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REPRESENTING DIVERSITY THROUGH ORAL HISTORY
AT THE MUSEUM OF CROYDON

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ΠΑΡΟΥΣΙΑΖΟΝΤΑΣ ΤΗΝ ΠΟΙΚΙΝΟΜΟΡΦΙΑ ΜΕΣΩ ΤΗΣ ΠΡΟΦΟΡΙΚΗΣ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑΣ
ΣΤΟ ΜUSEUM OF CROYDON

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ABSTRACT

The collection and display of oral history has always been an integral part of the Museum of Croydon's work. Between 1989 and 1995, the museum service actively collected oral histories (and associated objects) related to the social and cultural history of Croydon to form the basis of the *Lifetimes Gallery* - the predecessor to the current museum which opened in 2006. The museum's collection now consists of around 500 individual recordings of which 230 are accessible through interactive touch-screen kiosks in the main museum galleries. These five main galleries span different time-periods to form a timeline between 1800 and the present day. The aim of this article is to look at how identity is represented, regulated and consumed within the museum galleries, using statistical analysis of the borough's demographic profile and the museum's visitor profile, visitor feedback from questionnaires and comment cards, and the contents of the galleries (oral histories).

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Με βάση τη μακρόχρονη εμπειρία του Museum of Croydon όσον αφορά την αναπαράσταση της ποικιλίας των διαφορετικών ατόμων και ομάδων που ζουν στα όρια του Δήμου του Croydon, το κείμενο παρουσιάζει και σχολιάζει τα αποτελέσματα πρόσφατης έρευνας που εκπόνησε το Μουσείο με σκοπό να ελέγξει κατά πόσον η παρουσίαση της κοινωνικής ποικιλομορφίας του Δήμου του Croydon στις εκθέσεις του αντιστοιχεί στην πραγματική ποικιλομορφία των κατοίκων του Δήμου, αλλά και των επισκεπτών του Μουσείου. Το κείμενο αναδεικνύει τον προβληματισμό που υπάρχει ως προς τους περιορισμούς της στατιστικής μεθόδου για αναλύσεις δεδομένων που αποσκοπούν κυρίως σε μια ισορροπημένη μουσειακή παρουσίαση όλων των κοινωνικών ομάδων που ζουν και δρουν στο Croydon. Παράλληλα, επισημαίνει τη σημασία των ποιοτικών μεθόδων έρευνας για τη διαμόρφωση μίας, κατά το δυνατόν, αντιπροσωπευτικής παρουσίασης των αντίστοιχων προφορικών ιστοριών.

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Background

The collection and display of oral history has always been an integral part of the Museum of Croydon's work. Between 1989 and 1995, the museum service actively collected oral histories (and associated objects) related to the social and cultural history of Croydon to form the basis of the *Lifetimes* Gallery - the predecessor to the current museum which opened in 2006.

This initial approach to collecting came out of an unusual circumstance: evaluation had identified a need for a people-focussed local history museum at Croydon, but there were no collections to meet that need. Interviews were conducted with an emphasis on the importance of context, people and locality, and a stress was placed on loaning objects from interviewees to support the stories.

The museum's collection now consists of around 500 individual recordings of which 230 are accessible through interactive touch-screen kiosks in the main museum galleries. These five main galleries span different time-periods to form a timeline between 1800 and the present day.

Each object in the museum has four levels of interpretation delivered through the kiosk screens: Show, Tell, Explain and Explore. These screens give the visitor access to descriptive label information for the object, the oral history or primary source associated with it, the historical context of it, and links to further information - often other sources, objects or stories within the museum's collections.

The museum's current collecting methodology is primarily oral history led, concentrating on collecting within living memory, but allowing for a synthesised approach to historical and contemporary collecting and display where possible.

Regulation (Collecting themes and demographics)

The display of oral histories in the museum is regulated by 24 distinct collecting themes designed to balance the spectrum of human experience: World Events; National Events; Home Life and Housing; Demography; Work; Personal Hygiene and Public Health; Natural and Built Environment; Fashion and Taste; Media and Communications; Religion and Morality; Crime and Law; Sex and Love; Education; Health; Transport and Travel; Arts and Crafts; Welfare; Politics and Economy; Leisure; Food and Farming; Retail, Trade and Shopping; Science and Technology; Dying and Bereavement and Parenthood.

A second regulatory factor upon the display of oral histories within the museum is the borough's demographic make-up.

According to the 2011 census, Croydon is London's largest local authority by population with 363,400 residents - an increase of 8.5% (28,300 people) on the population recorded by the 2001 census, the last census conducted before the museum opened in its present guise in 2006 (Office for National Statistics 2011).

Within the census, 47% of Croydon residents identified themselves as white British - the largest single ethnic group. This compares to 45% of Londoners and 80% of the population nationally. 45% of Croydon residents fall into 'non-white' ethnic groups. This compares to 40% of Londoners and just fewer than 15% nationally (all percentages rounded to whole figures).

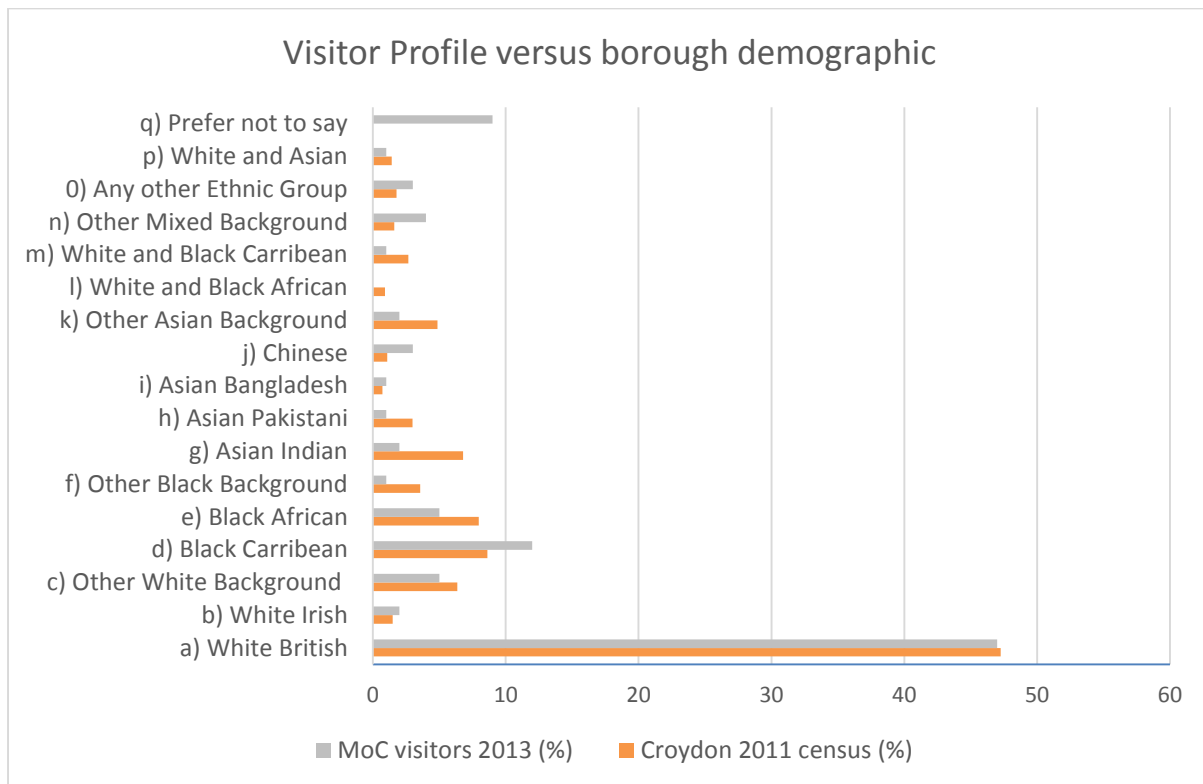
The aim within the time-bound museum galleries is that the identified collecting themes will combine with statistical analysis of the borough's demographic make-up to provide a structural framework for the museum displays:

We serve a diverse community and we intend to develop our collections and displays to reflect that. Where possible we will use a statistical, objective basis to achieve equality of representation" (Museum of Croydon Collections Development Policy 2013).

The aim of this article is to look at how identity is represented, regulated and consumed within the museum galleries, using statistical analysis of the borough's demographic profile and the museum's visitor profile, visitor feedback from questionnaires and comment cards, and the contents of the galleries (oral histories).

Consumption (Audiences and visitor profile)

The complexities of mapping displayed collections and oral histories against borough demographics and visitor profiles are hinted at by the graph below. The graph shows the ethnic groups of 158 visitors to the museum who were surveyed during the spring of 2013. The make-up of these groups is plotted as a percentage against the overall ethnic profile of the borough from the 2011 census.



The percentage of white British visitors is remarkably similar to the percentage of white British residents -at around 47%. The biggest gaps between the visitor and borough demographics are for those of black Caribbean background, where the museum is 4% up on the borough profile, and those of an Asian Indian background, where the museum is 5% down on the borough profile.

In practice, with a sample size of 158 visitors surveyed over a couple of months, it is difficult to know how accurate the overall museum visitor profile that is extrapolated from the data is - particularly the representation of minority groups. A large group of one-off visitors from a particular background could sway the results significantly - something emphasised by the fact that, where the biggest percentage difference is identified between the museum profile and the borough profile, i.e. those from an Asian Indian background, only three visitors to the museum were identified as being of that background through the survey.

With that in mind, it is perhaps surprising that the percentage differences between the museum visitor profile and the overall borough profile are not greater - particularly for ethnic groups that are smaller in number.

Representation

There are several main problems when trying to map the demographics of the oral histories in the galleries to both the borough profile and the museum's visitor profile.

A decision needs to be made on whether to look at the museum as a whole, or whether to take each time-bound gallery individually. If the galleries are assessed individually, then different demographic data needs to be sourced and compared to the oral histories within them. This would be particularly problematic where a gallery spans a large time-period - such as the 1800-1899 Gallery - as the data will potentially have changed considerably over the period it represents.

The collection and use of such data is further complicated by the changing geographical and political boundaries of what is now the London Borough of Croydon. Whilst the museum collects within the present-day boundaries, historic census and population data will not reflect these - making proportional representation hard to calculate and achieve.

Additionally, statistical information about communities with hidden histories further back in time is by its nature hard to come by, making meaningful analysis and targeted collecting and representation problematic. This is a problem the museum recognises:

Where this information is not available or reliable we will still collect hidden histories and focus collecting projects on groups or life events that have been historically under-represented (Museum of Croydon Collections Development Policy 2013).

For all of these reasons, achieving proportional representation across individual galleries outside of the time-frame of the living memory of potential interviewees, is not only challenging but potentially undesirable. It is difficult to achieve in practice, and would be restrictive in the content it would produce.

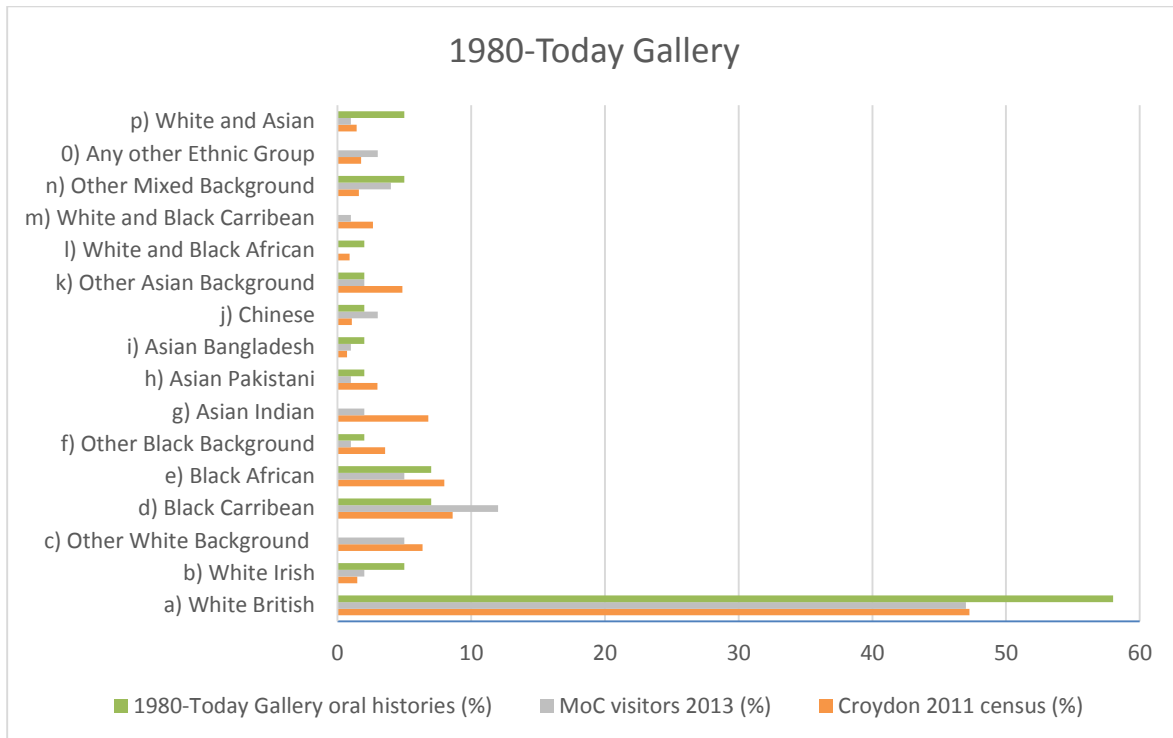
Other possibilities for analysis are to concentrate on the galleries that can be more easily affected by the contemporary collecting of oral histories, or to map the current borough profile against the content of all of the galleries combined.

The problem with the latter approach is that it would potentially skew the representation of diversity both in the most recent gallery - where the demographic data would otherwise be most useful - and also in the earlier galleries. The use of statistics would be misleading, and there would be no structure in place for regulating the representation of diversity within the individual time-bound galleries.

To look at statistical evidence of representation within the Museum of Croydon, the most obvious approach is then to look at the most recent gallery: 1980-Today.

Accurate census information is readily available and can be plotted not only against the gallery content, but also against the current visitor profile.

The gallery contains 42 oral histories and associated objects from the period. A breakdown of the ethnic background of the interviewees, plotted as a percentage against both the demographic borough profile and the museum's visitor profile is shown in the graph below.



Similar problems exist when comparing the ethnic backgrounds of the interviewees in the 1980-Today Gallery to the borough profile as do when comparing the visitor profile to the borough profile; because there are only 42 stories, any small imbalances could potentially distort representation in the gallery markedly.

Conversely, proportional representation may lead to the complete removal of oral histories recorded with interviewees of some minority backgrounds. Whilst the Chinese population of Croydon in the 2011 census is identified at 1%, displaying even one oral history in the gallery is to over-represent that demographic statistically. As a result, a purely proportional representation of ethnic groups in the gallery is again undesirable, and a more flexible approach to display that recognises this is needed.

There are however two noticeable trends which are easily identifiable through the analysis and which are potentially useful for planning future collecting and display: the over-representation in the gallery of white British oral histories, and the under-representation of Asian Indian oral histories.

Whilst there is a desirable correlation between the visitor figures of those from a white British background and the borough profile, the over-representation of interviewees from this background in the galleries is particularly stark. The 11% difference stands out all the more due to the comparatively large size of this group in the borough demographic - this should render the comparison with the gallery content the most accurate of any made possible by the statistics.

The fact that there are no stories in the gallery to represent those of an Asian Indian background - even though they make up nearly 7% of the borough's profile - is also noticeable. This is compounded by the fact that the negative correlation between the borough profile and the museum visitor profile for this group is the largest of any - at around 5%.

This quantitative approach to determining representation of ethnic backgrounds in the gallery is also complemented by a more qualitative approach. In a recent museum survey, visitors were asked if they thought any group wasn't sufficiently represented in the museum. Only one respondent picked out a specific demographic: "lack the eastern European element, Polish, Baltic States etc." (Museum of Croydon visitor 2014).

The statistical analysis had picked up a discrepancy with 'white other' as a group, but had not pinpointed this so specifically. The visitor survey in this instance was a useful complement to the statistical approach.

Within the gallery, 18 of the oral histories were recorded with female interviewees and 24 with male interviewees. Six oral histories have been recorded with interviewees who identify themselves as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender), of whom five are male and one is female. One of these six is British Asian, the other five are white British.

Comparing the figures for LGBT interviewees to the borough demographic or museum visitor profile is problematic. Through the Office for National Statistics' Integrated Household Survey (2012), 2.5% of Londoners identify themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual (compared to 1.5% nationally), 0.4% chose 'other' and 5.8% refused to answer. Of those identifying themselves as LGBT the ratio is approximately 2:1, male to female.

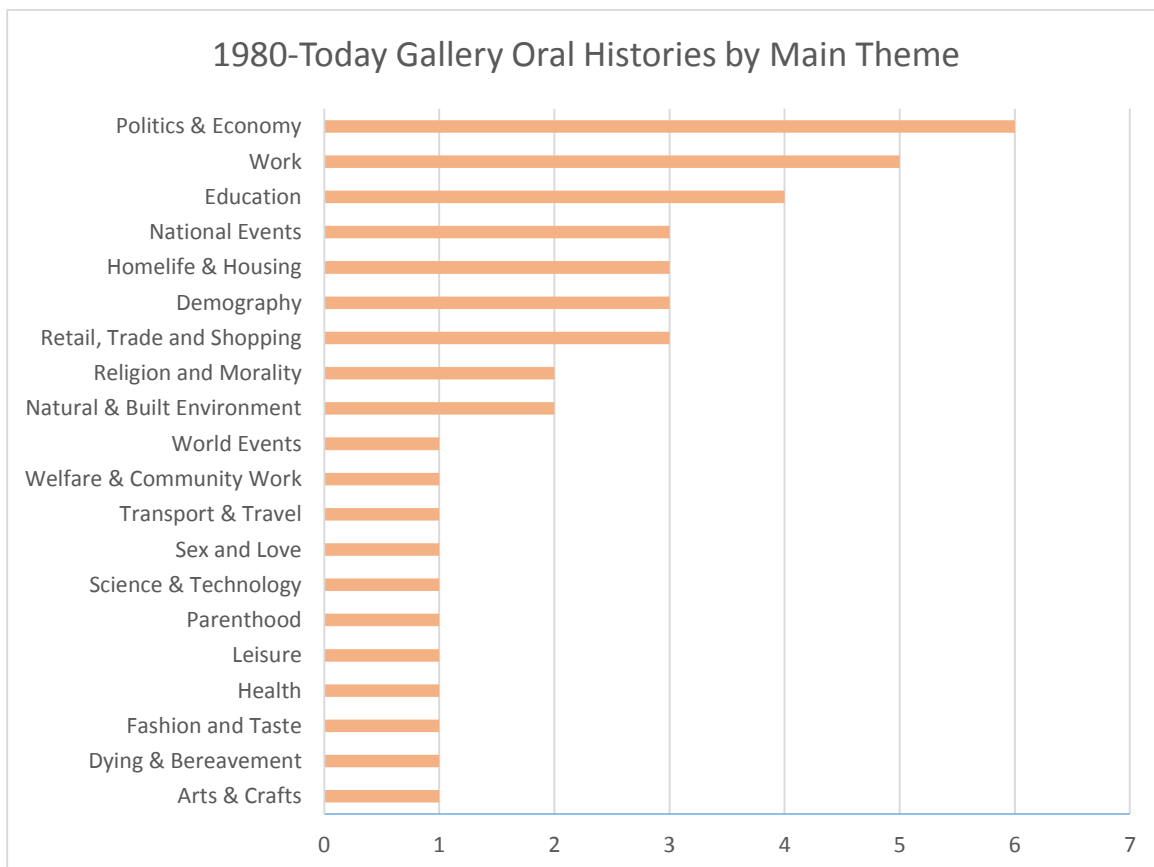
The government estimates the national percentage of those identifying themselves as LGBT to be 6%, though this figure is likely to be larger for London (Final Regulatory Impact Assessment: Civil Partnership Act 2004, Department of Trade and Industry).

Within the gallery, 14% of the oral histories on display were recorded with interviewees who describe themselves as LGBT. Whilst this seems an unrepresentatively high percentage, there is a danger in looking at the figure in isolation.

There may be, for example, a particularly low percentage of people who would identify themselves as LGBT from BME groups¹ in Croydon -the truth is that we just don't know- but this is not an argument to exclude them completely from representation in the gallery (in the same way as we would not wish to exclude interviewees from a Chinese background, even though including them is not accurate proportionally).

In the examples above, LGBT is applied broadly as a term for those who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender. The accepted definition is often now extended to LGBTQQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersex and asexual). To represent each of these identities with a story would sway the balance of the gallery away from a proportional representation of the heterosexual population, but to claim that all are represented by the story of a white gay British man, for example, is perhaps disingenuous. The approach needs to be more nuanced, and an analysis of over-representation within this broad grouping may be as valuable as identifying under-representation more generally.

When looking at the representation of themes within the gallery, the results are also interesting. Whilst 20 of the 24 identified collecting themes are present, there appears to be an over-representation of stories with a main theme of politics and economy, work or education.



When looking at this information in conjunction with the demographic information, three of the four stories identified as having a main theme of education have been recorded with those from a white British background - two female and one male. None of these interviewees come from an LGBT group.

When looking at those stories with a work theme, four of the five interviews are recorded with white British interviewees - two male and two female. One of the males and one of the females identify themselves as LGBT.

Perhaps most interestingly, of the interviews identified as having a theme of politics and economics, five of the six that were recorded were with males, and three of the six were with white British males. Three of the six identify themselves as LGBT, of whom two are white British males.

When looking at the results of the analysis as a whole, we can draw several main conclusions: women are under-represented in the gallery and men are over-represented; white British residents are over-represented; Asian Indian residents are under-represented; themes of politics and economics, work and education are over-represented.

White British gay men whose interviews are categorized as having a main theme of politics and economy are the most specific, identifiable group that are over-represented in the gallery.

Significantly under represented demographics therefore include: females (generally), males and females of Asian Indian background and non-male, non-white British individuals who identify themselves as LGBT. Replacing the over-represented demographics with stories from these individuals and backgrounds would help to balance the gallery.

Contemporary collecting in practice: Redressing the balance

The museum's contemporary oral history collecting has always been linked to both the utility and the local historical import of the material - translating in practice to a mixture of passive and targeted collecting.

As well as the five galleries spanning different time-periods between 1800 and the present day, the Museum of Croydon also contains a temporary exhibition gallery: *Croydon Now*. As with the main museum galleries, *Croydon Now* contains a modular system of individual display cases interpreted through multi-media touch screen kiosks.

During 2013 this gallery hosted an exhibition called *Moving Stories* - the main output of a contemporary oral history collecting project. The exhibition aimed to take a

'snap shot' or Zeitgeist of Croydon life in 2013. Museum visitors and the wider public were invited to record their experiences of Croydon life, and 20 stories were selected, recorded and incorporated into the exhibition to help celebrate Croydon's diversity.

At the end of the exhibition, the 'best' of the stories were then selected to help refresh the main exhibition galleries for the corresponding time-periods.

The stories collected illustrate some of the advantages of passive collecting. For example, an interview with a member of a theatre group un-expectedly led to a story about community spirit in the wake of the Croydon Riots² in 2011.

After the Croydon Riots she (the landlady of the Green Dragon pub) had the idea of putting post it notes on the window saying why we love Croydon.

It did bring people together more, I mean, this one here, one of the post it notes, why we love Croydon: "Because it's a melting pot of different cultures, religions and races, we can get on if we try." I mean, that's beautiful that is (*Moving Stories* 2013).

The story illustrates the potential for conflict between the stated intention of the galleries being contributor led, and the museum's desire to be representative of the identified collecting themes - one of the regulatory frameworks within each gallery. Had the museum solely been looking to interview participants on a specific leisure theme, this part of the story may never have been used.

The collection of some of the stories for the exhibition were targeted as they were seen to be of particular importance in celebrating Croydon's diversity at the time of the project.

An interview with Lord Alli provides a good example of this. The first openly gay peer in Parliament at the age of 34, Lord Alli is one of only a few openly gay Muslim politicians in the world.

You felt if you were black, if you were gay, there was no place for you in the Conservative party, there was no place for you in society because they were in government, and it did inform my politics from then on. And I remember it gives you a passion - a different kind of passion.

And the thing which I found most interesting is, at the time, people were much more accepting of my race than my sexuality, and that took a lot more work. It wasn't until I got much more politically confident that I felt able to talk about my sexuality. That confidence comes from being in those forums where you can challenge people, you learn to challenge them about race, and once you've challenged them about race you can talk about sexuality (*Moving Stories* 2013).

Both of these stories were incorporated into the 1980-Today Gallery at the end of the temporary exhibition in Croydon Now, one for thematic reasons (the story of a local event with national importance: the Croydon Riots) and one for its representation of diversity (and story of the struggle for equal rights and against Section 28³).

In addition to these stories, another interview with a national event theme (volunteering in the London 2012 Olympic Games) and one with a retail, trade and shopping theme (buying comic books in Croydon during the 1980s) were added to the gallery. These stories replaced like-with-like thematically, primarily fulfilling the function of refreshing the permanent displays.

To tackle the imbalance of representation in the gallery, the museum is also undertaking a number of more targeted collecting projects.

To address the imbalance of representation of the Asian Indian demographic, one project will work in partnership with a local Arts organization to focus on the influence of *Mela*⁴ on the local community and to explore themes of migration and cultural expression. Interviews will be recorded with individuals investigating - but not limited to - the project themes and the impact of *Mela* on interviewees identity.

The oral histories will be displayed first on a temporary basis in Croydon Now - for six months from October 2014 - before one is selected to be displayed on a longer term basis within the 1980-Today Gallery.

Another targeted contemporary collecting project that is currently under-way, is taking place in partnership with *Rainbows Across Borders* - an LGBT refugee group of black and ethnic minority backgrounds.

The project aims to deal with imbalance in the gallery by engaging an under-represented group - one of the stories will replace a white British LGBT story with a politics and economy theme in the gallery - and to deal with historic imbalances in the collection more widely through the hidden history approach.

Interestingly, it was the display of oral histories from LGBT backgrounds (linked together through a trail across all of the museum galleries) which first persuaded the *Rainbows Across Borders* group to be involved with the museum. This illustrates the influence the representation of diversity through oral histories can have in engaging hard to reach audiences and accessing hidden histories:

The museum was very important for us... we completed the entire (LGBT) trail - we looked at a range of issues dating back from Sexual Psychology⁵... and it was very helpful in the beginning, and in the formation of Rainbows Across Borders (Museum interview with one of the group's founder members 2014).

Summary

Taking a statistical approach to representation through oral histories can be challenging. Existing demographic data can be patchy, and any analysis needs to be undertaken with an appreciation of the complexities of hidden histories and the limitations of sample sizes and display capacity.

There is a danger of using pre-determined categories as a regulatory influence, as what museum staff may view as the subject, theme or meaning of a story may be different to how it is defined by the interviewee themselves.

In this sense, the fact that often the most interesting stories are the ones that don't lead where you expect them to is both an advantage and a disadvantage of targeted collecting. There is a tension between a desire for collecting and display to be oral history and contributor-led, and the museum's wish to present oral histories as representative of demographics and collecting themes - it is important to strike the balance between a desire for balance of representation, and the rights of individual contributors.

Within the Museum of Croydon, the temporary exhibition gallery 'Croydon Now' helps to address this conflict. It allows for the display of oral histories to be imbalanced in the short term - reflecting important contemporary events for example - whilst providing a ready source of content which can be used to refresh the permanent galleries on a more representative basis.

Statistical analysis is a useful tool to help achieve representation where up-to-date demographic information is available. The visitor sample and gallery size presented here do mean that any statistical analysis needs to be balanced with qualitative data and an appreciation of hidden histories, otherwise minority groups may be excluded from any demographic proportional representation.

Now that the quantitative and qualitative analysis has been done, the museum will update the stories and associated objects in the 1980-Today Gallery to better reflect the borough demographic. We will then conduct a new round of visitor analysis to see what effect this has had on the visitor profile.

References

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Office for National Statistics (2012). *Integrated Household Survey*. London: Stationary Office.

Endnotes

¹ Black Minority Ethnic groups. [Editors' note.]

² Between 6 and 11 August 2011, thousands of people rioted in several London boroughs, as in Croydon, and other cities across England, after a protest in London, following the death of a local man who was shot dead by police on 4 August. [Editors' note.]

³ Section 28, of the Local Government Act 1988, was enacted on 24 May 1988. It stated that a local authority "shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" or "promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship". It was repealed on 18 November 2003 by section 122 of the Local Government Act 2003. [Editors' note.]

⁴ Mela is a Sanskrit word meaning 'gathering', 'to meet', or a 'fair'. It is used in the Indian subcontinent for all gatherings -religious, cultural or commercial. They were exported around the world by South Asian diaspora communities, wishing to bring something of that tradition to their new countries. [Editors' note.]

⁵ It refers to the work of Henry Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897-1928), exhibited at the display of oral histories from LGBT backgrounds. Henry Havelock Ellis was the first man in UK who openly spoke over homosexuality as a natural side of sexual life, not as illness or crime. [Editors' note.]