museums; and that when they occur, they are limited to a small number of societal roles like ‘freaks’ and ‘beggars’. These practices reproduced negative stereotypes of disabled people as helpless or unable to contribute to society. Patricia Roque Martins’ (2018) doctoral research in Portuguese museums found these tropes were reflected and reproduced in museum interpretation of disability objects. Ana Carden-Coyle (2010) suggested that “disability maintains a powerful absence” (p69) in war museums, in particular, where displays engaged with narratives of death and injury but omitted representations of people disabled in conflicts.

Similarly, this project found that disabled people were underrepresented at AC-MW. Several visitors observed that stories about disability were absent from the museum’s galleries. For example, Michael said,

“It’s a missing thread of the story at the moment. And in terms of representing and explaining how people lived and died, both as individuals, but also there’s things about Wales, like the mining communities, why they were such strong communities”.

He suggested that this omission neglected some of the nuances which characterised South Wales’ mining communities, in particular. He felt that narratives about disability offered an insight into miners’ “hard, brutal lives” on the one hand; and “mutual aid and support” on the other. As such, omitting stories of acquiring and adapting to disability neglected important facets of these historical communities.

Harriet and Gabby argued that the absence of disabled people in the museum’s displays perpetuated the marginalisation of disabled people in society. Reflecting on her visit to AC-MW’s art gallery, Harriet felt that the artworks on display were focused on wealthy elites and did not engage with ideas around disability. She suggested the museum was,

“Narrowing down the perspective that you’re suggesting deserves to be heard. And you’re, at least indirectly, silencing the sort of perspectives of people who really don’t need the extra help in being silenced”.

Gabby shared a similar sentiment regarding the social history galleries at St Fagan’s National Museum of History. She argued,

“Disabled people have always been here, disabled people always will be here. We are marginalised because we’ve been pushed to the margins. We’re not included in the main text. We shouldn’t be a footnote”.

In both interviews, participants felt that disability representation was absent from AC-MW’s galleries; and that accessibility barriers they experienced as wheelchair users made them feel disregarded and unwelcome. Again, these discursive statements reproduced patterns of social exclusion from their everyday lives.

Staff participants described how disability was underrepresented in the documentation accompanying the museum’s collections. Esther recalled,

“I mean, it was just, I think, encountering collections that were so silent in storage... things like an invalid chair, you know, catalogued under wheeled vehicles”.

She argued that disability was represented by artefacts in the collection; but that these connections were not reflected in the information stored alongside them. She described how a piece of research in collaboration with a UK university had identified new links between disability and objects in the collection. However, she explained how the legacy of this work had been limited due to other museum priorities. She explained,

“A lot of the work we did with the collections that we have happened when the gallery content [at the new St Fagan’s National Museum of History galleries] had already been decided upon. So I’m not sure if you were a disabled person today going through our galleries that you would be, immediately be able find, actually, things that would resonate with your own experiences”.

As such, she reflected that the project had a limited impact on representation in the museum’s galleries.

In their 2005 study, Jocelyn Dodd et al found,

“There is, among curators, both a lack of consensus about the significance and importance of these issues, coupled with a level of anxiety about how to display and interpret the material, which results in inaction” (p15-16).

This did not seem to be the case in Esther’s account. Indeed, she felt that using the museum’s collection to better represent disabled people was important in her work. In her experience, disability remain underrepresented because of other pressures on her workload which had been afforded a higher priority by the museum at large – in particular, the redevelopment of St Fagan’s National Museum of History. Because of the time scales involved – she explained that gallery content was decided years in advance of their public opening – her work with the collections fell by the wayside. This illustrates how institutional frameworks and ways of working impact on ‘encoding’ meaning into gallery spaces.

As such, this project found evidence that AC-MW reproduced societal discourse about disability in its galleries. In particular, it perpetuated ‘rules of exclusion’ which prohibit talking about experiences of disability. Tom Shakespeare (1994) argued that disability is often hidden because of societal anxieties about the loss of health and independence. He wrote,

“Able-bodied people are perpetually anxious to deny their own mortality and physicality, and disabled people are the group onto whom these difficult feelings are projected” (p269).

This could perhaps offer insight into why experiences of disability were omitted from accounts of industry, agriculture, and everyday life in Welsh history.

2.2 Encoding and community engagement

Previous research has discussed the role of community engagement in bringing disability representation into museums. For example, Harriet Shepley and Bridget Teller (2018) explored work at the Royal College of Physicians, in which disabled people co-curated an exhibition of 17th-19th century portraits; and Jennifer Hunt (2022) analysed case-studies of co-production of exhibitions at the Science Museum, Museum of Liverpool, and

National Disability Arts Collection and Archive. These contributions illustrate how co-production can incorporate lived experiences of disability into interpretation; and in doing so, better represent disabled communities, and what disability can tell us about what it means to be human.

This research has sought to add an account of how curators use community engagement to 'encode' meaning into their practice. Several participants' accounts, and indeed AC-MW's policy documents, similarly argued that communities can share different perspectives on artefacts and narratives, grounded in different types of 'expertise'. Bringing these interpretations into the museum can make displays more representative and present novel, insightful counternarratives. Bashir explained,

“We had a Sudanese love doll which was I think donated to the museum. But we really didn't know or understand about the whole context, the story behind the doll. So one of the things we wanted to do was touch base with the Sudanese community”.

Working with community members expanded the museum's understanding of the doll and its cultural context.

However, accounts of community engagement at the National Waterfront Museum, in particular, focussed on its role to develop skills, wellbeing, and social cohesion in its geographical community. For example, John characterised community engagement as providing facilities for a range of local event, groups, and services:

“The Lord Mayor of Swansea came down and he made a speech, and one of the nicest things he said was he considers this to be Swansea's community centre. He said because so many communities come and use the building”.

He argued that this work was important to developing social networks and valuable skills within different community groups from the Swansea area.

On the other hand, when Gareth discussed St Fagan's National Museum of History volunteering program and its role in pioneering engaged practice, he focussed on “good examples of us engaging and using participatory methods”. While the two sites both understand community engagement as comprising providing community services and

coproducing museum content, they afforded a different weighting to these strands of work. Chapter seven argued that these cultural differences are rooted in the sites' processes of development: staff at St Fagan's National Museum of History discussed the importance of Iorwerth Peate's legacy of working with Welsh communities, while staff at the National Waterfront museum cited the museum's close relationship with Swansea council.

As such, there was disagreement as to how curators should go about co-producing collections and displays. In particular, the degree of power given over to community groups in developing interpretation was a point of contestation. Esther described her own experience of changing approaches to curatorial work:

“... more of a growing acceptance that knowledge is a two-way thing, and in the case of social history collections, that curators are only one part of the story, that really knowledge is out there and we are more really facilitators, I would argue, rather than being, you know, the font of all knowledge”.

She argued that changes at AC-MW in particular, and the museum sector in general, considered tacit, cultural, and lived experience information held by communities to be an important source of knowledge. Consequently, museum practice sought to share decision-making power with communities when developing collections and interpretations. For example, Eleri argued that communities had been asked to make important decision in the redevelopment of St Fagan's National Museum of History; and that this way of working was gaining increasing traction at AC-MW.

Alex shared a different perspective on this change. He argued,

“If you don't keep your eye on that historical fact, historical narrative, and just say, well, if fifteen people who've never really looked at it but are just dealing with hearsay think that and therefore we need to support that and build it into our displays. I think that's a dereliction of duty, really”.

He was concerned that devolving power to communities could undermine the museum's ability to provide balanced, 'factual' accounts of history; and in doing so, lessen its authority as an educational institution. While he supported community engagement, he

felt that interpretation should remain the purview of curators, who were equipped with professional skills and experience to support empirical research and reflexive evaluation of sources.

In the focus group, in particular, visitors supported Alex's argument. For example, Jo stated,

“You need to get the facts right, and sometimes you need a little bit of distance in order to present the facts. So in some ways it depends on whether an exhibition is looking at the facts of what has happened, or the lived experience of what has happened”.

This excerpt illustrates the discursive distinction she drew between ‘facts’ and ‘lived experience’. Indeed, several participants argued that when they visited the museum, they expected to encounter objective, factual information.

These accounts reflect different ideas about what constitutes ‘knowledge’ in the museum. Following Foucault (1971), one can identify different systems of exclusion and inclusion at work, prescribing what types of ‘expertise’ should be displayed in galleries. Further research could explore how these discursive rules shape how the museum reproduces prevalent discourses about disability.

2.3 Decoding and disability representation

The ‘encoding/decoding’ model provided a productive framework for understanding how meaning is co-created in museum galleries. In particular, it emphasised visitor agency in constituting a ‘meaningful’ interpretation of objects and text on display. Responses to the prosthetic leg on display at the National Waterfront Museum, in particular, illustrated how different readings of a display should not be written off as ‘misunderstandings’. Chapter six described how Nick, Niamh, and Jo all identified that the prosthetic had been framed as an artefact of medical history. However, they all drew on different personal experiences and societal discourses to understand what the display ‘meant’ to them. For Nick, it represented progress in the form and function of prosthetics and positive impacts on people’s lives. For Niamh, it represented societal discourses which privilege medical aspects of disability and neglect civil rights dimensions. And for Jo, it represented that

historical industry had often resulted in injury and required medical support. These interpretations began with a common theme but drew different conclusions.

Different perceptions of what it meant to be disabled were an influential factor in these ‘decoding’ processes. All participants agreed that the built environment and societal prejudices shaped the challenges they faced in everyday life. In particular, several participants expressed a belief that the barriers and challenges faced by disabled people in navigating social spaces and interactions were invisible to non-disabled people. For example, Gabby argued that,

“I can guarantee that the majority of the population, it’s never even occurred to them”.

Tom similarly felt,

“People don't think about disabled people unless you're disabled or you know someone who's disabled. I find the general public don't think about disabled people”.

However, they gave different accounts of how their disability affected their sense of self-identity. For Niamh, it was a part of her identity, alongside her gender:

“What matters to me, my identity – anything about women and their role in society, I’m interested in that. If there had been something about disabled people and their role in society, that would also have been of interest to me”.

On the other hand, Chris argued that disability affected his life but not his sense of self:

“Rugby's like a big part of my life. And, you know, like, I have that connection; and [my disability] is something that's happened to me”.

These different accounts illustrate Foucault’s ‘technologies of self’ – processes by which an individual comes to understand and govern themselves. Niamh, Chris, and Tom located themselves within different discourses about disability. This influenced the sort of representation they wanted to see in the museum. Niamh argued that AC-MW should include more narratives about disability in their permanent galleries and temporary exhibitions, referencing examples she had seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum,

London; while Chris suggested that disability representation should focus on individual achievements, including information about their disability where relevant.

These responses illustrated the diversity of ‘disabled communities’. The experience of living with a disability differs from person to person based on a multitude of factors including financial resources, types of impairment, age, race, and many others. Furthermore, it is affected by how an individual understands the nature of disability and their own identity as a disabled person.

They also reflected the complexity of communication in museum galleries. When a visitor encounters a display, they constitute its meaning. This is shaped by how museum professionals have ‘encoded’ meaning through their choice of objects, layout of galleries, and interpretative text; but also by wider societal discourse. This poses a challenge for museums who intend to challenge stereotypes and prejudice with their work.

3. Limitations and future work

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, and associated regulations on movement and interaction, halted data collection early. As such, the project did not include as many interviews as originally intended. A higher number of interviews would have the potential to reflect further on the diversity of disability experiences; and on further accounts of museum practice. Indeed, a second cohort of interviews could explore the impact of changes in the museum since data collection was conducted. For example, signage at St Fagan’s National Museum of History now suggests wheelchair accessible routes around the park, and an access ramp was built at the National Museum Cardiff in 2023. Also in 2023, AC-MW published ‘*A Charter for Decolonising Amgueddfa Cymru’s Collection*’ (AC-MW 2023) to express its commitment to using community engagement practice to address colonial discourses and power dynamics embodied in the sorts of objects and documentation comprising its collections. The museum’s current strategy, published in 2022, states,

“In an ambitious and exciting programme, we’ll work with people and communities to decide what we collect for the future so that we represent more diverse stories in Wales’ national collections” (AC-MW 2022 p14).

Further interviews could explore how these changes affected visitor experiences of the museums; and staff approaches to community expertise.

The photographs produced in visitor interviews provided a useful *aide memoire* and gave participants the ability to structure and shape our discussions. As such, they contributed positively to the research; and achieved the goals set out for them in the research design. However, in hindsight, there was a missed opportunity to analyse these images further. For example, why did participants choose to photograph what they did? And how did they choose to frame this images? All of the visitors to the National Waterfront Museum photographed the prosthetic leg on display; but they framed the image differently. Some captured other objects in the cabinet and interpretive text alongside it, while others focused on the prosthetic itself. Future work could explore these choices and what they indicate about the 'decoding' process.

It would also be interesting to explore encoding/decoding in the context of a community engagement project. In particular, such work could explore how participants drew on societal discourses to understand historical narratives and contemporary identities; and how discursive rules of inclusion and exclusion affected the museum's ability to act as a 'heterotopia'. For example, it could engage with how participants discursively constituted working definitions of 'facts'. In the interviews and focus group session, staff and visitors alike argued that museums should present historical 'facts' rather than subjective accounts of history. Further work could deconstruct this discursive distinction and explore these different expectations of museum practice. The cache of 'disability objects' identified in Esther's review of the museum's collection may be an interesting case study for this work.

4. Final reflections

Parts of this project have felt intensely personal and emotive. For example, I have found the process of exploring societal discourses about disability, the discursive rules which frame what society can and cannot say about it, and 'technologies of self' used to locate one-self in these discourses as a disabled person have often felt very 'close to home'. Having lived with a brain malformation since birth and a brain injury for nine years (to date), I have at times had to manage my personal subjectivities to avoid data analysis

becoming a personal polemic. I hope that through reflexive practice I have been able to honour participants' accounts of their experiences and perspectives.

Reflecting on the project, I believe that this personal link enabled me to engage with research participants by providing a rapport upon which we could build during interviews. As discussed in chapter four, interviews are collaborative in nature with data co-constructed between researcher and participant. While it is not my intention to suggest that a non-disabled researcher could not have established meaningful rapport with the disabled people who participated in this project, in my experience shared experiences of impairment, medical intervention, and societal barriers and perceptions provided a foundation for talking candidly and openly about complex topics. Participants shared not only their opinions but their emotions. For example, Gabby expressed heartfelt frustration when she said,

“It makes me angry. And I wouldn't have thought about it if we weren't having this discussion. And that itself makes me angry”.

She explained how lack of disability representation in the galleries she visited made her angry because it contributed to the marginalisation of disabled people and their experiences. Furthermore, she was angry because it felt “so normal” for disabled people to be absent from accounts of historical and contemporary society.

Similarly, Tom spoke emotively about how impairment had affected his life:

“I'd rather get up and walk. It's weird, I dream a lot, and in my dreams I'm always working or doing some physical activity. I'm never disabled in my dreams”.

It is my contention that our shared identification as 'disabled' contributed to this candour; especially considering that both Gabby and Tom expressed their belief that non-disabled people did not think about the challenges they faced in society. As such, I have tried throughout this project to work reflexively – not only to recognise the impact of my own subjectivities, but also maximise the benefits of this rapport.

As in previous research regarding disability in museums, many participants felt strongly that museums can and *should* challenge stereotypes and prejudices; but that in practice, they reproduced these discourses. What this project had sought to add to this discussion

is an engagement with complex processes of communication museum practice, and how they contribute to this obdurate problem.

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Appendix Research Participants

Museum staff	
<i>Primary location⁷</i>	<i>Pseudonym</i>
St Fagan's National Museum of History	Esther
	Eleri
	Matthew
	Gareth
	Lowri
	Luke
National Museum Cardiff	Bashir
	Jacqui
National Waterfront Museum	John
	Alex
	Ava
	Isaac ⁸
	Juliet

Visitors	
<i>Museum visited</i>	<i>Pseudonym</i>
St Fagan's National Museum of History	Gabby
	Michael
	Rhian
National Museum Cardiff	Simon
	Harriet
	Ryan
National Waterfront Museum, Swansea	Jared
	Nick
	Tom
	Laura
	Jo
	Niamh
	Chris

Focus group	
<i>Staff</i>	<i>Visitors</i>
Alex	Jared
John	Jo
Gareth	Nick
Luke	

⁷ This indicates where they are based the majority of the time; there is some movement of staff across sites.

⁸ Isaac is usually based at a UK university.