SOCIAL INCLUSION

Definition: Social inclusion, as a term, emerged from discussions about how to ameliorate social exclusion. It is used across many sectors, practices and countries, sometimes in significantly different ways. Ideas about social inclusion and exclusion are political. As a result, the term and how it is understood are contested. Because social justice issues are always multifaceted, continually evolving and context dependent, the question of what constitutes social inclusion sits within a constantly changing landscape, with different emphases across time and space.

The key organising principle of social inclusion work recognises that structural inequalities (such as, but not limited to, racism, sexism, class discrimination, ableism, ageism, homophobia and their intersections) shape the conditions for how people's participation in our societies is valued and supported (or not). Social inclusion work in museums recognises therefore that structural inequalities affect who can and cannot participate in the many opportunities museums offer. Social inclusion discussions and practices in museums typically focus on trying to create and promote meaningful, accessible and respectful opportunities for everyone to participate in museum experiences and, in some cases, beyond museums.

Related Terms: **access, activism**, audience development, colonisation, decolonisation, **ethics**, inclusive design, outreach, **participation**, training, Postcolonial museum.

Background to social inclusion in museums
As a term, social inclusion began to be used in museums in response to the development of the term 'social exclusion' in political discourse, particularly in Europe from the 1990s onwards. Practices focused on social inclusion have, of course, far longer histories in many museums around the world. The public education agendas of certain early European museums could be interpreted as oriented towards social inclusion. Similarly, the growth of specialised education roles within museums from the 1970s onwards could also be flagged as a point when ideas about social inclusion became more important to museums. Although the term 'social inclusion' has a specific history in policy discourses, it has been taken up, developed and critiqued in numerous ways across the museum sector.

In many countries legal requirements for physical accessibility provided both the impetus and initial institutional frameworks for social inclusion. While accessible entrances, ramps and larger exhibit text became more common as a result of these policies and recommendations, it meant social inclusion was often narrowly framed in many museums as *only* about physical accessibility. While (dis)ability remains a key

concern for social inclusion in museums, it is no longer framed only as an access issue, but instead shares the spotlight with broader questions of representation, respect, power-sharing and other social justice issues (Sandell, R., Dodd, J., & Garland-Thomson, R., 2010). Importantly then, attention to understanding and redressing how additional structural inequalities and their intersections limit participation in museums has grown in recent years (Garibay and Huerta Miges, 2014).

Today social inclusion in museums is concerned with redressing multiple, intersecting, structural inequalities in numerous ways. Social inclusion practices can involve many aspects of social justice, such as who can access, visit, work in or volunteer in museums as well as how people are respected, represented, and how power inequalities are redressed. Social inclusion work spans the spectrum of structural inequalities and their intersections, as well as of the work of all kinds of museums. For instance, there has been work exploring how natural history museums might reinforce or subvert homophobia and heteronormativity, and how they might move from narratives of white supremacy to decolonise their collections (Cassidy, Lock & Voss, 2016; Das & Lowe, 2018). Today, social inclusion practices in museums such as the District Six museum in South Africa's Cape Town and the Jewish Museum in Berlin, Germany ask questions about what reparative justice looks like in museums and what roles museums might play repairing rather than simply remembering injustices.

Why is social inclusion still an important issue for museums?
Social inclusion remains a crucial topic for museums because social exclusion continues to shape museums as well as our societies. As such, understanding and addressing the specific ways that structural inequalities affect museums is crucial for working towards social inclusion in and through museum work. Because social justice issues are always multifaceted, continually evolving and context dependent, the question of what constitutes social inclusion sits within a constantly changing landscape, with different emphases across time and space.

Museums are marked by structural inequalities (such as racism, sexism, class discrimination and more) in multiple and intersecting ways. Take, for example, just three facets of museum practice: staffing, visitors and physical presence. Entry to the museum job market is shaped by privilege. In the UK for instance, museum staff, board members and volunteers are typically from the dominant, white ethnic group and upper/middle class socio-economic backgrounds. Research on museum visitors reveals a strikingly similar pattern. Around the world, visitors to museums come from the dominant 'racial'/ethnic group of a given society, have a higher socio-economic background and tend to live in urban centres (Dawson, 2019). The physical presence of museums, from their collections, to the buildings and neighbourhoods that house them, can be understood as similarly marked by structural inequalities. In the West, for instance, the buildings, bequests, collections and collecting practices of large, US and European museums are rooted in colonialism in ways that remain largely unaddressed (Autry & Murawski, 2019; Dixon, 2016). Taken together, these three (not exhaustive) facets of museum practice demonstrate how enmeshed and mutually reinforcing inequalities can be. Thus, despite growing attention across the museum field, social inclusion remains a significant concern for museum practice.

Contemporary practice: from tokenism to activism in museum practice
What does it mean to be meaningfully included in a museum, whether we consider material objects, stories and knowledge, staff members, visitors or someone who has never visited a museum? Contemporary social inclusion practice in museums ranges from activities easily dismissed as tokenistic to those that open up possibilities for

radical, transformative social change. Social inclusion practices in museums can be categorised in many ways, but it can be helpful to think of those that focus on practice and those that focus on content. And, despite the critiques outlined below, even small attempts at social inclusion may afford important opportunities to build relationships, and to learn and reflect, in ways that can help museums embrace the challenges posed by structural inequalities.

Turning first to focus on socially inclusive practice, some of the notable patterns include developing 'outreach' and/or 'in reach' programmes, a turn towards participatory work and a turn towards activism. Participatory work in museums has developed alongside similar approaches in education and politics, with a range of terms being used to describe such work, such as co-production, co-curation, community participation and user-led design. These approaches are rooted in participatory models that prioritise working in collaboration with specific stakeholder groups (whether members of a particular community, staff or a group related to a specific collection) to reach a commonly agreed goal. Practices of power sharing such as these, challenge and, arguably, change the traditionally more top-down, institution-centric dynamics of who holds knowledge and power in museums.

The activist turn in museum practice questions established power relations in ways that are similar to participatory practices, albeit often more pronounced. Social inclusion activism in museums takes many forms. For instance, museum activism around social justice can be initiated by visitors, such as environmental justice protests, staged at museums, lobbying against their funding by oil companies. It can also involve organising by staff and volunteers, such as the Museum Detox network which champions and supports the work of museum staff from racialised minorities in the UK, or the Guerrilla Girls, Activist Artists who campaign in the US against sexism in art museums. Museum activism around social inclusion can also include practices that bridge staff/visitor divides, such as the #MuseumsAreNotNeutral campaign that highlights the structural inequalities that shape museums, such as the colonial legacies of many museums, galleries and their collections (Autry & Murawski, 2019).

A second theme of contemporary social inclusion work in museums concerns their content, where questions of representation, repatriation and decolonisation are crucial. Museums face specific challenges about collecting, displaying and interpreting material culture, in ways that are too often rooted in colonialism. Contemporary practices that focus on the sovereignty of indigenous peoples in countries with histories of white settler colonialism explore how indigenous and decolonial perspectives support different ways of thinking about museums and inclusion (Nagam, J., Lane, C., & Tamati-Quennell, M., 2020). Questions raised include: on what grounds can contemporary museums in the Global North continue to retain objects significant to the histories and material culture of peoples from the Global South? What does it mean for museums to hold human remains, stolen, traded or otherwise acquired through extractive or settler white colonialism? What might it mean for museums in the West and Global North to take seriously questions posed by decolonial and/or reparative justice approaches?

Critiques of social inclusion in museums

While there is widespread agreement that social inclusion is crucial for the museum field, we must reflect on how to make social inclusion meaningful and authentic. Key critiques of social inclusion in museums examine how practices explicitly labelled as 'social inclusion' make either no difference to the status quo, or even worsen the situation. Drawing on critiques outside the museum field, we know social inclusion can be invoked in hollow attempts to build markets (Bhattacharya, 2018). Critics also argue that social inclusion efforts rarely go far enough. Sara Ahmed (2012) has

argued, for instance, that inclusion agendas can be framed in ways that protect established, institutional practices against the kinds of transformative changes that may be required to develop meaningfully inclusive practices. This sleight of hand might take the form of tokenistic attempts to reach excluded audiences, hosting a potentially transformative exhibition in a temporary space, say, while leaving core exhibitions unchanged, or it might involve attempts at co-curation without significant power-sharing or a commitment to institutional change.

Social inclusion work in museums is frequently limited because it is formulated through the neo-liberal capitalist approach within which many museums operate. As such, social inclusion practices risk being reduced to efforts to create so-called 'new' audiences, which might be better understood as 'new markets', while doing little to address or ameliorate the structural inequalities that excluded such audiences in the first place (Bhattacharya, 2018). Similarly, tokenistic attempts to transform representational politics can all too easily become exercises in racial capitalism, benefitting institutions rather than the communities they claim to support (Leong, 2013). A commitment to social inclusion is rarely realised without significant transformation across the institution and museum field, not least the array of sometimes competing values and assumptions that drive museum practice.

The way social inclusion is framed in museums too often results in practices that target minoritised groups rather than the structural inequalities in our societies that create the conditions for social exclusion. Inclusion agendas are renowned for reifying dominant practices, values and knowledges with little regard for the needs, interests or practices of marginalised groups. Framing social inclusion as the flip side of social exclusion, rather than as a broader, deeper structural issue, too often means those who experience social exclusion become the problem. Excluded groups can be framed as doing the wrong things (not visiting museums or other dominant cultural institutions) and having the wrong values (not appreciating museums, being unknowledgeable and without culture). In other words, excluded groups are seen as doubly deficient, in terms of behaviours and attitudes. Social inclusion, from this deeply flawed premise, becomes an assimilationist exercise that works to protect the privilege of dominant groups and institutions, leaving museums largely unchanged (Dawson, 2019). Without institution-wide commitment to redressing structural inequalities and working towards inclusive change over time, working in long-term, trust-building partnerships with excluded communities, social inclusion in museums (and elsewhere) too easily remains talk without action.

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