



“People just need to feel important, like someone is listening”: Recognising museums’ community engagement programmes as spaces of care



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 October 2012

Received in revised form 4 April 2013

Available online 11 May 2013

Keywords:

Museums

Care

Gender

Community engagement

Outreach

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ways in which spaces of care are produced within museums. In particular, this paper investigates community engagement, a relatively underexplored facet of museum practice in the UK. Community engagement is often understood as a way for museums to engage with those individuals, groups and communities who do not or cannot regularly visit museums. Goals for community engagement programmes range from the short-term, for example the creation of a body of knowledge around an object from a museum’s collection, through to the long-term, for example the cultivation of a relationship between local communities and the museums service. The paper draws upon a period of ethnographic research undertaken with Glasgow Museums – the city of Glasgow’s municipal museum service. I use the example of community engagement as a means of interrogating the spaces of care produced within museums. I argue that museums are ideal places within which to create caring spaces and yet clear problems arise when the caring that is done within museums is not recognised as such. I also argue that ideas about women’s ability to cultivate and sustain care relationships are reproduced in museum settings.

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1. Introduction

Writing in the early 1990s, Hooper-Greenhill (1994: 1) provocatively argued that “the balance of power is shifting in museums, from those who care for objects to include, and often prioritise, those who care for people”. Of course, museums have always been seen as places where objects are collected and cared for, and yet little attention has been paid to the ways in which museums might also function as places where *people* are cared for (for exceptions see Silverman, 2002, 2010). Hooper-Greenhill’s (1994) words are the ideal starting point for this paper, which draws together a range of relevant literatures from a variety of disciplines – including critical museum studies, geography, sociology and gender studies – in order to argue for the re-consideration of the museum as a space of care.

In recent work on the geographies of care, close attention has been paid to those unremarkable, everyday spaces that might facilitate care (Little, 2012; Parr, 2007, 2008). For example, Laws (2009) has focused on public parks as spaces of care, whilst Warner et al. (2013) have focused on cafés. Other research has investigated the caring that is done within institutions (particularly state institutions) and organizations (Askew 2009; Bondi and Fewell, 2003;

Conradson, 2003a,b; Darling, 2011). Conradson (2003b) has written of a Bristol drop-in centre, illuminating the ways in which caring relationships are facilitated by, and expressed within, the space of the drop-in. This flourishing body of literature seeks to understand “the material and psycho-social dimensions of care” (Conradson, 2003a: 451), and the physical and affective labours that are constitutive of caring relationships.

To date, geographers’ engagements with museums have been sporadic (for a summary see Geoghegan, 2010). Geographers’ preoccupation with the materiality of museums means that there has been relatively little commitment to understanding the museum as a forum for communication. Recent work within critical museum studies regarding museums’ ‘other’ activities – those activities that fall outwith the practices of collection, preservation and display, such as museum education, community engagement and outreach – has, however, emphasised that museums are important sites of social interaction (Crooke, 2006; Silverman, 2002, 2010). This body of work also interrogates museums’ entanglement within a variety of governmental agendas, particularly social policy agendas pertaining to social inclusion, health and wellbeing (Ander et al., 2011; Chatterjee and Noble, 2009; Sandell, 2002).

This paper attempts two things: first, to advance the claim that museums are spaces where caring is ‘done’, and second, to sketch out the formations that care takes within museums, using one facet of museum practice – community engagement – as exemplar. The focus of this paper falls predominantly on the relationships

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that are forged within museums' community engagement sessions, and the extent to which these could be considered caring relationships. My discussion of these issues is empirically centred on Glasgow Museums, the city of Glasgow's civic museum service.¹

The discussion that follows is structured into five sections. First, I offer an introduction to the research project from which the bulk of this material is taken. Second, I consider some of the ways in which geographers have sought to understand care, in a bid to draw attention to the often-unusual, yet resolutely ordinary, spaces that may facilitate care. The third section focuses upon community engagement in museums: I outline the theory that underpins this particular form of community engagement, and the UK policy landscape within which it is emplaced. The fourth section draws on empirical material collected during my time volunteering for Glasgow Museums, and is designed to give the reader some idea of what community engagement entails; in this section, I illuminate the sometimes-hectic nature of community engagement sessions via a series of thickly descriptive ethnographic vignettes. I then turn to an examination of the gendering of community engagement, arguing that like within many broadly caring occupations, widely-held assumptions about women's supposed innate ability to care serve to devalue the caring work that is done in this context. I also consider the caring work of men in this section, and illuminate the difficulties faced by men who do so-called women's work (Lewis and Simpson, 2007). In the concluding section, I reflect more broadly on museums – and community engagement settings in particular – as caring environments.

2. Glasgow Museums and the Curious project

This paper draws on a 15-month period of ethnographic research conducted as part of a project concerning the implementation of social inclusion within Glasgow Museums. Between spring 2010 and spring 2011, I volunteered with Glasgow Museums on a community engagement project entitled Curious.² Curious had a broadly four-part structure, consisting of: a training programme for museum volunteers working with issues of cultural diversity, a community exhibition, a conference for museum professionals concerned with community engagement and a schools programme themed around citizenship. I volunteered primarily on the training programme, and also interviewed a cross-section of Glasgow Museums staff as part of my ethnography.³

The Curious project was based at St. Mungo's Museum of Religious Life and Art – a venue located in Glasgow city centre, and administered by Glasgow Museums – but involved collaboration with other groups around the city, including local colleges and community groups. As a volunteer on Curious, I helped to plan, implement and evaluate community engagement sessions, wherein we sought to gather participants' input to the volunteer training programme. I was encouraged to volunteer on the Curious programme by the then-head of Glasgow Museums' Learning and Access Department. My fellow facilitators were made aware of my status as volunteer/researcher, and I was trained in the same way as other volunteers. In the first community engagement session, I was introduced as a volunteer researcher from the University of Edinburgh, however as sessions progressed my status as researcher tended to fade into the background. In keeping with

university ethics guidelines, I was clear about my dual role whilst volunteering on Curious; however, I often found myself in situations similar to those outlined by Darling (2011) in his work on The Talking Shop drop-in in Sheffield. Darling (2011: 409) writes of his volunteer/researcher role, that “there were points at which reinstating this position felt uncomfortable, points at which breaking out of the conversation to clarify one's position would have undone the affective and emotional work of care in these interactions”.

Community engagement sessions are characterised by a high degree of heterogeneity, and some – though by no means all – of the participants engaged by Glasgow Museums could be considered vulnerable; Curious recruited participants through local colleges, so college students participated alongside English Speakers of Other Languages (hereafter, ESOL) learners. Facilitators did not have access to detailed information about individual participants,⁴ and so Glasgow Museums were uneasy about allowing me to interview individual participants. I respected this decision on their part as I too felt it was important not to encroach too much on the personal ‘space’ of participants in sessions. However as sessions progressed, the rapport I formed with some participants led to a high degree of trust and intimacy. As a result of this, interactions with participants are reported as field vignettes, reflecting the organic nature of the relationships that evolved between myself and some of the participants in sessions.

Of course the hybrid role that I played within sessions required engagement with the debates articulated most coherently by feminist geographers about the ways in which our presence as researchers may impact on the research setting. This is of particular concern within ethnographic research, indeed O'Reilly (2009: 12) has written of the “participant-observer oxymoron”, a neat phrase that aptly describes the tension between observing and creating ethnographic data through participation. Despite careful preparation, my dual role raised unexpected questions about my positionality, and about the way in which I might inhabit what Katz (1994: 67) has called “a space of *betweenness*”. The concept of reflexivity has been discussed at length by geographers in recent years (Rose, 1997), and its use advocated as a means of making visible the slippages and tensions that may arise as part of our immersion in the field. As should be clear from the empirical data presented, I attempt at all times to draw attention to my positionality, or to keep myself ‘in view’; I do this in order to make clear that the encounters presented here are partial views, drawn from my time immersed within a complex, fast-paced and messy research environment.

3. Care, gender and museums: understanding the links

When thinking about care, I am drawn to Milligan and Wiles' (2010: 737) definition: they state that “care is the provision of practical and emotional support”. The burgeoning of scholarship on care reminds us that we should be cautious in our use of the word ‘care’: some scholars find the language of care unhelpful, as it casts the ‘recipient’ of care in a passive role (Oliver, 2002). This is particularly the case when thinking about children, the elderly and disabled (Milligan, 2003). Milligan and Wiles (2010) also point out that some carers consider all care as work – whether they are paid for their care or not – whilst others find this definition distasteful, preferring to understand care as a gift, or something done out of altruism, friendship or love. To further complicate matters, care relationships are often understood as uni-directional (i.e. one person cares for another), yet Wiles (2003) refutes this, arguing that care relationships

¹ Somewhat confusingly, Glasgow Museums' collections are publicly owned, but Glasgow Museums itself is part of an arms-length company (called Glasgow Life), that was created in 2007, in order to manage cultural services on behalf of Glasgow City Council.

² See Munro (2013) and Strachan and Mackey (2013) for further analysis of Curious.

³ Throughout my time volunteering on the Curious project, I kept a research diary in which I recorded my observations. Both interview material and field notes/field vignettes appear in the empirical sections of this paper. All names are pseudonyms.

⁴ It is worth noting however that college staff were on hand throughout sessions, and they had access to the detailed profiles of participants.

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