Setting the Foundation from Within:

*Phenomenology and Human Rights – Museum Staff Perspectives and Impact*

A paper prepared for spoken presentation

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*Alexandre Christopher opened the presentation.*

Our paper queries the influence of curatorial staff on access and human rights advocacy, focusing on an *idea*; that personal understandings of human rights may affect and define the role of the curator, and therefore the exhibition products they create and present.

We have explored this concept briefly as a pilot project. We aim to start a dialogue about the possibilities of our concept. For this pilot we interviewed four curators about their understanding of human rights and how they see it impacts their work. We have also
considered the emerging trends that flow from this pilot enquiry: that being the themes of museum staff self-awareness, a possible “us” and “them” dichotomy and the idea that access is an all ways engagement.

Our intention is to spark a conversation and to perhaps point to you the curator or museum staff member about the human decision maker in the human rights museum and exhibition context. We additionally posit that access and inclusiveness flows from the appeal of the exhibition, which is built by the individual human-curator (and other staff). Essentially, there is a clear line between human curator, exhibition product (its content and delivery), its appeal to the public, and therefore, access and engagement. A strong Human Rights ethic and presentation in the Museum starts with the staff and their human rights sympathies.

Staff in this sector, as we’re all aware, have a great responsibility to promote culture and cultures, which is achieved through collection management, programming and exhibitions; these products, reflect and represent an aspect of community, humanity and its history. Yet, there’s always an element of selection from the curator, and we as the public trust it, which influences a museum’s programming. Curators wield a powerful position on behalf the nation, the state and community they represent and we are proposing that their individual understanding of human rights, their individual topic interest areas and their human partialities for certain narratives, are the foundations upon which a museum or exhibition reaches or appeals to an audience, or tells a story in a certain way.
Our idea is that for a museum to be truly human rights aware, cognisance of the individuals in the staffing structure and their understanding of human rights perhaps should be considered. This may then provide greater awareness of the cornerstone that is human rights and ethics; the contemporary museum institution is built on.

Our title is - Setting the Foundation from Within: Phenomenology and Human Rights – Museum Staff Perspectives and Impact.

What do we mean by phenomenology? A somewhat standard definition of the term is the “philosophical study of the structures of experience and consciousness.”

And for this study, it relates to the individual curator’s experiences, awareness and conscious thoughts being potential factors to their role as promoters of culture and human rights matters.

Gabriella Farina writes, “A unique and final definition of phenomenology is dangerous and perhaps even paradoxical... In fact, it is not a doctrine, nor a philosophical school, but rather a style of thought, a method, an open and ever-renewed experience having different results…” The tenor of this quote has some relationship to the term human rights, something that is perhaps indefinable and only best understood as an individual perspective.

Methods & Limitations

Four curators were interviewed who work in varied areas: public art museum/gallery, an independent curator, a community art gallery and a social history museum curator. There were two males and two females interviewed. Each have connections to North Queensland

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where we are situated and the participants have worked across the world and have varied educational backgrounds.

It was initially intentioned to interview staff from all areas of the museum, but for the purpose of the pilot the curator was selected for comparison and as they are (usually) key drivers of exhibition content. All methods were created within the limitations of the twenty-minute presentation for the FIHRM conference. This paper is considered a pilot project and is written with a mind to be open to feedback from conference delegates and others reading the paper; the aim is to broaden the project herein.

Three interviews were conducted via email, one in person and then transcribed.

The following questions were asked of the four participants.

1. What’s your understanding/definition of human rights?

Here we wondered to what extent curators would think in similar terms or not reinforcing our phenomenology approach.

2. How much does human rights affect/define your role as a curator? Would you say incorporating elements of human rights is vital to you in your role?

This question was to elicit a solid platform from which to ask the rest of the questions.

3. In which areas would you say human rights affect your work as a curator?

This was to see the awareness of the interviewee and the intersections of where they see human rights and their work.

4. Where do you feel that your personal ideas about human rights might intersect with the choices you make in developing exhibitions and art activities?

This is question gets to the heart of our inquiry.

5. Broadly speaking, to what extent do you feel that the exhibition product is an expression of human rights matters? And to what extent do you feel that this is influenced by staff/curators who develop the products?
Here we were questioning that if a curator creates exhibitions and builds collections, and they are aware that their personal ideas of human rights flow into their work, then exhibitions are essentially a trickle down from the individual curator’s perspective.

6. What is your understanding/definition of access in developing exhibition products? Do you consider that there are more ways than one for the public to have access to the exhibition product?

This question aimed to link the idea that the content of the exhibition might be an access point for audiences.

The following is a selection of some of the responses.

1. What’s your understanding/definition of human rights?

One respondent sharply responded that the definition and understanding is different.

“I think the definition of human rights differs from an understanding of it. Legal definitions set out basic rights for individuals under laws and charters and, unfortunately, despite statements of their universality even in the most progressive of countries these fundamental rights and values differ. So Australia is a signatory to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights whereas the United States is not, and fundamentally that means that two developed western nations take a differing view on human rights, Voltaire and Magna Carta notwithstanding. I personally define human rights as those fundamental rights that affect a person’s ability or capacity for the free expression of individual life. This then expands into issues of education, healthcare, hunger, economics, religion, wealth or other issues. I think that we think of the fundamentals as human rights – if it affects a person’s dignity we think it is a right, whereas if it affects a person’s more broadly based capacity to express, we somehow think it is something else. I disagree.”
All other respondents offered similar themes of: freedom and equality, freedom to participate, and that they are inherent in the act of living. So I think we can be rest assured that these curators have a heart for Human Rights.

2. How much does human rights affect/define your role as a curator? Would you say incorporating elements of human rights is vital to you in your role?

One respondent believes,

“One of the roles of the Museum and staff is to safeguard memory but also to empower all people to understand and exercise their human rights.” So they feel their role is circulate and infuse a human rights philosophy into society.

Another offered,

“Human rights issues do affect my role as a curator but I think they define me more as an individual than as a professional. I am not sure a person can separate out their core values as an individual from how they work.”

This statement underlines our theory entirely, that there is a flow from individual perspective and experience into the role and decision making of the curator, reinforcing our idea that staff self-awareness of the topic is key to understanding the museum’s cogs of human rights promotion.

Almost conversely a respondent has noted,

“I don’t believe the exploration of human rights is a constant consideration in my role as a Curator, no more than the exploration of any other key societal issues, for instance the environment. Certainly issues of human rights are embedded in exhibitions we develop and host from time to time as part of a diverse exhibition program aiming to interest and educate the broadest cross section of the community. That being, the organisation is a supporter of
equal human rights, demonstrated most evidently through the absence of any admission fee in
the interest of providing equal access to all patrons. It’s also true that I wouldn’t support any
content that was counterproductive to the advancements of true equality.”

There were responses to say that human rights defines one’s role as a curator and also not
quite so. This is an interesting intersection in our inquiry and will be revisited when the
project expands.

3. In which areas, would you say human rights affect your work as a curator?

The range of areas respondents offered include:

- Aboriginal cultural heritage – in language and life.
- Exhibition planning and development: human rights affects how the exhibition
  program is developed as it is an influence on programs and schedules;
- Exhibition concepts or proposed touring exhibitions on merit.
- Collections development: it affects how works are brought into a collection.
- At a governance level – in operations and policy – for example ensuring there is an
  indigenous and disabilities representative on the board and/or an advisor is always
  available.

4. Where do you feel that your personal ideas about human rights might intersect with
the choices you make in developing exhibitions?

One respondent offered, and I quote,

“We’re guided by our ingrained views and interests in everything we do and every
choice we make. In this my personal ideas about human rights probably guide my
decisions far more frequently than I may even be conscious of.”

Again, this underscores the position of the enquiry at hand and begs the question as to
whether all curators conduct their role with the same level of awareness, clearly
delineating between personal ideals and those of the broader community.
Another respondent,

“I have always believed that understanding how power and representation worked was fundamental to understanding how curatorial practice should be constructed. So, as a curator I have developed shows on Latin American Art, women artists representing women, contemporary Maori art and other projects that sought to question the model of white male domination in the gallery system. I also, however, understand that a complex representation of human rights issues depends on thinking broadly, so I also curated exhibitions that challenged dominant ideas.”

This paints a nice picture of some exhibitions created with human rights ideals in mind. The curator has a particular awareness of power play and representation and so has created many exhibitions based on these interest areas.

5. Broadly speaking, to what extent do you feel that the exhibition product is an expression of human rights matters? And to what extent do you feel that this is influenced by staff/curators who develop the products?

One respondent,

“I do believe that a curator’s personal interests and beliefs will heavily influence the end product, as could be expected. In this, I think it’s also important public institutions
host exhibitions developed by an array of curators to provide a platform for many voices.”

The way that one museum does this is, “Staff work autonomously but come together as a team when considering how to set value for the product; i.e. they come together with an aligned vision of quality and inclusiveness.” Another respondent says similarly, “It is important that respect and acceptance of diversity are an integral part of the Museum workplace. Diversity in the Museum staff is also a great asset. We learn from each other, encourage each other and better work together to reach the Museum goals.”

So in this question we are seeing that curators are aware there is a flow from human to product, and they workshop and have a diverse staffing body to mitigate against any potential eclipsing of individual curator’s sympathies.

6. What is your understanding/definition of access in developing exhibition products? Do you consider that there are more ways than one for the public to have access to the exhibition product?

One respondent,

“How you program as a director/curator limits or welcome access – not only the way you present it but how you present it.”

Another offered,

“There are certainly a multitude of ways for audiences to access exhibitions. As mentioned, our organisation removes any financial constraints or considerations, and also
physical boundaries. However access to the concepts embedded within an exhibition can also be extended, and are regularly, through considered programming tailored for different audiences and different abilities.”

Another respondent saw access as, “Providing (access) to broad groups and categories: school groups and minority or community groups. And by putting artwork online - as ways of engagement.”

NB. None here outright say that the content of the exhibition can affect access/appeal.

Radhika Iyer presented from this point.

As we have just outlined, staff self-awareness of their own perceptions of what constitutes human rights is a vital element to the contents and narratives of exhibitions. However, while some of the participants in our interviews acknowledge awareness of personal perspectives (of human rights) influencing what are presented, the question occurs: to what extent is there active and timely engagement in self-awareness when developing contents? This critical self-awareness process may expose the possibility that museum exhibitions could inadvertently create an “us” and “them” dichotomy between staff/institution and visitors, whereby the exhibitions might reflect the curatorial staff’s perspectives of what the visitors need to be educated on; which in turn impacts upon the ways in which the visitors access the museum.

The “us” and “them” dichotomy to which we refer here is not one of intentional division rather, the dichotomy occurs, due to the sub-conscious choices made through personal perceptions of curatorial staff. All four participants who took part in our interview placed value on human rights, framing it within the context of the rights of the marginalised and
minority groups, and as such, while the museum staff have conscious awareness of personal perceptions at the interviewer's prompt, their sub-conscious may inform the contents of exhibitions and how these are presented to visitors. In effect, this could unconsciously create this dichotomy that may cause a fissure in the visitors’ experience in how they engage with the museum space and exhibitions.

How visitors experience their role in engaging with the contents of an exhibition depends on the sense of connection and ownership they feel towards the contents - be it tangible or intangible material. Visitors who feel disconnection may view themselves as just detached observers of another’s narrative, and feel that they do not own nor have a sense of belonging to fully and legitimately engage with the contents, therefore limiting shared empathy which further limits access.

The concept of ownership is vital in transcending the “Us” and “Them” dichotomy. The highest form of access in the human rights arena could be considered as when all visitors feel that they are active participants, regardless of the diversity of their backgrounds, who feel some degree of ownership to the contents and participation in an exhibition’s dialogue. This is so that the audience can engage and voice their own perspectives, which can thereby lead to a viable, shared set of human rights values constantly in flux and discussion with itself. This may involve curators incorporating diverse voices unified by shared empathy for the human condition in an exhibition. However, to provide access in a truly inclusive and all ways engagement, it has to start in the home of the museum staffing body.

The old adage may ring true here: Charity begins at home. Perhaps our collective self could practice what we aim to espouse to museum visitors. For access to be provided in its entirety,
there must be a level of integrity in practising self-awareness at the foundation of the exhibition transaction, the curatorial concept and activity. This can only be achieved by challenging our own viewpoints and to consider that the museum space not just as the holders of past (and present) records of human rights violation and human expression; but to shape, with the inclusion and active participation of all its visitors, a vision of the future, one which affirms a unified concept of human rights through shared humanity therefore paving the way for a Museum of Us, with no division between curator/institution and audience. This starts with the curator being aware of his/her position, experience and agenda and equally open to the myriad of stories and experiences as possible.

Co-creation between the museum and the community is the contemporary approach to museum operations and philosophy. Who are the ‘Co’ in the co-creation dynamic? We think there must be recognition this is not necessarily collaboration between an institution and a community; however perhaps from individual staff member to individual community member. As such, awareness of the staff member’s cultural heritage sympathies – perhaps via a museum staff and human rights perspectives audit - is vital to yielding a healthy co-creation, Museum of Us-type relationship.

This project has aimed to question if museum curators are aware of their personal ideas in relation to human rights and to see if it influences their exhibition content and presentation. We believe an understanding of this may edge towards a more accessible and inclusive museum, as there is a line from curator to exhibition to audience, appeal and ultimately access.
Our small pool of respondents vary in their thinking, suggesting that there is more to discuss on the matter. We hope to have sparked your curiosity and challenged you to think about how your ideals and sympathies may be impacting and influencing access to your museums.

Many thanks.

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