

Museums and Social Justice:

Creating the Intersection

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the intersection of museums and social justice. The research was a qualitative study using the data from six interviews from museum professionals who are recognized leaders in advocacy for social justice in museums. Findings include the range of ways social justice is defined and perceived and the current status of the work of social justice. One strong theme was the shared recommendation that there is a need to evaluate the internal practices within the museum field before social justice can be properly addressed externally. The study also found that the museum space and narrative are key components in addressing social justice. It is hoped that this study will help move the conversation forward on the intersection between social justice and museums.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The purpose of this study is to describe the intersection between social justice and museums as perceived by professionals in the field. Museums as social institutions are being called to address the topic of social justice. Organizations like the Social Justice Alliance of Museums states, “We acknowledge that many museums have for many years failed to operate for the wider public benefit, and instead have catered primarily for educated minorities. We reject this approach” (SJAM).

Nightingale and Mahal state, “For too long equality and diversity considerations have been relegated to the margins of the business of museums and galleries with many institutions interpreting their responsibilities in this area as being limited to one area of activity (for example, collections, or staffing) or restricted to specific equality issues (such as race, gender, or disability) with a corresponding disregard for the interconnections or tension between them. Ignoring the changing nature of our society and the multi-faceted and shifting nature of people’s identities they have often been limited (or at worst insensitive or inappropriate) in their response to diversity and equality issues” (Nightingale & Sandell, 2012,13).

How social justice is currently viewed in museums is varied, and some argue that social justice is not at all addressed in museums. Elaine Heumann Gurian suggests, “Should museums be socially responsible institutions?’ And the answer should be, ‘yes.’ If the question is, ‘Are museums currently socially responsible institutions?’ Then the answers range from ‘yes’ to ‘sometimes’ to ‘not yet’ to ‘not always’” (Gurian, 2006,73). During times like what is currently being experienced in American Society what is the

role of museums in social justice? Where does social justice intersect with museum practices?

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this research study is to understand the intersection of museums and social justice by interviewing professionals from the museum field. The research is driven by four research questions.

1. How do museum professionals personally define social justice?
2. What does social justice in museums look like?
3. How can museums further address social justice?
4. How can museums respond in times that threaten social justice?

The thesis is a qualitative study that focuses on the data collected from six interviews.

Significance

This study will add to the literature on the topic of social justice in museums, and give context to how museums understand the meaning of social justice as well as the ways social justice can begin to be integrated into museum practices.

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Museums and Social Justice

Do museums need to address social justice? Elaine Heumann Gurian states, “Museums are institutions set up for the transmission and preservation of things we collectively hold dear. That purpose is a good one, so why is there any debate about social responsibility and how it applies to museums” (Gurian, 2006, 71)? The core principles of museums in the United States as described by AAM (American Alliance of Museums) include that of public service. Furthermore, museums operate for the benefit of the public that they serve (AAM, 2000). AAM’s strategic plan for 2016-2020 states that, “As we pursue our goals, we will focus on topics that our membership strongly believes are vital to the future viability, relevance and sustainability of museums, including: Diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion in all aspects of museum structure and programming” (AAM, 2016).

Social justice is incredibly multifaceted and defining the term is challenging. For the purposes of this study, social justice will be grounded in the definition provided in the book *Museums, Equality, and Social Justice*, “We use the term social justice to refer to the ways in which museums, galleries and heritage organizations might acknowledge and act upon inequalities within and outside of the cultural domain. This usage is underpinned by a belief in the constitutive, generative character of museums; their capacity to shape as well as reflect social and political relation and to positively impact lived experiences of those who experience discrimination and prejudice” (Nightingale & Sandell, 2012,3).

Museums have started to consider what social justice means institutionally and the role the museum can play. “The last two decades have seen concerns for equality, diversity, social justice and human rights move from the margins of museums thinking and practice, to the core. The arguments – both moral and pragmatic – for engaging diverse audiences; creating conditions for more equitable access to museum resources; and opening up opportunities to participate in (and benefit from) museums experiences, now enjoy considerable consensus” (Nightingale & Sandell, 2012, 1).

As the issue of social justice is becoming more widely accepted as a topic that museums should address, museums have only recently become more confident in promoting social justice. "While some museums addressed social issues previously, only in the last ten years or so have mainstream science museums, science centers, natural history museums, zoos, aquaria, and other informal science institutions (ISIs) begun to explore civic and political issues with their communities. As this trend gathers momentum it has the potential to fundamentally shift the focus and role of ISIs and their relationship to their communities" (Garfinkle, 2009, 914). Yet many professionals within the field view the importance of social justice in museums with skepticism (Nightingale & Sandell, 2012, 1) Sandell and Nightingale explain that even though social justice is gaining momentum in museums, “At the same time it would be naïve and misleading to suggest an even and uncontested transition from the museum as an organization that has, for many years, been widely understood to marginalize, exclude, and oppress to one which is wholly inclusive and committed to fairness and equity in all areas of practice” (Nightingale & Sandell, 2012, 1). Implementing social justice in museums cannot happen overnight. In this literature review three major topics are discussed in relation to

social justice in museums. The three topics are museums as civic spaces, museums and neutrality, and internal museum practices and policies.

Museums as Civic Spaces

Museums have largely ignored the majority of the public and instead appealed to the upper and middle classes. This has caused museums to be seen as distant and inaccessible to many potential visitors. Cameron Duncan explains, “We created great art museums that reflected the heritage of bourgeois and aristocratic culture to the exclusion of popular or folk culture” (Anderson, 2012,53). This establishment of museums as a space that is seen a sacred or as a temple can alienate and demean the experiences of many visitors. Museums should except that space needs to be seen as interactive and welcoming to all visitors. Elaine Heumann Gurian writes, “The argument has been made that museums should be treasure houses, elaborate storage facilities, and temples of the contemplative. Less has been written about museums as lively, funny, noisy, inclusionary places that offer human interaction, civic discourse, and social service in addition to their expected exhibitions and programs...Museums, I argue, are important civic spaces and should gladly accept this often unacknowledged responsibility” (Gurian, 2006, 67). If museums are unwilling to make such changes in order to become more inclusive and accessible spaces than they become obstacles to their progress as public institutions (Anderson, 2012, 59). Space has the ability to be the catalyst to broadening audiences and often overlooked. Elaine Heumann Gurian states, “When museums want to diversify their audiences, they tend to concentrate on developing programs that they consider inclusionary. But program expansion, while interesting to many, is not enough. At the

same time, museums have devoted much attention and money to the physical expansion of their facilities and the architectural statement these buildings make. Museums have rarely understood – and even more rarely exploited – the connection between the creation of new spaces and the rhetoric of inclusion” (Gurian, 2006, 97).

Opening the doors to a museum’s space not only broadens the audience but it also presents other important opportunities. A museum’s space can start dialogue and engagement among its visitors. “Museums have the potential to attract people who are radically different from each other. Institutions that facilitate, social, cultural and generational mixing is a core underpinning of a civil society” (Anderson, 2012, 276). The accessibility of the museum space can help museums promote social justice and strengthen the underpinnings of a civil society.

Museums and Neutrality

Museums have historically been viewed as neutral spaces that remain above issues that are integral to promoting social justice. This affects the museum’s ability to find its role in society. Robert Janes elaborates on neutrality, “I will argue that the majority of museums, as social institutions, have largely eschewed, on both moral and practical grounds, a broader commitment to the world in which they operate. Instead they have allowed themselves to be held increasingly captive by the economic imperatives of the marketplace and their own internally driven agendas” (Janes, 2009, 13). Janes explains the concept that he has labeled as the “*fallacy of authoritative neutrality*”, which is the belief, held by museum professionals that in order for a museum to accurately present information the institution must remain neutral or else fall victim to special interest groups. This concept of authoritative neutrality has shifted in the past decades.

Janes explains, “Authoritative neutrality has taken on new meaning over the past decade, as museums have increased their reliance on corporate, foundation and private funding, and business people occupy more seats at the board table. Perhaps the pervasive, albeit discreet, argument is that museums cannot risk doing anything that might alienate a private sector sponsor, real or potential” (Janes, 2009, 59). Moving past neutrality does require museums to embrace risk-taking but can lead to building trust between museums and the communities they serve.

An example of a museum that has acknowledged that harm that can be caused by neutrality is the Eastern State Penitentiary Museum. The Museum states, “We believe that the bedrock value that many of us brought into this field—that museums should strive for neutrality—has held us back more than it has helped us. Neutrality is, after all, in the eye of the beholder. At Eastern State, more often than not, the word provided us an excuse for simply avoiding thorny issues of race, poverty and policy that we weren’t ready to address” (Center for the Future of Museums, 2016).

Museum Practices and Policies

As museums start to consider what is needed to address social justice outside of the walls of the institution, there are calls for museums to first examine their policies and practices pertaining to social justice internally as well. Museums have the potential to be strong allies and advocates in the fight for social justice, but this must be accompanied by an internal examination (Kinsley & Wittman, 2016). Through the process of self-examination museums can also start to conceptualize the objectives and standards of social justice that are needed as an institution in order for change to be effective

(Nightingale & Sandell, 2012, 16). Museums are being called on to address issues of institutional legacy, staffing, and language (Kinsley & Wittman, 2016).

An internal practice that needs to be developed is the acknowledgment of the institutional legacy of museums and the impact that it has and had on visitors. “Museums’ desires to form inclusive relationships with their communities cannot be disassociated from the relationships they had in the past. Even if that history predates everyone on staff, we must educate ourselves and make amends for them today” (Kinsley & Wittman 2016). In order for museums and the field to understand the institutional legacy requires a thorough analysis. Elaine Heumann Gurian explains that some of the issues associated with museums are not obvious; “The issue of museums as forces for evil is easy to understand by invoking extreme examples, but in the age of relative moral values, it is much more difficult to detect when museums cross the boundary into authoritarian imposition. When have they falsified the truth to present propaganda? When have they allowed the donor or the government to prevail over others in the citizenry? The gray area is broad” (Gurian, 1988,70). Understanding these issues allows museums to better understand whom the institution is for and whose experiences have been historically acknowledged and whose experiences have not (Kinsley & Wittman, 2016).

A major component of the change and examination that needs to happen internally pertains to the diversity of staffing, which is directly related to the issue of whom the museum is for and the way a community feels represented in a museum space. (Kinsley & Wittman, 2016). Diversity and equity need to be placed at the heart of strategic planning in museums with measurable objectives. Part of the problem is the lack of concern in relation to the socio-economic status pertaining to the demographics of

museum visitors as well as racial and gender inequities in leadership roles (Nightingale & Sandell, 2012, 34-35). Elaine Heumann Gurian states, “Historically, museums have been staffed and visited by white, well-educated folk. The staff, the audience, and the donors were mirror images of each other. They were mostly not very self-conscious, but instead appeared self-confident, even self-congratulatory. They believed that they knew what their audience wanted and/or what was good for them” (Gurian, 1988, 73). The museum field needs to question current employment practices, which require high levels of education and provide low wages. This disparity in the level of education needed and the wages provided require intersecting privileges at the same time excluded those of certain race and class from the museum field (Kinsley & Wittman, 2016).

Chapter III: Methods

The goal of this research was to understand the intersection of museums and social justice by interviewing professionals from the museum field. This research used a qualitative method including semi-structured interviews. Individuals who are considered leaders in advocating for social justice in the museum field were interviewed over the phone and recorded using Zoom. The interviews lasted 20 - 45 minutes. Interviews were then transcribed using NVIVO.

The interview questions were created in a way that was open ended so that interviewees could each express their position and opinions on each question without being constrained by the interview question. During the analysis the interviews were used in conjunction with the literature review to further elucidate upon the main questions and goals of the research study.

Sample

Interview participants were chosen because of their professional standing in the field and their work pertaining to Social Justice. Interviewees have made contributions to social justice in museums by publishing papers, working directly with museums, working with museum associations, and other activities that address social justice in the museum. They were recruited through purposive, expert, and snowball sampling. The University of Washington IRB approved the protocol.

A list of the Interviewees is as follows:

- Sarah Pharaon: Senior Director of Methodology and Practice at the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience
- Brian Carter: Staff at 4Culture and a founding staff member at the

Northwest African American Museum

- Elaine Heumann Gurian: Museum Consultant/Advisor; Writer
- Marjorie Schwarzer: Museum Studies Program Director at the University of San Francisco
- Sean Kelly: Senior Vice President, Director of Interpretation and Public Programming at the Eastern State Penitentiary
- Robert Garfinkle: Project Leader for Science and Social Change, Science Museum of Minnesota

Instrument and Protocol

The interview used open-ended questions. This format was used in order to allow the interviewee to give unhindered responses, which also allow for room to expand on their personal experience. The interviews took place from January to March of 2017. All interviews were recorded using Zoom. The goal of this research was to understand the intersection of museums and social justice by interviewing professionals from the museum field. To do this, interviews include the following questions:

1. How do you define social justice?
2. What does social justice in museums look like?
3. What can museums do to further address social justice?
4. During times of political unrest, such as what the US is currently experiencing, what unique contributions can museums offer to further social justice?

The questions were qualitative to provoke more in depth response.

Analysis

All six interviews were uploaded to a research project file using NVIVO. The interviews were coded using emergent coding. For example, the code *public space* was used to describe instances where museums can use their physical space for visitors to engage with one another. Another example is that the code *lens* was used to examine museum practice internally and externally. The coding's reliability was confirmed by reviewing all of the interviews and the emergent themes that were consistent across all of the data.

Limitations

Interviewees represent current professionals in the field that are leaders in social justice advocacy. The data collected from the interview participants may not represent the views of emerging museum professionals, which will shape the work of museums in the future. Also, the study only interviewed professionals that have a background in social justice work in museums. The data does not represent museum professional's views that do not work with social justice.

Coding Rubric

Coding	Definition/Question	Example
<p>Social Justice</p>	<p>What is your personal definition of social justice?</p> <p>What does Social Justice look like in museums?</p> <p>The role social justice plays in museums.</p>	<p>“In the simplest terms it is working towards or action that results in a world that has greater fairness, equality, and people.” (Carter)</p> <p>“Well, I think it looks like the attempt of the museum using its standing or using its assets that include programs, facilities, money as well as its goodwill and standing in a community to shine a light on those inequities to provide resources to, or opportunities to underserved constituencies.” (Garfinkle)</p>
<p>Lens: Internal & External</p>	<p>What can museums do to further address social justice?</p> <p>What museum practices need to be evaluated internally in the museum field?</p>	<p>“From an internal perspective, social justice values must address how staff is compensated so that they have access to basic needs such as shelter, food, safety, education and health care.” (Schwarzer)</p> <p>“From an external perspective, social justice values can be advanced through exhibition and educational programs that address these values, and call attention to injustices.” (Schwarzer)</p>

<p>Public Space</p>	<p>What can museums do to further address social justice?</p> <p>During times of political unrest such as what the US is currently experiencing what unique contributions can museums offer to further social justice?</p> <p>How the space of a museum is one the most valuable assets.</p> <p>How engagement among visitors is fostered by the space of the institution.</p>	<p>“It is going to be a little trite, but I always think that among the museums highest purposes is just being big and have lobbies. So the space that we offer is essential.” (Carter)</p> <p>“Well, the most important one is to create or to maintain or to enhance the idea of a museum as a third place. As a vibrant public space for respectful engagement.” (Garfinkle)</p>
<p>Museum Narrative</p>	<p>What can museums do to further address social justice?</p> <p>During times of political unrest such as what the US is currently experiencing what unique contributions can museums offer to further social justice?</p> <p>How the museum narrative affects social justice.</p> <p>The shift in the museum narrative.</p>	<p>“Museums also have preserved the status quo. So social justice in museums needs to look at the message we are sending to our visitors and make sure we are really questioning whether or not we are being honest.” (Kelly)</p> <p>“So I think we need to start being really honest about ourselves with that and start to critically examine what effect our continuing the dominant narrative but saying we are not has with our audiences and our staff.” (Pharaon)</p>

<p>Neutrality</p>	<p>What can museums do to further address social justice?</p> <p>During times of political unrest such as what the US is currently experiencing what unique contributions can museums offer to further social justice?</p> <p>The Fallacy of Neutrality in museums.</p> <p>Museums taking a stand on social justice issues.</p>	<p>“What I am pleased about is what I refer to as the stake in the ground. Museums and especially museum associations in United States have taken public positions and have put out public statements.” (Gurian)</p> <p>“I think we were comfortable before to say we are neutral and present multiple perspectives, and that we feel very comfortable in truth telling and telling the stories that have been untold. We being asked to be more now for communities that need strong allies and advocates I think that is were a lot of our museums and historic sites are trying to figure out where they fit in that.” (Pharaon)</p>
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Chapter IV: Results, Implications, and Limitations

The intention of the study was to understand what professionals from the field conceptualize as the intersection of social justice and museums. There were six interviews and participants were asked a total of four formal interview questions with an additional follow-up question at the end of the interview. This chapter presents the data and findings that emerged throughout the interviews.

Defining Social Justice

Sarah Pharaon stated, “I would say that when I think of the term social justice, I most relate to it through the lens of our work at Sites of Conscience. We submit to the idea that saying that the work of our member sites and of the other members within the coalition is to help promote and create a more just and humane future. So what I think of social justice is through that lens. I am interested in furthering practices which create equality and a more just future for all aspects and all segments of the human population.” Marjorie Schwarzer defined social justice as, “much the way the U.S. Constitution defines it: that every human has basic rights in regard to how we relate to one another in order to create a civilized society . . . I would add one dimension that is also embedded in American values: that talking about social justice isn't enough; we have to act on those beliefs.”

Brian Carter, Sean Kelly, and Robert Garfinkle all used similar terms. Brian Carter provided one of the most concise definitions. Carter stated, “In the simplest terms it is working towards or action that results in a world that has greater fairness, equality, and people.” Sean Kelly started by describing what is currently being done at the Eastern State

Penitentiary Museums where he works and suggests that social justice is, “About equity, it’s about access to opportunity, it’s about honesty, and about how we have gotten where we are.” Robert Garfinkle described social justice as, “The pursuit of equality, equity, and opportunity. Outcomes in the face of a capitalist system that persistently tilts the advantage to the wealthy and powerful so social justice is an attempt to tilt the playing field back in the direction of working-class and middle-class people in the face of that imbalance.”

Elaine Heumann Gurian explained that the term social justice and its meaning in the museum field is not an easily defined term. She provided other terms that she like that surround social justice such as inclusion, activism, and diversity, but ‘social justice’ is her preference. Gurian stated that social justice is, “Currently my favorite term of all these activist terms, but precisely I have no definition for you and that’s part of the problem of the whole field. I don't mind that there is a mush I just like it because it is a bigger umbrella in my head than any of the other words that people are using.” Gurian further explained the term social justice as, “I think it is just a more embracing word. There are a whole lot of people working on very specific aspects all of which I applaud, but social justice I think encompasses that better.”

Social Justice in Museums

In response to the question of what social justice looks like in museums Elaine Heumann Gurian started with the role of museums in society, “Let me start with where I think museums fit in the world, and that’s why I like the word civil society and civility. I think that museums are part of the civil fabric of our society, and are aligned with government, and education, and faith.” Garfinkle explained, “Well I think it looks like the attempt of the museum using its standing or using its assets that include programs,

facilities, money as well as its goodwill and standing in a community. To shine a light on those inequities to provide resources to, or opportunities to underserved constituencies.” He continued, “So what does that look like in museums? It looks like putting resources, and reputation in the direction of enlightenment, education, engagement around issues of social changes so that people in the community become more educated and try to shine to a light on that inequity because it is hard to see.”

Brian Carter pointed out that social justice in museums is still relatively new. He stated that “I think right now social justice in museums looks novel I think it looks new I think it looks often times like a choice, a programmatic choice, or a particular initiative that museums undertake as opposed to being built into their DNA in the museum field.” Carter suggested that social justice is more than just a novelty but instead becoming a way in which to view museums as a whole.” He added, “I think if the heart of the museum field is really ripe for improvement and greater integration into day to day activity and by that I mean that I don't think that social justice is just a program on a Saturday at 4 pm but instead it's the lens through which all museum operations whether those be creative, administration, or operational can be looked at through that particular lens.”

Interviewees spoke of the immense amount of work ahead of museums in addressing social justice. As Robert Garfinkle stated, “I think there are worlds to do. I think that museums have done very little. Right now, I think that we just got our toe in the water, we talk a lot about it, but there is only limited stuff that has been done.” Similarly, Gurian said, “Museums generally are not interested in social justice. I am very skeptical of the motivation of museums altogether. The real quantity of museums are really neither prepared nor focused on social justice and their mission.”

Lens: Internal And External Practices

A major theme across the interviews was the idea of the internal and external lens and practices of social justice within museums and within the museum field. As Schwarzer described, “From an external perspective, social justice values can be advanced through exhibition and educational programs that address these values, and call attention to injustices. From an internal perspective, social justice values must address how staff is compensated so that they have access to basic needs such as shelter, food, safety, education and health care.”

Overwhelmingly the interviewees argued for reexamining internal museum practices as crucial for the museum field. Sarah Pharaon explained that the field primarily looked on social justice through an external, but it lacked internal perspective. Pharaon stated that, “One of the ways that the museum industry for many decades has been talking about the social justice work of museums is we have been looking at it primarily from external lens... For a long time, we have tried to have those conversations with the public without have those really important intelligent conversations internally first. Part of it is being really honest with ourselves about equipping our staffs with tools in order to do this work. It’s about treating our staff as well as our outside stakeholders and our public.”

Museums also need to evaluate their employment practices as it pertains to people of color, economic status, and education. As Sean Kelly stated, “Museums have also been a very difficult place for people of color and people who have grown up without a lot of money to find work. I think increasingly there is a lot of interest and certainly, I am interested in it, we are interested in it here and looking at why the field is so white and why

the field is so middle to upper middle class in who it employs.” Gurian also addressed the issue of hiring practices. She asks, “How diverse is your staff and what your HR policies are toward different cultural ways of being and where you place family in the lives of your employees I mean it is tough stuff.” Sarah Pharaon spoke about the attention that is now being placed on the issue of employment and the shift that is it is possibly related to the young professionals in the field, “We've seen so much attention on this maybe because of young professionals who are coming into the field with higher expectations of what they expect the practice to look like. That means ceasing our reliance on unpaid internships, that means critically looking at our pay scales and what we ask of not only new employees to the field, but also for long term employees to the field and the way people are treated financially. As well as looking at how our hiring practices impact how we as a field have increasingly relied on M.A.s and Ph.D.'s, what does that mean for our hiring practices?”

Brian Carter and Sean Kelly added two other topics related to museum practices. Carter suggested that the larger museum organizations have a role to play in promoting social justice. He stated, “I think that the governing body which is the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) as well other regional organizations like Washington organizations and Washington associations have to take up this topic as something that is important and is dealt with through ongoing professional development opportunities so conferences, workshops, or webinars. I think AAM has got to make it more of an accreditation standard, a professional best practice standard and to help museums.” Sean Kelly brought up that boards of trustees are in contrast to most visitors financially. Kelly explained, “I am amazed that for museums it is not a bigger issue for us. That we are mostly still run by boards of director that have mandatory gifts that they have to give financial gifts in order to

be on that board of directors. So as a result our boards of directors are by definition run by people who are more wealthy than our average visitor is.”

Public Space

The idea of maintaining and creating public space was an idea that was touched on by almost all of the interviewees. Brian Carter stated, “It is going to be a little trite, but I always think that among the museums highest purposes is just being big and have lobbies. So the space that we offer is essential.” Carter added that the very architecture of a museum is often contrasted in a way that is meant to welcome large groups of people. Carter explained, “We are literally setup perfectly to welcome large groups into our space that is what we mainly want to do. So I think just being available for those types of opportunity is something that museums can do.” Robert Garfinkle also explained the importance of a museum to use its space. Garfinkle explained, “Well the most important one is to create or to maintain or to enhance the idea of a museum as a third place. As a vibrant public space for respectful engagement.” Sean Kelly suggested that not only do we have space, but also we can create space where multiple perspectives can be heard. He stated, “We can model behavior so we can create spaces that respect multiple perspectives. We can create space where multiple perspectives are respected. Where issues of national concern are addressed with intellectual honesty and rigor and respect for science and respect for forensic truth.”

The discussion about space commonly revolved around the power of the museum space. Gurian introduced the term peace-ability. “I am much more interested in what it means for strangers to safely be in the presence of each other and learn things that they believe is worthwhile and so as part of the methodology for keeping public safety. I am interested in the fundamental underlying, underpinnings of peace-ability.” In a similar vein,

Sean Kelly explained “A lot of people really do want to have these conversations if they are in an environment that feels open. We talk a lot about Safe space for people who are impacted by trauma for instance. That is real, and that is definitely no joke to create spaces that are safe for people who have experienced trauma. I am saying it is on the same scale but creating spaces where people who have privilege feel comfortable talking about that I wouldn't say that they would feel unsafe but I also think that if you take this work seriously you have got to find a way to talk to people who are not impacted by, or are impacted in a positive but don't realize it by the issues we are talking about and find a way to talk to them about it and it can be done.” Robert Garfinkle commented that, “It is not the same as being just a safe space. We need to not just be a place where people feel okay about coming, we still need to be and want to be provoking thoughtful conversation it is not enough to be just a distraction . . . Continuing to look for those opportunities and to play up to that line and push those possibilities I think that is important to do. I think that and this may be more true for some museums than others although we can and should be talking more explicitly creating opportunities for people to consider what a democracy is and basically trying to engage people around civics and government and political theory.” Similarly, Pharaon stated, “Museums can effectively in this moment be a place that can help bridge the bubbles of a community. A community that is very similar in one perspective and community that is very similar in another perspective may never come together anywhere else but at a museum or a historic site. So how do we use spaces like the Gettysburg Battlefield Site or the North Carolina Museum of Science how do we use places like that as a place people of varied political beliefs and one of really becoming increasingly rare places where people of very different political beliefs can be in the same space?”

Shifting Museum Narrative

Discussions of social justice inevitably brought up the damage created by the implicit bias of the traditional narrative in museums. The interviewees urged museums to evaluate the narrative that museums are perpetuating. Sarah Pharaon reflected, “So I think we need to start being really honest about ourselves with that and start critically examine what effect our continuing the dominant narrative but saying we are not has with our audiences and our staff.” Similarly, Sean Kelly stated that “Museums also have preserved the status quo. So social justice in museums needs to look at the message we are sending to our visitors and make sure we are really questioning whether or not we are being honest.” Elaine Heumann Gurian described this bias as an “Alliance with the existent powers to maintain their power and control both intellectual and overtly.”

Acknowledging the damage of the narratives museums have promoted the interview response addressed the need in shifting the narrative in museums. The change in narrative would require a shift in intention and the stories that are told. Elaine Heumann Gurian stated that, “Museums by themselves are not forces for either good or evil. It is all about intention. The intention can be a really important one, but everybody has to personally make a commitment that is generally way above what we train students to think and way above what people work in museums think is their obligation.”

The importance of surfacing untold stories and letting the collections themselves represent underrepresented histories was expressed by multiple interviewees. Robert Garfinkle stated, “To keep looking for what are the sorties and what are the experiences that are connected to the lives of most people. All the stuff we are doing if you multiplied it

times ten that would be a start it wouldn't be enough but it would be a start.” Brian Carter spoke about the power of the collection to surface important stories. Carter stated, “Museums have a museum collection whether those be objects, or they are artwork, or even story based. I mean the material culture and the power that I think within that material if it has somebody that can properly translate it to a contemporary social justice issue an issue facing our society is really something that museums can do a better job of.” Sarah Pharaon explained the importance of telling untold stories in a way that is helpful to both onsite and offsite audiences. Pharaon explained, “To surface historical context which is useful and helpful and appropriate for both our onsite museums audiences and our non-traditional museums audiences may only be only be seeing things through a social media feed, but to uphold our charge to interpret and present fact-based history I think that’s something that we can help do.”

Neutrality

Multiple interviewees discussed the concept of neutrality. Brian Carter explained that museums are not neutral and that they have never been. Carter stated, “So can museums be neutral places? No, they are not neutral, nor they have never been. Museums are not neutral. Museums have existed to promote often one strain of history for one particular class of people.” Robert Garfinkle explained that anything museums do regarding social justice is not neutral. Garfinkle stated, “I just think that what museums do around social justice is a political act it is not a neutral act like anything that we do it is value-laden and the values that it is laden with are the values of social justice and I think that is perfectly great.”

Both Elaine Heumann Gurian and Sarah Pharaon spoke about museums making a

stand and taking public positions. Gurian stated, “What I am pleased about is what I refer to as the stake in the ground. Museums and especially museum associations in United States have taken public position have put out public statements.” Sarah Pharaon stated, “I think we were comfortable before to say we are neutral and present multiple perspectives, and that we feel very comfortable in truth telling and telling the stories that have been untold. We are being asked to be more now for communities that need strong allies and advocates. I think that a lot of our museums and historic sites are trying to figure out where they fit in that.” Pharaon continued to explain that, “I think that you are going to continue to be asked and pressured in many ways to step up as allies and advocates. I think that we have always benefited and numerous studies have talked about the trust that we have because of our so-called perceived neutrality. I also think that our relationships with segments of our population continue to be damaged by that fact that we are not stepping up as allies when our unique body of knowledge, our own historic narrative, our own historic context that we preserve as institutions almost dictates that we step up because we know these moment and specific events.”

Implications of the Study

Internal Change

Social justice in museums needs to start at the ground level. What can become the biggest impacts on how museums externally promote social justice are the changes that are made within museums first. Museums have not done enough to examine their own practices and before this examination is done the effort to promote social justice externally cannot properly happen.

One of the biggest issues facing museums internally is the hiring practice of the field. There is a reliance on hiring employees that have advanced degrees. The preferential hiring of employees with Doctoral and Masters degrees dictate the type of workforce that is currently in the museum field. The hiring of professionals that are properly trained is important, but it should not be at the expense of denying employment to those who can offer expertise to the museum because they do not have a degree. Museums must ask themselves what does it mean when the staff is at times overeducated. Furthermore, the lack of opportunity and employment for people of color in museums is an issue that needs to be addressed and the impact of which needs to be understood. The research suggests that the museum field at large needs to reconsider who is employed and what current employment practices have done to affect accessibility to individuals looking to work in museums.

Another issue of social justice within museums is providing livable wages for the entire staff. The reliance on underpaid workers and unpaid internships has a major impact on the employee's quality of life. The financial difficulty of gaining experience in the field because of unpaid and underpaid positions causes further inaccessibility to the museum field. The governing bodies of museums are far removed from these issues. The Boards of Directors and Trustees are unable to fully understand the issues of concerning wages when they are comprised primarily of wealthy individuals. Furthermore, the divide between who sits on the board and who sits at the front desk alienates the museum board from the staff and the visitors.

The museum associations such as AAM need to better address and promote social justice not just externally but internally as well. As Brian Carter stated if AAM was to set

an accreditation standard pertaining to social justice and museum practices this would be a step in the right direction. Museology programs could benefit social justice in museums by further equipping and training incoming professional to better understand issues of social justice.

So to restate what the research shows is that discussions need to happen with staff about the changes needed within the museum before adequately addressing social justice externally. Museums can affect change by creating better employment practices and appropriately equipping employees with the tools they need. The internal changes regarding social justice needs to start with museums being honest themselves and starting to take action. It is not realistic to think that museums can rectify all the issues of social internally before working on addressing social justice externally but there has to be balance between the two.

External Change

Museums have the unique opportunity to provide space and through that space foster dialogue and engagement. The interviews suggest that museums need to be an environment that is safe but also one that promotes engagement with visitors that may be ideologically opposed to one another. This means that museums must understand what it means for visitors to peacefully share space and also peacefully engage. Sarah Pharaon in her interview stated that museums even have the opportunity to help bridge the divide between visitors of differing beliefs. So the space of a museum is something that is not to be overlooked. The museum space can be used a public forum and even place to bring people together despite ideological discrepancies.

A change in the museum narrative is another external social justice practice that needs to happen. The data suggests that museums should be honest about what narrative they promoting or continuing and how that contributes to existing inequities. A shift in intentionality regarding narrative is an important step to social justice. The power of the collections to relate to current issues and help visitors to better understand these issues is vital. Museums have the great potential to tell the stories that to be told. It is up to the professionals in the field to make personal commitments to make the museum narrative more applicable to its visitors and to translate collections to address contemporary issues of social justice.

Neutrality: Time for Stepping up

It is also apparent from the data the idea of museums, as a neutral place is problematic. Museums need to step up for the community that they serve, and when they neglect the responsibility of being allies or advocates the relationship with the public suffers. This doesn't only apply to individual museums, but museum organizations like AAM.

Limitations

The limitations of the study are that current museum professionals were interviewed pertaining to the issue of social justice and data could vary based on the incoming professionals' opinions and ideas. Further limitations are that the questions asked were very open-ended and may not have pointed to specific issues that are encapsulated by the multifaceted topic of social justice.

Future Research

This study yielded many opportunities for further research. Throughout the study, the discussion of museum policy regarding hiring was abundantly clear. Research on hiring practices and the how such practices could become more equitable is vital to the museum field. Also research could consider how HR policy can be reexamined in museums to better address would social justice. The creation of education programs within museology departments that focuses directly on social justice is another avenue of study. The idea of public space and how museums provide peaceful engagement among visitors in that space would benefit from further research. Again the issue of social justice in museums is extremely multi-faceted and needs further research. This study provided data from museum professionals the responses that they gave whether talking about the need for internal change, the power of public space, shifting the museum narrative, and the ceasing of neutrality all warrant further research.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Social justice in museums is just beginning to be addressed and is an issue that can be viewed more as a novelty than an essential component of museum practice. The data from the interviews highlighted the immense amount of work that is still ahead of museums regarding social justice. Much of the change that is needed in the field will be internal changes focusing on museum practice and policy. Elaine Heumann Gurian expressed throughout her interview much of the change will seem small but can have great secondary impacts. The work to better address social justice in museums is arduous and needs thorough examination. The comment that Brian Carter made about how museums should use social justice as the lens through which all practices and policies are viewed is among the most useful and eloquent responses.

The purpose of this study was to understand the intersection of social justice and museums as understood by professional in the field. The following questions were addressed:

1. How do museum professionals personally define social justice?
2. What does social justice in museums look like?
3. How can museums further address social justice?
4. How can museums respond in times that threaten social justice?

Although the interviews yielded responses to each of these questions, at the end of this study, it seems apparent that these questions assumed too much and asked questions that are too large. The pursuit of understanding and promoting social justice in museums needs to start with the assumption that social justice is currently not being addressed by

an overwhelming majority of museums and if there is some acknowledgment of social justice, it is usually viewed as a novelty. The big questions are important to ask. There is also so much work that can be easily overlooked in museums as the field begins to think about how to address social justice.

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