This project is in partnership with Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums and ‘Destination Tyneside’, Discovery Museum, a new display about migration in Tyneside. It investigates the dialogic potential of museums to address issues of migration, identity and belonging in North East. The ‘dialogic museum’ refers to the idea that museums are shifting from being didactic towards being spaces where co-production of meaning and learning is recognised and encouraged. Specifically, the project explores what drives visitors’ identification (or lack of identification) with displays that aim to reframe North East identity in ‘inclusive’ terms.

This research has worked with different audience groups and is evaluating how individuals’ background (such as age, ethnicity, length of time – or family connections – in North East, 1st/2nd generation migration experience) affects individuals’ responses to the themes addressed in Destination Tyneside. Building on existing research around museums and migration in the European context undertaken by Mason, Whitehead, Eckersley and Lloyd, as well as museological research into the use of museums/heritage as dialogic spaces (including work by Lloyd and Galani), this project works with both visitors and non-visitors (identified via the museum’s outreach team) to examine the question ‘who do we think we are?’ The project also aims to help the museum understand the impact of the displays in Destination Tyneside on visitor attitudes.
In the field of museum studies much visitor research relies solely on post-visit surveys within the gallery space. Little is therefore known of what visitors think about a particular issue, such as migration, before they visit. It is therefore difficult to assess what the impact of the museum visit has been on people’s attitudes to a given topic. The project’s methodology has been developed to address this blind-spot and in order to allow us to gain a better sense of visitors’ ‘entrance narratives’ i.e. the ideas and experiences that shape their response to museum displays.

The methodology developed has proven to be extremely useful for gaining a deeper understanding of participants’ experiences and how these relate to the gallery. Both the participants and the curator have been very enthusiastic about the research experience. Short vox-pops have been filmed with all participants and these will be made available to the museum for its collection. Additionally, we have now confirmed with the curator that one short composite film will be included in the ‘My Tyneside’ AV installation in Destination Tyneside on a permanent basis. There are plans to disseminate this work through academic publications and conferences, and to build upon it in future projects.

By working with the historic material within Destination Tyneside, participants had the opportunity to examine the changes within contemporary communities and to situate these within both their personal histories and wider historical context. Through testing the extent to which dialogism, empathy and attitudinal change are possible in a public museum, a key output of the project is a better understanding of the way in which the Discovery Museum and the wider heritage sector can achieve their own social justice aims by tackling issues of migration, identity and citizenship through public participation.

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https://discoverymuseum.org.uk/whats-on/destination-tyneside