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# The individual's needs versus the needs of a broader public

A short introduction to a central moral challenge  
museum employees could face when working with contested,  
sensitive histories

**Abstract** Over the past decades many museums have seen their role become subject to significant change. From being essentially institutions committed to bridging the gap between a nation's past and present, they have gradually assumed a supplementary role as social actors with a special opportunity for giving people often neglected a chance to be heard and seen. A multitude of strong narratives, many of them traumatic, have found their way into the museums and in some way radically transformed the working days of the museum professionals. In the wake of this development a number of moral challenges have appeared, e.g. how to deal with sensitive, contested history, how to master delicate interview situations or how to reconcile professional obligations with empathy, compassion and solidarity. The purpose of this conference paper is to introduce briefly one of these challenges.

**Keywords** moral challenges, professional ethics, personal narratives, sensitive topics

## Introduction

My speech at the Helsingborg conference was titled *Moral challenges for museum professionals. A short overview* and aimed to give the audience a sizeable idea of the comprehensive reviews and considerations which are needed when working with sensitive histories – especially when contested histories are involved. The presentation based mainly on the findings of my research connected to a PhD-thesis. In this paper, I would like to concentrate on only one of these challenges: the moral balancing of individual needs versus the needs of a broader public.<sup>1</sup> In my PhD-thesis, where this challenge was among many other findings, my research focused on the following: What are the moral challenges employees at a museum of cultural history face when dealing with sensitive, contemporary-related exhibitions that involve external collaboration, how are they handled and how should they be handled? These topics were examined using research questions that attempted to shed light on how interactions happen and how morally relevant decisions are dealt with internally in museums, what moral challenges arise in cooperation with individuals and further dissemination of their stories, and how museum employees handle the tension between facts and experience. My starting point has always been – and still is – the museum employees, the framework in which they work, and the needs that become visible in projects on contested, sensitive history. Several ethical theories may provide valuable insight and advice while facing these challenges, and in my work I have used mainly professional ethics, consequence ethics, deontological ethics, recognition theory and relational ethics (Pabst 2014; Pabst 2016).

When working with sensitive, contested history there are many considerations which must be observed and many needs to be balanced. Projects may deal with themes of war, violence in closed institutions, violation of

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1 The thesis as a whole was published in 2014 by the University of Agder and then in a shorter version in 2016 by the Norwegian Museumsforlaget. The latter has now been translated into English and will be available online for free downloading by the end of 2018. In the thesis the reader will find more than 1,200 notes with detailed information about sources and relevant literature, and the compressed version still has almost 500 notes. This conference paper is in addition a shorter version of an article published in the Museum International “Museums and Contested Histories” by ICOM in the end of 2018.

human rights, the limits of the freedom of speech or the treatment of minorities. It may also touch upon the dark sides of contemporary society: poverty, mental health, or the abuse of alcohol. It is common to all these issues that the themes may trigger strong emotions and reactions among all persons involved: the individuals who are about to relate something difficult and painful they have experienced, visitors who must react to these testimonies and handle their own feelings attached to the revealed stories, the local society and its members who might have to reconsider how they understand their own identity, and not least the museum employees who must respond simultaneously to their own and other people's feelings.

I take my point of departure in projects of cooperation, which aim at producing an exhibition – an ordinary museal channel of dissemination – which is addressed to a broad public. Here, the museum employees might work together with individuals from the local society, contributing with personal experiences and reflections connected to some selected incidents or experiences from their own lives. Such a narrative is necessarily subjective and coloured by earlier experiences. Such experiences might have been traumatic and are difficult to handle, and talking about them to a museum staff member who is perforce a stranger can be emotionally hard. Therefore it is very important how these persons are met by the staff members and how their narratives are prepared for a broad audience. The fact that cooperation with individuals is right and important is confirmed by relevant literature within museology and psychology. Two aspects may be emphasized in this connection: a) the audience/the society becomes more strongly affected and learns more when exhibitions are based upon personal narratives, and b) it is of positive value for individuals that the museum disseminates their personal narratives, even if these are based upon painful experiences.

Knowledge, experience, moral analysis of the consequences of the different courses of action for all parties involved and the individual employee's character and handling of feelings are crucial when one decides how to act in a morally challenging situation. All these factors are to a great extent marked by *feelings*, both one's own and the ability to immerse oneself in other people's feelings. Since every assessment of situation and following action leads to new experience which change thought patterns and future actions in similar situations, the importance of feelings cannot be overestimated. The feelings of the participants, the audience and the employees characterize all courses of action and thereby all work on and repercussions from the exhibition.

## The individual's needs versus the needs of a broader public

How should one attend to individual persons in the best possible manner and at the same time cover what one considers to be the needs of a broader audience or the society as such? This is always the crucial question when meeting individual persons face to face – we observe their vulnerability and are touched by the emotions which appear in the conversation.

Take for example Thomas, a young father, who participated in a project about poverty in the South of Norway.<sup>2</sup> He told us in detail about the feeling of having to choose between bread for him and his daughter and letting the child participate at a friend's birthday party, which demands a small present. He felt he could not talk with anybody about his lack of money for even the most essential things: who would understand, when it felt like that most of the population in Norway had more than enough money? His and the other participants' stories were mainly about the same: guilt and shame of being a 'loser' in a county where everybody else seems to be successful, while simultaneously feeling invisible. The feeling of shame often leads to loneliness and social isolation. It seems too hard to tell anyone what has happened or is going on, and one tries hard to keep up a façade. This again means that people with identical or similar experiences will not be able to realize that they actually are not the only ones suffering from the same feeling. The museum felt that these stories had to be told to enlighten the public about the fact that more than 10 percent of the population in Norway is poor, with huge consequences for the kids and youngsters involved. To contribute to creating better living conditions for the poor required making these facts public in an efficient way. But to enlighten and awake feelings which might lead to a higher degree of understanding, the participants' feelings of shame and guilt had to be transferred, ideally by using videotapes showing participants telling their stories. Of course, that was out of the question: the participants agreed to talk to us only if we guaranteed total anonymity. So, we searched for a different way to disseminate the stories. In this case we ended up with writing the stories down and getting the acceptance for the words used before engaging actors to record the stories as if they were their own. In the exhibition we created the illusion of being in a room full of 100 people whereof 13

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2 This is an example from a later exhibition at the Vest-Agder Museum and is not covered in my thesis. All names in the examples are fictional.



Fig. 1: The spotlight focused on the face of the person speaking. He or she had no face, but the age and sex were the same as for the informant. ©Vest-Agder Museum, 2016

‘told’ their story loud and clearly, one after the other. The light in the room switched from face to face as the people ‘spoke’ and it was not possible for the visitor to escape – he or she had to consider how long they were capable of hearing their unknown fellowman tell how challenging the experiences of poverty were for them (fig. 1).

But challenges can also be related to the quantity of information we feel the visitor can absorb. In our contact with individuals who participated in an exhibition project about religion in Southern Norway, Hanna told us in a touching meeting about her former life in a closed religious community, which still is active in the area. For Hanna, it caused a great deal of pain. She was still, more than 20 years after leaving the community, not able to hug her own kids, because of her own early childhood when she was taught that all kinds of physical contact between kids and their parents were forbidden.

Her contribution to the exhibition gradually became very extensive since she wanted to confront her past once and for all. Beside a text of several pages where she among other things wrote about the lack of care and organizational culture in the sect, two poems, and a survey of what she considered to be the 100 commandments of Pietism, she wanted to include several self-composed surveys of literature connected to Pietism and what she considered the possible psychological consequences of a childhood spent in such a pietistic community. This case was challenging for many reasons, first and foremost because of the personal meeting with a woman who obviously struggled after many difficult experiences in childhood, and which still marked her life. Hanna expressed repeatedly that participating in the exhibition was her way of confronting a difficult childhood and a possibility of having sorrow and anger dealt with. On the other hand, we – the museum employees – had to find a way of presenting the extensive material, so that it could be appreciated by the public. As in several other cases, we consciously refrained from editing or changing texts, and rather worked on alternatives to present the material (fig. 2, p. 34).

Thomas and Hanna touched us listening to them face-to-face, and they expressed later on how much the meetings with our staff meant to them. To be recognized implies being seen and heard. When people experience that a museum takes interest in their history and chooses to retell it in an exhibition visited by many, they feel lifted up as individuals. If they simultaneously experience that their own history becomes part of a larger entity showing a diversity of experiences, they will in addition to their own recognition feel that they contribute to a common social benefit. Edited in a good way, visitors could be able to recognize themselves in what is presented, which in turn would make fewer people feel excluded or ignored. To let individual persons tell about their own personal experiences which others may recognize as their own or at least which lead to the recognition of certain feelings, can therefore lead to a situation where both the individual contributor and the visitor become able to see themselves in what is told. Thereby they could get a feeling of being not alone and actually an important part of the diversity. Here it is taken for granted that the narrative refers to values which are considered good and important for the community and the development of the society.

I have interviewed several museum employees who have worked closely with external participants and their personal narratives, and all were unison in their evaluation: even though individual persons did not want the museum employee to act as a psychologist, they found it crucial to be able to speak



Fig. 2: In an exhibition about religion in Southern Norway, we developed shapes of women and men, each of them representing one of our participants. A short and crucial excerpt from their personal contribution was used to attract the visitor's attention. Interactive touchscreens made it possible for the visitor to explore the whole contribution afterwards. © Vest-Agder Museum, 2011

out about a difficult situation. Being seen and heard by a professional working at an institution with considerable credibility in society, has in all probability contributed positively to the individual person's process of coming to terms with his misfortune. Gaynor Kavanagh, English Professor of Museum Science, underlines in one of her publications that museum employees at times can feel like social workers and that the responsibility they carry in many ways corresponds to this in practice. They may do well, but also cause damage if they do not act with a great deal of moral integrity (Kavanagh 2000).

In all cases, the personal meeting had considerable consequences for the employee's choice of action. The employee reacted with an increased sense of responsibility faced with the trust they got from the individual persons:

The narratives had to be handled carefully. Some of the museums employees I interviewed mentioned the need to protect the individual contributors and all of them told of moral considerations which came out in favour of the individual person. Possible expectations held by the public in relation to the design and content of the exhibition, were similarly given less priority at the advantage of the needs of the individual person. The change took place due to a situational assessment of the options for action, in which the foreseeable consequences of the action were indispensable for deciding whether an action was considered morally right.

“This is about existential questions for human beings”, said one of my informants, and similar statements were made by the others, too. Here it is of importance to recognize that regarding the strong feelings involved, it is not only difficult to speak of sensitive themes and to meet the informants face-to-face; it is also demanding having to relate to such themes as visitors at an exhibition. Here are many traps we can fall into: What the visitors experience as difficult or controversial, could be related to the theme and the choice of dissemination method. The reactions could be directed towards the fact that it is demanding to take to one’s heart new knowledge, but could also be an expression of disagreement to the way the knowledge was presented. The own identity can be threatened by new information which leads to an urge to rethink basic assumptions about ones’ own life and offspring. An attempt to summarize and interpret the unexpected reactions which appeared in my empirical material showed certain patterns, at the same time as the reactions seem to have such a complex basis that it is impossible to predict all of them.

### **How to balance the needs according to ethical theory**

In order to answer the question as to how this challenge should be met, the needs of two parties are of particular importance: Those of the individual and those of the public, which in turn is composed of a number of individuals. Whom and what should the museum employee be most loyal to? The individual, contributing with a personal account which is often difficult to share or a duty and commitment to concentrate on the museum’s social mission which demands dissemination of knowledge at a high professional level to a large number of people? Should the museum employee be a fellow human being, acting instinctively out of a gut feeling, or a professional, having the broad audience and the most effective dissemination schedules in mind?

Behind the intent to give priority to the needs of the individual are first and foremost concerns embedded in proximity ethics. Based on their “gut feeling” and considerations drawn from public morality, my informants chose to let the needs of the individuals prevail over the general needs all the parties involved felt they had, this because he or she was perceived as the weaker party – the one that needed more protection. In view of the museums’ social role and their political assignment, the question is whether this is a correct procedure, or if the interests of the majority of the visitors more consistently should be given priority. If we start from the fact that museums are institutions whose mission is to disseminate new and important knowledge for the benefit of the society, and assume that the narratives of the individuals can be used to provoke feelings among the visitors, feelings which support and intensify the dissemination of knowledge, it is an open question whether museum professionals to a lesser extent should protect individuals and rather choose dissemination strategies aiming at a more straightforward exposition of individuals and their feelings.

Here is no space to go through an ethical analysis. Summing up very shortly, it is possible to say that the needs of individuals should be given priority. A human being should always be treated as a purpose in itself and never as a means to achieving some other purpose, which is essentially what Kant points out (Kant 2002). Psychologists emphasize the importance of being seen and heard, presupposed a careful approach where the focus is directed towards the needs of the individual. If there is not enough mindfulness, there would be a risk that individuals would not only drop out of the project, but also be exposed to new forms of trauma and offence. After having studied several museum exhibitions in Great Britain where the traumatic recollections of individuals were presented, Kavanagh, among others, sends out an insistent warning against underestimating how sensitive traumatic memories are for the individuals and how decisive it is to adopt a careful approach to all parties involved. “The process” is here to be understood as the cooperation with individuals during the period leading up to the opening of the exhibition, and as something which must be given priority at the cost of “the product,” here understood as the accomplished exhibition as presented to the visitors (Kavanagh 2000; Kavanagh 2002).

There is no evidence that the stirring up of feelings among the visitors will always entail better learning and therefore result in enhanced dissemination of knowledge. There are several indications that certain dissemination tactics will support the pedagogical effect and that the feelings of the visitors are

pivotal. If so be the case it is essential to handle these feelings with care. Løgstrup's approach to the concept of confidence suggests that confidence gives power and requires responsibility, and implies that this double effect can be transposed, not only to a face-to-face encounter between a museum professional and an individual, but also, indirectly, to the confidence the visitors show to museum personnel in their capacity as professionals.

When visitors come to a museum they are confident that the museum employees take steps to make sure their visit will elicit learning, which includes being taken care of in a morally responsible manner. Any dissemination strategy which affects the visitors emotionally has to be assessed with a particular view to ensuring that it is for the benefit of the visitors.

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