

Who Am I?

The Science Museum's new exhibition is disappointing, says **Rachel Souhami**

How should one communicate a complex field of science to a museum audience? This is the question that the Science Museum had to address when redeveloping its *Who Am I?* exhibition, which re-opened in June.

The exhibition poses the question: 'What makes you uniquely you?' It explores how genetics and neuroscience may help to provide answers. But it is not just the science that is complex: these areas of research have wider implications which must be discussed if people are to be fully engaged. Unfortunately the Science Museum over-simplifies the science and side-steps many of these issues.

Bite the bullet

Who Am I? first opened in 2000, and has been redeveloped to ensure that the science is up to date. In the centre of the exhibition large cases of objects present science relating to subjects such as ageing, intelligence, gender and appearance. The themes are continued in computer-based interactive exhibits positioned nearby in large silver pods.

The fact that there are any objects at all is impressive: the equipment used by modern biomedical science doesn't lend itself easily to display and the concepts it investigates are often abstract. The Science Museum has overcome this by using objects as illustrations rather than as the main focus. For example a case on phobias contains jars of things people might be afraid of, such as string, spiders and balloons. Another case on physical appearance includes a 7-toed cat and a white peacock. All exhibits are accompanied by a wealth of labels – there is an unusual amount of text in this exhibition, no chance that visitors will not get the message.

But that message is confused. On one hand it is highly celebratory: science, particularly genetics, will provide an answer to everything. But then it has to acknowledge that actually our genes aren't deterministic. A label on phobias is typical: they are 'shaped by your genetic inheritance, your experience and by your environment' – which seems to be pretty much everything to me. So where does that leave us? Why not bite the bullet and say frankly that genes are only part of a very complex story and we don't have the whole picture?

Social contexts missing

There is almost no mention of the wider social contexts of the science presented, or of controversies within science. A case that presents average body size, IVF, sexual attraction and gender identity (why are these considered together?) has very little mention of the difference between sex and gender and the role of society in defining the latter. An exhibit on intelligence mentions past controversies about racial and social biases in measuring intelligence, but does not acknowledge current similar controversies or question the need for such measurements. None of the interactive exhibits takes up these issues. Attentive visitors may want to read the books located at the end of some cases, or use the two nicely presented but out-of-the-way ethics exhibits, but on my visit few visitors had chosen to look at either of these.

The areas of science presented here are highly complex and have some profound implications which must be thoroughly debated

The Science Museum may feel it has to champion science, but by taking that approach to this subject it does itself and science a disservice. The areas of science presented here are highly complex and have some profound implications which must be thoroughly debated. Speaking at the launch event for the new exhibition three eminent scientists, Sir John Sulston, Dr Francis Collins and Professor Mike Stratton, eloquently wove together the scientific, social, political, ethical and legal factors of genetic science, highlighting the nuances and limitations of their research. That is the kind of debate that this subject needs and deserves. *Who Am I?* might be fun, but that is not the right kind of engagement.



Rachel Souhami is a freelance curator and lecturer in Science Communications at Imperial College London
r.souhami@imperial.ac.uk