



Deposited via The University of Leeds.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/43645/>

Book Section:

Graham, HC (2010) To Label the Label?: 'Learning Disability', and Exhibiting 'Critical Proximity'. In: Sandell, R, Dodd, J and Garland-Thomson, R, (eds.) Re-Presenting Disability. Routledge, 115 - 129 (14). ISBN: 9780415494731.

Reuse

See Attached

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

TO LABEL THE LABEL?

'Learning disability' and exhibiting 'critical proximity'

Helen Graham

The Museum of Croydon's recently developed permanent displays explore the history of Croydon, south London, through specific people's objects and stories. Two among the many stories presented are *Mabel's Certificate* (2004) and *Madeleine's Celebrities* (1960–79). Mabel Cooper's choice of object, her own account of its importance and the descriptive text offered by the museum, all refer in some way to 'learning difficulties'. In contrast – though in common with many of the other stories on display – Madeleine Gardiner's oral testimony and the museum-authored supporting interpretation draw on no specific identity or classification to 'explain' Madeleine's memories of celebrities coming to Croydon's Fairfield Hall.¹

Whether or not to 'label the label' – to attach a widely recognized descriptor that denotes membership of a particular identity category to an individual's story or object – is an ongoing problematic. Recent initiatives in museums designed to enhance the visibility of disabled people within exhibition narratives have generally relied on the mobilization of recognizable classifications. 'Labels' – for example 'disabled people' in the UK and 'persons with disabilities' in the USA – are often deployed to promote disabled people's rights and to draw attention to inequalities. The use of such labels as markers of identity can engender powerful feelings of belonging and worth, they can operate to communicate a positive sense of shared group membership and be mobilized to effect political and social change. But, at the same time, labels can work to differentiate groups and, in doing so, they can stigmatize. These concerns are also linked with questions regarding the capacity of such classifications to reflect the subtleties and complexities of daily life experiences; a growing emphasis on identity categories as mutable and contingent on circumstance, and a sense that classifications are not simply *descriptive* but also *productive*, have meant labels are being approached with increasing caution.

One of the reasons for this caution lies in the epistemological consequences of labelling – specifically how we make sense of the relationship between

individual people's actions, memories and objects and 'larger contexts' or 'wider social and historical explanation'. In recent years the emphasis has shifted away from museum exhibitions which mobilize 'meta-narratives' that aim to assimilate and explain multiple objects and lives within a unifying framework. In the place of such meta-explanation, there has been a call for a 'de-centering' of the museum voice, an increased use of dialogic and multi-vocal approaches to interpretation and for museums to be places for the representation of 'cultures-in-difference' (Bennett 2006) or to function as cross-cultural 'contact zones' (Clifford 1997).

Such shifts are reflected in the Museum of Croydon. No grand narrative of Croydon's development is attempted; instead multiple people's objects and stories are divided into decades. 'Croydon' is not expressed as one coherent, whole place but rather perceived as something fluid and changing and *made up* of many different people whose radical multiplicity is represented through the stories in the gallery. However, the exhibition does not fully abandon the explanatory register; instead, explanations are located at the bottom of the interpretive hierarchy. Audiovisual 'touchscreens' offer visitors access to information about an object through the choice of different options – 'Show', 'Tell', 'Explain' and 'Explore'. The person whose object appears in the display case 'Tells' the visitor about the object through oral testimony, while the museum voice first 'Shows' the object and then 'Explains' it. Unlike 'explanation' when located at the top of an interpretive hierarchy, the Museum of Croydon's use of explanation does not aim at synthesis and cohesion. Rather, multiple explanations are mobilized for specific objects and people, which do not coalesce but rather work as unreconciled pathways of explanation – of one amongst several contexts, for one part of one person's life, as one aspect of 'Croydon'.

The de-centred, multi-vocal approach to understanding our pasts has, however, been criticized – the perception being that if you lose analysis and explanation then politics too is in danger of being lost. A strand of this basic argument has been developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who argues for a 'strategic essentialism' which recognizes both the dangers of naturalizing difference and, at times, the necessity for mobilizing around collective identities in order to make political contest possible (1987: 205). At the same time, the dangers of fetishizing the authenticity of experience have also been noted (Scott 1992). Through the prioritizing of people's stories in their own words, and complemented by optional explanatory interpretation, the Museum of Croydon's approach represents a subtle and effective response to these dilemmas. Yet there remains scope for exploring further the implications of the decision whether to label or not, and to identify alternative approaches.

Taking a close reading of Mabel's and Madeleine's stories as its focus, this chapter locates the decision whether or not to invoke identity labels as a particular expression of concern over how the relationship between specificity

(of an object, a memory, an event) and social and historical explanation can be understood *as politics*.² In this chapter I suggest that social history in museums might be renewed by supplementing fidelity to individuals' own vocabulary for describing their lives by 'redistributing', in Bruno Latour's terms, 'the local' – and thereby neither treating individual people's words as the locus of pure authenticity nor jumping to meta-explanation which erases specificity. Instead, following Latour, I suggest politics be relocated through tracing the networks and associations (via movements of people, objects and ideas) that maintain differentiation, hierarchy and inequality. I conclude by suggesting that museums no longer need to locate themselves 'above' the people and events they represent (through standing back and setting out the big picture) nor aim only to create 'dialogue' between locales. Rather through an epistemological shift, museums can replace critical distance with visitor experiences of 'critical proximity' (Latour 2005: 253).³

Labelling objects and labelling people

Object labels have traditionally been classificatory; they have tended to contain information about the object's 'name, date, material, scientific name [and] accession number' (Serrell 1996: 28). Equally, the labels of 'mental deficiency', 'mental handicap', 'learning disabilities' and 'learning difficulties' have emerged and developed over time through similar logics of definition and differentiation. Indeed, the connections between museum display and intellectual disability are not solely confined to contemporary concerns with the representativeness of audiences, collections and displays. As Nélia Dias has argued in relationship to the development of French anthropology collections in the late nineteenth century, in the 'search for differentiating characteristics of the skull and of the face in human groups, anthropological studies focused on the Other – inferior races, idiots, criminals' and through this 'confirmed the latter as objects of difference and otherness' (1998: 38).

The mutual development of museums and understandings of human evolution was motivated not only by the generation of new knowledge but – significantly – also by the desire to effectively communicate 'a means of making difference visible to the public and inscribing it in the memory of visitors' (Dias 1998: 38). In fact, Dias argues, the prioritization of communicating with the public actually shaped the production of knowledge as museum display was 'a major reason why the comparative anatomy of human races and the study of physical remains (skeletons, skulls, crania) was privileged over physiology and the study of functions and processes in the living' (ibid.: 38). It was for these reasons that while the 'meticulous study of objects' was seen as key to a new rational method of knowledge production (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 105–6), the *display* of objects required some deliberate shaping for the sake of effective teaching (Bennett 1998). The 'clear and detailed labelling of exhibits' was developed precisely so that

exhibitions would be 'auto-intelligible' and so that 'the working man was not ... wearied by his visit and sent away dissatisfied' (ibid.: 26, 27).

The 'labelling' of objects or people cannot therefore be understood outside of the desire to communicate something. In essence any naming device aims to 'stabilize' meaning for the purposes of its transmission to others. Bruno Latour with Michael Callon has discussed this process as one of creating 'black boxes'. This is a term widely used in Science and Technology Studies to refer to things – or ideas – that are treated as if their content 'no longer needs to be reconsidered' (1981: 285). An example often given is of a computer, whose complex chains of production, or the workings which make typing or internet connection possible, are largely forgotten as we go on with our jobs until, that is, the computer stops working and suddenly some of those networks which made the computer work are revealed. Even though, Latour and Callon argue, 'black boxes never remain fully closed or properly fastened', stabilizing meaning does offer people the opportunity to cease to 'negotiate' every experience 'with equal intensity' (ibid.: 285). Certainly, stabilized meanings – in the form of categories of identity – have been tactically mobilized (women, Black, Scottish, mothers and so on), gathering people together as a means of expressing commonalities and using this stability to move on to communicate a political challenge. While this has been effective for a number of social movements, the labels associated with intellectual disability have been problematic because reclaiming and owning their meaning has proved very difficult. In fact, unlike the contexts of feminist or Black politics where the term 'labelling' is not generally used to refer to 'identity', 'labelling' is regularly used in learning disability politics, professional practice and academic research precisely to express anxiety about the implications of the use of 'learning disability/difficulties' (McClimens 2007).

The chief cause of this anxiety is that 'learning disability' has been very difficult to 'black box'. In recent years, the pathological basis of learning disability as an underlying explanatory factor has been challenged:

Clinical conventional wisdom suggests that in only 25–30 per cent of cases so diagnosed is intellectual disability associated with an identifiable organic pathology ... In other words, the bulk of the category consists of people who have been categorised as significantly less bright than the general population average, without there being any clear diagnosis or understanding of the reasons for their incompetence.

(Jenkins 1998: 9, 10)

Moreover, social explanations of disability that have emerged through critiques of the 'medical model'⁴ have stressed the contingent and unfixed nature of 'intellectual ability' (Goodley and Roets 2008). This has been coupled with an increasing focus on the *work* done by the act of labelling; as

Ian Hacking puts it in more general terms, 'human beings and human acts come into being hand in hand with our invention of categories labelling them' (Hacking 1986: 236).

One of the key concerns has been about the impact of categorization and differentiation. As Robert B. Edgerton – whose pioneering work on deinstitutionalization in the 1960s has greatly influenced thinking around 'labelling' – characterized the problem, the 'label of mental retardation not only serves as a humiliating, frustrating and discrediting stigma ... it also serves to lower your self-esteem' (Edgerton 1967: 145). This analysis has also underpinned 'normalization' theory, which remains influential in social care practice and aims to counter stigmatization through associating learning-disabled people with 'valued' (non-learning disabled) people and places. Normalization has been criticized by those working in the tradition of the social model of disability for not critiquing the ways in which the organization of our society itself creates certain kinds of learning disability and for not enabling a positive political identity to emerge. Research has also shown that many individuals described as learning disabled do not themselves recognize the term (Goodley 2001: 216–17). Self-advocates have challenged labelling through the slogan, 'label jars, not people' (Walmsley 1997) with some choosing 'learning difficulties' as a preferred identity. Yet, at the same time there is no doubt that being classified as 'having learning disabilities' by social care professionals very often remains essential to being considered eligible for welfare services and, in the process of classification, clinically produced knowledges such as IQ are considered alongside social factors.

In the context of the changing configurations of 'the natural/biological' and 'the social' outlined above, museums are no doubt left in a difficult situation in approaching issues of classification and explanation. Some of the problems and ethical concerns associated with mobilizing specific classifications or labels were identified in recent research looking at representations of disabled people in UK museum and gallery collections and displays, where anxiety was expressed by curators over when to 'out' a specific person as disabled (Dodd *et al.* 2004: 16). The term 'outing' refers to the public disclosure of a person's impairment (when they may have gone to great lengths to conceal it) or the attachment of the label 'disabled' to a person who may not have self-identified as such in their own lifetime (Sandell 2007: 165–66). The researchers Jocelyn Dodd, Richard Sandell, Annie Delin and Jackie Gay – while recognizing the need to consider a range of contextual factors when deciding on the appropriateness of 'outing' – tended to oppose 'side-stepping' the issue. They saw making explicit reference to disability as an opportunity either to develop positive representations of disabled people that might 'complicate reductionist and totalizing understandings of disability' (Sandell 2007: 169) or to tell difficult stories about prejudice and exclusion (Dodd *et al.* 2004: 17–18).

The issue of 'outing' (this time in the context of lesbian and gay history) was an issue facing Croydon in their development of the *Lifetimes* gallery (the predecessor to the Museum of Croydon) in 1995. Staff involved in the gallery expressed the hope that – with more than 300 voices presented in the gallery, each drawing on 'the authority of personal experience' to present their accounts of the past – 'lesbian and gay experience can be presented not as an anomaly, but as one aspect of complex lives' (Rachel Hasted quoted in Vanegas 2002: 103). Indeed, Hasted further argued that, 'since sexuality is only one aspect of a person's life, the stories only mention it when it is appropriate' (ibid.: 103). However, while this inclusive approach was striven for, there was also a concern that 'lesbians and gay men will become invisible within the exhibition' (ibid.: 103). It was also suggested that where donated objects did not immediately express themselves as being related to lesbian and gay history, a searchable database (and freely available pamphlets in the gallery) should allow the objects' connections to such history to be highlighted (ibid.: 103). Through this, the aim was to conceptualize lives as articulated at different times by different identities and to discover how, without over-determining the specific story individuals offered, to allow the diversity of social groups represented in the gallery to be 'find-able' or recognized by visitors.

However, while Vanegas describes a useful technical fix to this conundrum there remains a conceptual problem. Dodd *et al.* do assume that including the label of 'disabled' in exhibition interpretation is directly linked to introducing a political reading into the display (2004: 12, 18) and suggest that building a positive 'new cultural identity' is at stake in this decision (ibid.: 16). This position is a clear response to the ongoing erasure of disabled people in public contexts. But is the explicit use of such a label necessary to generate a political reading of the impact of 'disability'?

Here it is helpful to draw on a debate shaping contemporary sociology, concerning the utility of sociological classifications – such as 'class', 'gender', 'sexuality' – for describing, analysing or, indeed, changing the world. Latour – who sees himself as conducting a 'sociology of association' (sometimes called 'pragmatic sociology') – counsels against the 'instant sociology' and 'ready explanations' he associates with what he calls 'critical sociology'. He argues that the danger of the analytical use of 'black boxed' categories/structures is that they become mobilized in such a way that any given specific interaction becomes *because of* and *explained by* (for example) class, capitalism, or patriarchy. Instead he argues that sociologists should 'not stabilize' and allow the concepts of those people being studied to be 'stronger' than those 'of the analysts' (Latour 2005: 30). Where 'critical sociology', he argues, tends to look for what is 'behind' action and psychoanalytical approaches search for unconscious motivations, the job of the sociologist of association is to trace these connections as they are created through both actions and articulations. Key to Latour's approach is to see that people 'are

constantly at work', justifying their groups' existence 'invoking rules and precedents and ... measuring up one definition against all the others' (ibid.: 31). In terms of approaching museum display, the challenge is to be guided by the specific terms people themselves use to describe their own lives, yet not erase or 'side-step' the complex formations of differentiation, hierarchy and inequality which flow through their daily life experiences.

Mabel's certificate: communicating differentiation and inequality

So it is this complex work – and the implications of mobilizing labels – to which we return via Mabel Cooper's literacy certificate, displayed and interpreted in the Museum of Croydon (Plate 8.1a). Here, Mabel's story has a very coherent, clear and generally explanatory narrative. Unlike some of the gay men and lesbian women who chose objects which were not about their sexuality for the *Lifetimes* gallery, Mabel has chosen an object which specifically allows the museum to represent 'learning difficulties'. In her oral history, Mabel expresses the importance of the certificate by placing it in the context of her experience of school where 'she went for a little while' until they told her 'you can't come back again' because 'you can't learn, you're not able to learn'. In the second part of her oral testimony Mabel speaks about going to Croydon College and learning to read 'a little bit', especially with the help of her friend, Gloria. Mabel's account achieves its effect by using a comparison between the past and the present. First, the over-determination of her lack of ability to learn is questioned, therefore destabilizing 'learning disability' (or as it would have been 'mental deficiency') as a 'black box'. Second, however, a less fixed notion of learning difficulties remains implicitly important to make sense of the support from Croydon College provided to help her get her certificate.

However, the museum-voice interpretation offered at the 'Show' and 'Explain' levels of the audio-visual gives different explanations for the certificate. The 'Show' element – the first of the categories on the touchscreen – describes Mabel as having 'learning difficulties so gaining these skills is a reward for her hard work', going on to say that learning to read 'has given Mabel a real sense of achievement'. The evocation of learning difficulties at the 'Show' level is mobilized in the sentence quoted above as if it is an *explanation* of why Mabel needed to 'work hard' to learn to read and write. Drawing on Mabel's own autobiographical writings,⁵ the 'Explain' level of the touchscreen – located after 'Show' and 'Tell' – accounts for the importance of 'studying at Croydon College' by the introduction of Mabel's history, specifically her experience of being held at St Lawrence's Hospital in Caterham. Here, the significance of Mabel's achievement is further reinforced by attaching to it a history of segregation and oppression. Learning difficulties are not simply the meta-explanation of 'finding it hard to read', but rather segregation and discrimination are also evoked as 'explanations'.

In many ways the difference in what is 'collected' and 'stabilized' – to use Latour's terms – at each of the interpretive levels is best understood through following the different use of the idea of 'reading'. Reading at the 'Show' and 'Explain' levels is treated positively. So at the 'Show' level, learning to read is a 'big achievement' that took 'hard work' and at the 'Explain' level it is because of classes at Croydon College and Gloria's help that Mabel has learned to 'read *properly*' (emphasis added). Mabel, in her oral history extract, however, offers a much more equivocal and non-binary understanding of reading. The opening sentences of her oral testimony extract suggest that it was precisely at 'reading' as a site (located at school) that she was first classified as 'unteachable'. Although clearly the critical framework of comparison of past and present shows the failure of that set of pedagogical and clinical systems as they operated through the vehicle of 'reading', this does not mean that 'reading' is embraced by Mabel herself as a sign of either redemption or success. In the audio of her oral history, Mabel actually sounds a bit ambivalent about reading. She says 'I *should* learn to read' and through this introduces some sense of compulsion and external expectation. Unlike the first section of the oral history where Mabel is strident, in the second section her voice sounds quieter and less forceful. Where being able to read is represented as a binary state at the 'Show' level of the audio-visual interpretation, before Mabel started at Croydon College she tells us that she could already do 'two letter words' and now can do a 'few more' words. In fact, for Mabel the certificate does not mark the end of the journey but is rather just one point along the way as, with Gloria's help, it 'is coming on'. Where at the 'Show' and 'Explain' levels 'reading' demarcates achievement and acts as a validation of Mabel's ability, 'reading' does not operate at all as a 'black box' for Mabel. It is both hard and a competency which is *in progress* but, crucially, it also remains a site through which she is judged. If understood through the lens of the social model of disability it would be precisely the organization of our world around literacy that gives specific form to Mabel's 'difficulties'. When thought about in this way, the binary state of reading (learn to read, learn to read *properly*), at the interpretation levels, actually works to set up a binary reading of Mabel herself (*now* she can read), even though her words complicate and break down the connections, associations and practices which make up 'reading' and her classification as someone who has 'learning difficulties'.

Mabel's story makes 'learning difficulties' visible and legible and through this enables a critical reading of the effects of the over-determination of someone's capacity. The museum interpretation certainly works to give a kind of political punctuation to Mabel's critical framework of comparison of past and present by evoking the history of institutionalization. That said, and taking Latour's advice of allowing Mabel's terms to be stronger than the terms of the museum voice, it is possible to see that there are some erasures at work. While Mabel's main argument was reinforced through the 'Explain' label, the

interpretation did not follow the detail of how Mabel compared then and now – and the implications of that for the politics of reading itself. Because of this, the label worked to re-stabilize both 'learning difficulties' and 'reading', the latter seeming to be the very site of differentiation, hierarchy and inequality to which Mabel's oral testimony draws our attention.

Madeleine's celebrities: communicating the complexity of experience

Unlike Mabel, Madeleine did not choose a literacy certificate for her object case. Instead she chose programmes representing the celebrities she saw at the Fairfield Halls where she used to work. At no point does she classify herself in any way, and neither does the museum voice interpretation. Where Mabel's story set up an interpretive context via the use of 'learning difficulties', Madeleine's account leaves us with what Latour calls 'vast oceans of uncertainty' not even speckled with 'a few islands of calibrated and stabilized forms' (2005: 245). The 'Show' touchscreen label introduces the programmes as showing 'some of the celebrities Madeleine Gardiner met at the Fairfield Halls' while she worked there (Plate 8.1b). The 'Explain' level places Madeleine's story in the context of the history of the Fairfield Halls by explaining that 'entertainers visited the site over a hundred years before the Halls were built. The Fair Field hosted dancing bears, jugglers and acrobats at Croydon's Great Fair.'

The museum voice – with its focus on explaining 'Madeleine's celebrities' with a general history of the Fairfield Halls – drives the visitor away from any reading of Madeleine's story which might speak to 'learning disability' specifically or 'differentiation' and 'inequality' in a more general way. Yet the precise edit of Madeleine's oral history, I think, suggests a Museum commitment not to erase some of the complexity of her account. Madeleine's account is structured around two encounters, the first with the celebrities like 'Peggy Mount, Gordon Jackson, Richard O' Sullivan, Gilbert O'Sullivan, who else, Richard Todd, and that one whose name I can't remember. Barbara Windsor, Ronnie Corbett, Matt Monroe, Gene Pitney, oh, quite a few of them.' She comments: 'I wasn't supposed to, they would come down for their meals, and I used to go round the table and ask them for their autographs. They were very good.' The second encounter is with her mother who, Madeleine tells us, 'threw [the autographs] away, didn't she? Because she said it was rubbish.' Taking the same approach as the *Lifetimes* galleries, the Museum of Croydon did not mobilize any label to describe Madeleine. This is highly appropriate as the objects in the story were not 'about' learning disabilities/difficulties and because in the whole of the longer interview recorded between Madeleine and interviewer Ian Buchanan, neither the phrase 'learning disabilities' nor 'learning difficulties' was mentioned once.

But while there appears to be an understandable representational discomfort in locating the complexity of Madeleine's account through a 'structural' or classificatory explanation (e.g. her autographs were thrown away because she has learning difficulties), there remains something in the display strongly driving the visitor *towards* this kind of 'context' – specifically the sound of Madeleine's voice. Madeleine's voice, her intonation and some of her phrasing indicates *difference* just as surely as do other elements of the display, such as photographs of Mabel's certificate, Sislin Fay Allen in her police uniform (the first Black woman officer in the Metropolitan Police) and Roger Fisher dressed as a cowboy with his arm on his partner Ron. The vocal difference acts as a kind of analytical pointer for making sense of the two encounters. Neither not being supposed to approach celebrities nor her mother throwing the autographs away *equal* or *add up to* the classification of 'learning disability'. Yet both sites do act as moments of tension, concrete social moments through which differentiation, hierarchy and inequality can be traced.

As is also visible in Dodd *et al.*'s (2004) desire to make sure disability isn't 'side-stepped' in displays, there has been a general sense that it is through this notion of analysis, explanation and the mobilization of specific identities that politics itself is seen as emerging. Certainly, specific social accounts – especially those as richly complex as Madeleine's – immediately resist the sense that they are simply specific. As Latour puts it: 'any given interaction seems to *overflow* with elements which are already in the situation coming from some other *time*, some other *place*, and generated by some other *agency*' (2005: 166, emphasis original). As a result there is a tendency – especially if you want specific people's memories to have a political impact of some kind – to jump to context (the 'so what?' prized in exhibition interpretation strategies). Challenging the sense that a sweatshop can be *explained* by capitalism, Latour concludes that the problem with structure is that it is nowhere tangible and because of this is 'very powerful and yet much too weak and remote to have any efficacy' (ibid.: 168). Although there is a constant pull between specificity and unmanageable and ineffective 'context', Latour argues that there is some specific empirical work that can be done which might actually start to account for the many things which made a specific event happen. Latour describes this as replacing critical distance with 'critical proximity' – that is, working with the intimate specificity of experience but moving outwards to consider the political contexts which make a specific experience possible. A key methodology in Latour's strategy for 'critical proximity', and for addressing the erasures created by classificatory explanations, is to 'localize the global' and 'redistribute the local'. What Latour means by this is that, while 'no place is self-contained enough to be local' (ibid.: 204) and every place or interaction is made possible through multiple networks, at the same time, those places cannot be accounted for by reference to a dominating global 'underlying structure' which itself cannot

be located. Defending the political purpose of his approach, Latour argues that 'it does not require enormous skill or political acumen to realize that if you have to fight against a force that is invisible, untraceable, ubiquitous, and total, you will be powerless and roundly defeated' and that 'localizing the global', by breaking down and identifying the 'skein of weak ties' and 'surprising connections' that make up our social worlds, is 'the only way to begin contemplating any kind of fight' (ibid.: 250, 252).

I'm not suggesting here that all this work of tracing – if done – could be used in exhibition interpretation. But approaching the explanation of specific encounters by tracing material practices and specific ideas outwards (rather than starting with top line key messages and working down) might enable an approach which neither ignores differentiation, hierarchy and inequality opened up by the complexity of oral/first-person accounts nor flattens complexity through over-determined labelling and classification. To return to Mabel's oral history, a skeletal tracing of associations would allow 'reading' to be pulled out as a way of generating more responsive interpretation. 'Reading' could then be used to introduce the history of the emergence of mental deficiency as a 'problem' after universal schooling was introduced in 1870 (Thomson 1998: 13). This historical locator might then be used to introduce a social model of disability reading of literacy and to ask the visitor to consider whether a world where reading wasn't necessary would change understanding of 'learning difficulties'. From there, Mabel's critique of the fixed nature of both 'learning difficulties' and of 'reading' as a set of specific practices which are in process could be reinforced.

In Madeleine's case, there are multiple ways this local moment could be redistributed. There is a strong materiality to this story. There are autographs, some on serviettes, all once kept in autograph books. The autographs were slowly built up encounter by encounter with specific celebrities in the Fairfield Halls dining room. We know she 'wasn't supposed to', but how was this prevented? Was this prevented for everyone, or were extra attempts made to stop Madeleine approaching the celebrities? Of the staff at the Fairfield Halls, Madeleine says it 'was more or less me' who collected autographs. Using this as a starting point it might be possible to trace the development of celebrity culture in this period. Which celebrities came to Croydon? How many autographs were collected and by which people? How were the autographs circulated and when did a market in autographs develop? This would offer material ways for understanding better the lack of value placed on them by Madeleine's mother.

Key to Madeleine's oral history is how her mother came to be in a position to make decisions over Madeleine's belongings. One way of approaching this would be to consider the link between control over belongings and adulthood. This specific history could be traced via some of the labels associated with intellectual disability discussed above, as one of the main features of the long stay hospitals was not having your own clothes⁶ and ensuring people

defined as 'having learning disabilities' now have control over their own belongings is, in theory, core to current policy and professional practices (Department of Health 2001, 2007). Listening to the specificity of Madeleine's accounts and asking questions like these could then facilitate the opening up of her oral testimony as a location for understanding political inequalities while still following her own use of language and sense of priorities. Although actually tracing all the networks and associations which make up a specific memory would be incredibly difficult and time consuming, Latour's approach does suggest a set of helpful reconceptualizations which might re-animate the political nature of the personal in museum displays.

Not only a label: interpretation and critical proximity

Labels can work to generate differentiation, create ranked hierarchies and perpetuate inequalities. Labels as identities can also generate shared understanding and collective articulations. They also, crucially, work to stabilize meaning for the purposes of communication. For all these reasons, labels both remain a crucial part of the way we all make sense of our social worlds and – because of their power to classify and stabilize – also need to be approached with care. As I have shown, the label of 'learning disability' poses specific problems not least because 'learning disability' has been described as 'labelling' precisely because of concerns over stigmatization, yet becoming labelled still remains necessary to ensure access to state resources.

However, the specific debate over invoking the 'learning disability' label is just one example of a more widely applicable question over the relationship between specific people's objects or memories and 'context' or 'explanation'. It has been thought that the best way of generating critical and political readings is through using meta-explanatory terms such as 'capitalism' or 'patriarchy' or explicitly mobilizing identity categories. However, while these labels allow you to see some elements of daily life, they also potentially erase the rich complexity of social experience. Instead, and following Latour, I have made two specific suggestions which might allow a 'critical proximity' to develop. First, great care should be taken to follow the terms people use to describe their own lives. Second, by following the specific concerns of specific people the 'local' can be redistributed and the networks which make up a specific experience can be partially traced and represented. In the case of Mabel's account of learning to read, it is 'reading' itself which could be drawn out as a problematic site which itself contributed towards her specific experience of 'learning difficulties'. In Madeleine's oral history there were opportunities to explore the difference and inequality pointed to by her voice and words by tracing the devalued place of celebrity culture in the late twentieth century or by investigating the importance of belongings and the link between having your own things and notions of adult personhood.

The increasing trend towards beginning interpretation from the object, a specific historical moment or a specific person's experience, offers us the beginnings of a more satisfyingly complex and intimate interpretive approach. Critical distance only ever took politics so far; it is through following people outwards through the specificity of their lives that 'critical proximity' (Latour 2005: 253) will emerge.

Notes

- 1 The issue of how to use people's names is of immense importance when writing about those who have been defined as having a 'learning disability'. In this chapter, I introduce Mabel Cooper and Madeleine Gardiner using their full names. After this I only use their first names. There is a very real danger that in using only first names – rather than the more formal second name that is conventionally used to refer to writers and public figures – the infantilization which has characterized the worst institutionalized 'care' is perpetuated. However, in this chapter I have taken this route to reflect the intimate and personal approach which is used across the Museum of Croydon and for all the people they represent. It is, in part, this intimacy that makes the exhibition so successful and makes the Museum of Croydon such an important case study for exploring the mediation between specific people's experiences and accounts, and the idea and implications of 'explanation'.
- 2 I would like to thank the editors for their comments and suggestions and Katie Graham and Michael Terwey for reading earlier drafts of this chapter. I would also like to thank Rob Shakespeare at the Museum of Croydon for the permission to use the images included and The Open University's Social History of Learning Disability group for their pioneering work on 'inclusive history'.
- 3 Bruno Latour and others associated with Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) have developed a much more extensive analytical and methodological infrastructure than I have drawn upon here (see also Law and Hassard 1999). In this chapter, I have simply taken key conceptual insights offered by ANT to illuminate this chapter's specific empirical focus on 'the label'. With its focus on materiality – and as has been shown by Kevin Hetherington (e.g. 2003) and Andy Morris (2003) – ANT offers rich potential for further analysing museums and their audiences.
- 4 The social model of disability has come to be widely recognized within the field of disability studies and amongst disability campaigners and activists as a key conceptual tool for the advancement of the rights of disabled people. Whereas the medical model presents a highly individualized, medicalized, pathologized understanding of disability – where disability is located 'on the body' – the social model rejects this understanding of disability and instead locates the issue not with the individual and their impairment but with the many barriers within society that operate to restrict and oppress disabled people (Dodd *et al.* 2008).
- 5 See Cooper 2001 written with Dorothy Atkinson.
- 6 See, for example, Ferris 2001.

References

- Bennett, T. (1998) 'Speaking to the eyes: Museums, legibility and the social order' in S. MacDonald (ed.), *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture*, London: Routledge.
- (2006) 'Exhibition, difference and the logic of culture' in I. Karp, C. A. Kratz, L. Szwaja and T. Ybarra-Frausto (eds), *Museum Frictions: Public Culture/Global Transformations*, Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press.

- Callon, M. and Latour, B. (1981) 'Unscrewing the Big Leviathan: how actors macrostructure reality and how sociologists help them to do so' in K. D. Knorr-Cetina and A. V. Cicourel (eds), *Advances in Social Theory and Methodology: Toward an Integration of Micro- and Macro-Sociologies*, Boston, MA: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Clifford, J. (1997) *Routes: Travel and Translations in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cooper, M. (2001) 'Mabel's story', *Learning Disability History*, Faculty of Health and Social Care, The Open University. Online. Available <http://www.open.ac.uk/hsc/lds/site/mabel/index.html> (accessed 21 November 2008).
- Department of Health (2001) *Valuing People: A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century*. Online. Available <http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm50/5086/5086.pdf> (accessed 21 November 2008).
- (2007) *Valuing People Now: From Progress to Transformation*. Online. Available http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Consultations/LiveConsultations/DH_081014 (accessed 21 November 2008).
- Dias, N. (1998) 'The visibility of difference: nineteenth-century French anthropological collections' in Sharon MacDonald (ed.), *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Dodd, J., Sandell, R., Delin A. and Gay, J. (2004) *Buried in the footnotes: the representation of disabled people in museum and gallery collections*, University of Leicester. Online. Available <https://lra.le.ac.uk/handle/2381/33> (accessed 21 November 2008).
- Dodd, J., Sandell, R., Jolly, D. and Jones, C. (2008) *Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries*, University of Leicester.
- Edgerton, R. B. (1967) *The Cloak of Competence: Stigma in the Lives of the Mentally Retarded*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ferris, G. (2001) 'Gloria's story', *Learning Disability History*, Faculty of Health and Social Care, The Open University. Online. Available <http://www.open.ac.uk/hsc/lds/site/gloria/index.html> (accessed 21 November 2008).
- Goodley, D. (2001) 'Learning Difficulties, the social model of disability and impairment: challenging epistemologies', *Disability and Society*, 16(2): 207–31.
- and Roers, G. (2008) 'The (be)comings and goings of "developmental disabilities": the cultural politics of "impairment"', *Discourses: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 29(2): 239–355.
- Hacking, I. (1986) 'Making up people' in T. C. Heller, M. Sosna and D. E. Wellbery (eds), *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality and the Self in Western Thought*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Hetherington, K. (2003) 'Accountability and disposal: visual impairment and the museum', *Museum and Society*, 1(2): 104–15.
- Hopper-Greenhill, E. (2000) *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*, London: Routledge.
- Jenkins, R. (ed.) (1998) *Questions of Competence: Culture, Classification and Intellectual Disability*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Latour, B. (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Law, J. and Hassard, J. (eds) (1999) *Actor Network Theory and After*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- McClimens, A. (2007) 'Languages, labels and diagnosis: An idiot's guide to learning disability', *Journal of Intellectual Disability*, 11: 257.
- Mohanty, S. P. (1989) 'Us and them: on the philosophical bases of political criticism', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 21: 1–31.
- Morris, A. (2003) 'Redrawing the boundaries: questioning the geographies of Britishness at Tate-Britain', *Museum and Society*, 1(3): 170–81.
- Sandell, R. (2007) *Museums, Prejudice and the Reframing of Difference*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Scott, J. W. (1992) 'Experience' in J. Butler and J. W. Scott (eds), *Feminists Theorize the Political*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Serrell, B. (1996) *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, Walnut Creek, CA and Oxford: Altamira.
- Spivak, G. C. (1987) *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Thomson, A. (2008) 'Oral history and community history in Britain: personal and critical reflections on twenty-five years of change', *Oral History*, 36(1): 95–105.
- Thomson, M. (1998) *The Problem of Mental Deficiency: Eugenics, Democracy and Social Policy in Britain 1870–1959*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vanegas, A. (2002) 'Representing lesbian and gay men in British social history museums' in R. Sandell (ed.), *Museums, Society, Inequality*, London: Routledge.
- Walmsley, J. (1997) 'Including people with learning difficulties: theory and practice' in Len Barton and Mike Oliver (eds), *Disability Studies: Past, Present and Future*, Leeds: The Disability Press.
- Woodward, K. (1997) 'Concepts of identity and difference' in K. Woodward (ed.), *Identity and Difference*, London: Sage.