

Introduction

This book considers the way blind and partially sighted people (BPSP) make meaning and form identities through embodied experience in the museum space. It explores BPSP's situated interactions with companions, other visitors, objects, and the environment. This book examines the wider social and cultural context of disability and the museum visit, particularly concerning accessibility for BPSP. By drawing on empirical findings, I argue that museum accessibility is part of a wider issue of providing access to environments, institutions, geographies, and information. The finding that BPSP have developed visiting strategies for themselves and their community further highlights the leadership role that museums could play in addressing the gap of seeing themselves as part of a larger infrastructure, as well as paving the way for a wider cultural shift.

1.1. Research context

When I started the research for this volume, I began by asking what it means for someone with a vision impairment to be physically in a museum. The lack or loss of sight usually means that BPSP need to navigate, approach, and understand the environment differently compared to sighted people. The most obvious questions that come to mind when one thinks of BPSP in a museum are 'how do they walk around?' and 'How do they experience objects if they cannot see?'. Both questions imply that the physical impairment of sight loss and blindness directly affects the way BPSP access and make sense of museums through their bodies.

The focus of this book on the body and the embodied experience comes from the fact that there is a significant debate in the UK around physical access to museums for disabled people. For a long time, concerns seemed to be primarily related to tokenistic access resources like ramps for wheelchair users or tactile replicas for BPSP. This can be defined as being part of a 'culture of compliance' (Candlin 2010; Sandell and Nightingale 2012; Smith *et al.* 2012). Until recently, the debate rarely focused on the effect of embodied practices on meaning-making and the overall learning experience of disabled people. Recently (2021) the Science Museum Group advertised the position of Head of Access and Equity within the Department of Learning. This position, one of the first of its kind in a large national institution, formally brings together the realm of accessibility with that of learning. This can be seen as a public acknowledgment of how accessibility and inclusion of disabled people is not a mere access issue of 'how to get in and how to get around'. Access and inclusion are deeply connected to the way disabled people make sense

of the space, how they develop cultural capital, and how they form and refine their identities. This suggests that the social and cultural shift underway across institutions and society, of which museums are a part, should broaden its scope.

In order to acknowledge the embodied and situated nature of the experience and the learning of BPSP in museums, my research is informed by sociocultural situated perspectives on meaning-making as well as the embodiment theoretical framework. The nature of the research is interdisciplinary; the theoretical framework is formed of different theories and existing literature from museum studies, disability studies, visitor studies, learning science, and urban studies that are brought together to examine visitors' meaning-making and identity formation processes. This research adopts the embodiment and sociocultural framework, arguing that BPSP's practice and identity is an embodied, social, situated, and mediated process.

1.2. Disability and museums

Over the past 20 years, the issue of equality in museums and the inclusion of disabled people have been discussed among scholars and practitioners within the frameworks of human rights and social justice. Museums and other heritage institutions have been reframed as institutions purposefully bringing about social change (Janes and Sandell 2019). Museums have made efforts to recognise disabled people as under-represented and traditionally neglected audiences, and have also worked towards a better understanding and representation of disabled people and disability-related themes in their collections and exhibitions. Scholars like Sandell, Dodd, Garland-Thompson and Janes have shown how museums have the potential to 'engage in activist practice, with explicit intent to act upon inequalities, injustices and environmental crises' (Janes and Sandell 2019).

Restrictive opening hours, expensive admission rates, and elitist access and authority remained common exclusionary practices in many museums long after they were deemed incongruent with contemporary social standards (Saunders 2014; Silverman 2010). Nowadays, museums increasingly face greater critical scrutiny from the public. Museums are increasingly called to create inclusive and accessible experiences and to reach out to audiences who have been traditionally left out of the museum discourse (Candlin 2010; Fleming 2002; Smith *et al.* 2012). As Silverman has argued, 'museums are embracing starkly bolder roles as agents of well-being and as vehicles for social change' (2010, 3). In light of social

and governmental pressure, as well as new legislation, museums are improving accessibility in order to justify their place within society according to a re-evaluation of their role as educational and social environments (Spence 2007). In this sense, accessibility must be re-examined in relation to institutional change and a shift of values in the museum context.

Museums have the unique opportunity to embrace advocacy and activism roles, and to support the diverse communities in which they are embedded (Sandell 2002). Sandell has argued that it is essential for museums to develop ‘awareness and understanding of their potential to construct more inclusive, equitable and respectful societies’ (2002, 4). This is due to the greater understanding of the authority and impact of museums on the cultural and social experiences of individuals and communities that systematically face injustice. Museums have the potential to provide educational opportunities that compensate for exclusion from, and different treatment experienced within, traditional learning settings like schools (Ainscow and Sandill 2010; Hayhoe 2013a). Scholars have examined how the social component of being able to visit museums plays a crucial role in the life of disabled people (Candlin 2010). Others have discussed how museums can offer a fresh perspective on physical and mental differences which prompted visitors to engage in discussions informed by the non-discriminatory and rights-based narratives they encountered there (Dodd *et al.* 2010).

This book sits within such framework. Museums have the potential to be inclusive settings that can host, inform, and stimulate inclusive conversations and embodied practices among visitors. It is necessary to look at how these conversations and practices unfold in the experiences of disabled visitors (Hayhoe 2017). Listening to the voices and amplifying the lived experiences of disabled people is the first step towards the development of an inclusive and non-discriminatory museum experience that has a positive social impact. Hence, I aim to investigate the way BPSP make meaning and form identities through their interactions with, and embodied experiences of, the museum environment and collections. A deeper understanding of their experience has the potential to inform practice for the development of non-discriminatory, inclusive, and to empowering spaces, which reflect and shape the lived experiences of visitors.

1.3. Book structure

The introductory chapter has presented the rationale for conducting this study, the research context, the legislation around disability and sight loss in the UK, and the research questions.

Chapter 2 lays out the overarching theories of my research: the embodiment theory, the concepts of habitus and capital from the theory of practice, and the situated learning and identity theories. The combination of these

theories allows me to devise the framework with which to answer the research questions, and specifically frame the context of embodied and social practices of BPS visitors. The chapter builds the theoretical framework for this research, providing insights which will be elaborated on in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. The chapter begins with a discussion of embodiment theory, focusing on how the interaction between the body, the physical actions, and the perceptions of the environment have a meaningful role in learning and identity formation. It continues with a discussion of impairment and embodiment, considering what it means to have an impaired body, and outlining the links between embodiment and two concepts from Bourdieu’s theory of practice, capital, and habitus. I also examine the situated nature of embodied practices, drawing from Lave and Wenger’s situated learning theory to frame my research within the concept of meaning-making and identity formation. Here, I discuss learning as situated and as a continuous process deeply rooted in bodily activity.

Chapter 3 discusses the different characteristics of the embodied practice of BPSP in museums. It turns to empirical studies and it reviews existing literature to situate the study of BPSP experiences and meaning-making. The chapter opens with a discussion of normative practices, namely a repository of behaviours and conducts that visitors are supposed to enact in the museum space. This is particularly relevant as it aids understanding of how visitors move in the space, and how they perceive their movements in relations to objects and other visitors. The discussion of normative practices encompasses how the physical impairment of BPSP influences and shapes their embodied practice and their social interactions with other walking and standing bodies. The remainder of the chapter follows the different characteristics of visitors’ embodied practice: from gesturing, walking, seeing and being seen, to looking at and touching objects. These are characteristics of the embodied practice of sighted and BPS visitors according to existing literature, which helped shape the analysis of my findings. The discussion of these characteristics provides insights for my investigation of the perceived roles of museums for disabled people, and specifically BPSP. I draw from a broad range of studies on embodied practices, both in museums and other contexts, which offer insights for my discussion on embodied practices and meaning-making.

Chapter 4 sets out the nature of the research, presenting the methodology, research methods for data collection, and research design. I present my recruitment strategy, as well as the rationale for selecting case studies and participants.

Chapters 5–7 present findings from my three case studies and my analysis and discussion of the results. Chapter 5 presents findings from the Victoria & Albert Museum; chapter 6 from the Wallace Collection; and chapter 7 from the Museum of London. Each provide a cross-analysis of findings gathered via interviews, video recordings, and fieldnotes. Findings are presented and discussed following

six themes which mirror the categories of the embodied practice of participants that emerged during the coding of data: co-walking, scaffolding, identity formation, looking, touching, and using resources. This structure allows me to perform a comparative analysis of the three case studies, discussing how the embodied practice enables meaning-making and identity formation.

In chapter 8, I summarise key findings and conclusions, discussing them in relation to the body of literature on embodiment, practice, disability and situated learning. The chapter provides an overview of the implications and recommendations for practitioners and scholars on how BPSP experience the museum space, make meaning, and form identities. Additionally, I provide a reflection on the limitations of my research, and issues to be considered for future research. The chapter ends with a short section on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for the access and inclusion of BPSP in museums.