TRÊS QUESTÕES BÁSICAS SOBRE OS VISITANTES DE MUSEUS

THREE BASIC QUESTIONS ABOUT MUSEUM VISITORS

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RESUMO: Este artigo fala sobre alguns dos entendimentos sobre os visitantes do museu, especificamente em torno de três questões básicas: Por que as pessoas visitam museus? O que as pessoas fazem uma vez no museu? O que os visitantes do museu aprendem? Estas três questões têm sido historicamente vistas como algo distinto e independente, porém essas três vertentes são realmente muito intimamente interligadas e interdependentes. A experiência de cada visitante é de curso único, assim como cada museu. Ambos são susceptíveis de ser enquadrados dentro dos limites socialmente/culturalmente definidas de como essa visita ao museu permite vivências como exploração, a experiência de facilitação, apoio profissional, entretenimento e espiritualidade. Esta pesquisa trata de discutir abordagens históricas, um novo modelo de entendimento da experiência do visitante do museu, a motivação e a identidade do visitante e as implicações para a prática.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Visitantes de museus. Experiência do visitante.

ABSTRACT: This article talks about some understandings about museum visitors, specifically around three basic questions: why do people visit museums? What do people do once at the museum? What do museum visitors learn? These three questions have historically been viewed as a distinct and unrelated question, however these all three are actually quite intimately intertwined and interdependent. Each visitor's experience is of course unique, as is each museum. Both are likely to be framed within the socially/culturally defined boundaries of how that specific museum visit affords things like exploration, facilitation, experience seeking, professional and hobby support, and spirituality. This research deals to discuss historical approaches, a new model of understanding of the museum visitor experience, visitor motivation and identity, and implications for practice.
KEYWORDS: Museum visitors. Visitor's experience.

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Museums are growth industry. Every years hundreds of new museums are opened, hundreds more are updated, and tens of thousands of people come to visit. Although it is not always true, most museums exist in order to attract and serve visitors – as many as possible. Although arguably museums have long had questions about the people who visit their institutions, until recently issues about the collections and exhibitory have dominated the discourse of museum professionals; questions about the museum visitor experience have been by comparison few and vaguely framed. In this article I will talk about some of understandings I have begun to develop about museum visitors; specifically around three basic questions:

- Why do people visit museums?
- What do people do once at the museum?
- What do museum visitors learn?

These three questions have historically been viewed as a distinct and unrelated question, however I hope to show that all three are actually quite intimately intertwined and interdependent.

Although it is probably unnecessary to state, the answers to these questions lie at the heart of modern museum practice. If we knew why people *chose* to visit a museum, how they used the museum and what meanings they took away from the experience we would know something about the role that museums play in society; we could also learn something about this from knowing more about why many people chose *not* to visit museums. If we knew something about who visited museums and what meanings they made we, would also be able to better understand something about the role that museums play in individual people's lives. Buried within these questions, lie answers to fundamental questions about the very worth of museums – how museums make a difference within society and how they support the public's understandings of the world as well as themselves.

Two important caveats before proceeding. First, perhaps needless to say but important to state anyway, I am not going to be able to provide an exhaustive review in this brief article about everything we know about these three questions, let alone everything we know about museum visitors. There are dozens of books and hundreds of articles written on these topics. In this article I will primarily focus on some of the recent insights I've gained about these questions from my own research.

Second, in this article I will primarily focus on adult visitors, in particular adult visitors who freely *choose* to visit museums. This contrasts with audiences such as school children, who typically are *brought* to museums without significant input into the visit decision. That said, I do believe that the conclusions I will discuss are highly likely to apply to this latter group also, though this is only conjecture since the research on which I base my ideas was only conducted with free-choice adults.

Historical approaches to answering the three questions

For more than a generation, researchers have worked at better describing and understanding why people visit museums, what they do there, and what they take away from the experience. I would assert that two major problems limit the validity and reliability of much of this earlier research, including much of my own research. The first of these problems is a spatial and temporal problem. Specifically, virtually all of museum visitor research has been conducted inside the museum. Why is this a problem, where else would one conduct research on the museum experience? Logically it makes sense. If you want to understand something about museum visitors you study them while they are visiting the museum! It also makes practical sense. Where's the easiest place to find people who visit museums? Well, in the museum, of course. Although, studying museum visitors exclusively within the "four walls" of the museum may in fact be logical and practical, it also turns out to be highly problematic. This is because only a fraction of the museum experience, actually, occurs within the four walls of the museum. The whole process of deciding why to go to the museum occurs outside the museum; and this as we'll see has significant impacts on everything that happens

afterwards. But even beyond this, research has revealed that what a visitor brings with him/her to the museum experience in the way of prior experience, knowledge and interest profoundly influences what s/he actually does and thinks about within the museum (BELL, et al., 2009; FALK e DIERKING, 2000). Virtually, all museum visitors arrive as part of a social group. This social group dramatically influences the course and content of the visit experience (ELLENBOGEN, LUKE e DIERKING, 2009; FALK e DIERKING, 2000; LEINHARDT, CROWLEY e KNUTSON, 2002). Research in this area, as well, has shown that much of the social interaction occurring within a museum is actually directly related to conversations, relationships and topics that the visitors began before they entered the museum. In other words, it is not possible to fully understand what someone is doing within the museum and why unless you know something about that person's life before they entered the museum.

The meanings people make about their museum experience also extend beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of the museum (FALK e STORKSDIECK, 2010; FALK e NEEDHAM, 2011; FALK e DIERKING, 1992: 2000). It is only relatively recently that we have discovered just how long it takes for memories to form in the brain (MCGAUGH, 2003). It can take days, sometimes even weeks for a memory to form and, during that time, other intervening experiences and events can influence those memories. As with conversations that begin prior to a visit, conversations also can and often do continue long after visitors leave the museum. Ironically then, what happens after a person leaves the museum may be as critical to the nature and durability of that person's museum memories as what actually happened within the museum.

Perhaps the most important consequence of this dialogical quality of the museum experience is that it raises questions about much of the learning research previously done in museums since virtually all museum learning research has involved data collected within minutes after an experience. This time frame, it appears is too short for most people to be able to meaningfully and accurately reflect on the true nature of their experiences and the mental processing that occurred as a result of a visit. Consequently, visitors are literally incapable of fully describing what they did or did not actually learn. *Accurately understanding the museum visitor experience requires expanding the time frame of investigation so that it includes aspects of the visitor's life both before and after their museum visit.*

Also problematic has been the tendency by most visitor researchers to focus on permanent qualities of either the museum, e.g., its content or style of exhibits, or the visitor, and e.g., demographic characteristics such as age, race/ethnicity, visit frequency or even social arrangement. To many in the museum community the first and most obvious answer to the question of why the public visits museum is that it's all about the content. Visitors come to art museums to see art, history museums to find out about history and science museums to see and learn about science. Confirming the obvious, a research I did many years ago found that more than 90% of all visitors to art museums said they liked art; more than 90% of all visitors to history museums said they liked history; and more than 90% of all visitors to science museums said they liked science. And the other 10% said they weren't crazy about the subject but they were dragged there by someone who was (FALK, 1993). This makes perfect sense since displaying and interpreting subject-specific content is what museums do. Of course not everyone who likes art or history or science or animals visits art or history or science museums or zoos or aquariums. For example, according to the U.S. National Science Board (2011), more than 90% of the American public says they find science and technology interesting but nowhere near, that number visit science and technology museums even occasionally, let alone regularly. Having an interest in the subject matter of the museum is clearly important to determining who will visit, but interest in a subject is not sufficient to explain who does and does not visit any given museum, let alone predict who will visit on any given day. However, the belief that it is all about the content is so pervasive in the industry that the vast majority, perhaps as much as 90% of all marketing and promotion of museums is content-oriented. Media placements of all kinds emphasize what's on display at the museum; traveling exhibits about this or that, permanent collections including this rare item or that, special programming featuring a prominent speaker

talking on this topic or that. All this marketing focused on content, and yet such content-focused marketing only slightly influences public visits. Market researchers tell us that, again using America as case study, most museum-goers are aware of the content of the museum they visit but rarely do they view content as the most important factor affecting their decision to visit (AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS, 1998).

When presented with these facts, museum professionals usually counter by saying something like, "Well, content may not be the primary driver of why people come to the museum, but inarguably, content well displayed is what drives a visitor's in-museum experience and determines what they learn and remember." To this I would say, yes, sort-of. Without a question, the exhibitions and objects within the museum represent a major focus of a visitor's time and attention, but it is not the only thing visitors attend to. According to a major study my colleagues and I did many years ago now, roughly 60% of a visitor's attention over the course of a visit was spent looking at exhibits, with the peak amount of content focus being in the first 15 minutes of a visit tapering off considerably by the end of the visit (Falk, et al., 1985). Of course this means that approximately 40% of the visitor's attention was directed elsewhere; mostly on conversations with other members of his/her social group or general observations of the setting. Certainly, content does drive much of a visitor's experience in the museum, but by no means all of it. And of course, the content the visitor chooses to focus on may or may not bear much resemblance to the content the museum professionals who designed the experience hoped they'd attend to (ELLENBOGEN, LUKE e DIERKING, 2009; LEINHARDT, CROWLEY e KNUTSON, 2002). Which leads to the issue of how much of a visitor's long-term memories of a museum experience are actually determined by the quality of an exhibition's design? Research I conducted with my colleague Martin Storksdieck revealed that for some but not all visitors how much was learned was related to exhibition quality (FALK e STORKSDIECK, 2005). In some cases visitors who saw more high quality exhibitions (defined as those exhibits that clearly and compellingly communicated their intended content) learned more, but in other cases learning seemed to be totally independent of whether high or low quality exhibits were seen and engaged with. In short, the museum experience is influenced by the nature of the museum and its exhibitions, but not exclusively.

Over the past several decades, thousands of visitor studies have been conducted in order to better understand who is visiting the museum. Although, only a tiny fraction of these studies have been published, virtually every museum, from the tiniest historic house museum and volunteer-run natural area to the largest art, natural history, zoo, aquarium and science center, have variously counted and in some measure, attempted to describe who their visitors are. Overwhelmingly, these many efforts to describe museum audiences have utilized traditional demographic categories like age, education, gender and race/ethnicity; qualities of individuals that do not vary from day to day – a black male is always a black male. Museums have also used other tangible categories such as visit frequency – frequent, infrequent, non-visitor, etc. – and social arrangement – family, adult, school group, etc. Accordingly, we know quite a bit about certain aspects of the museum visitor, in particular the range of standard population characteristics that government agencies and social scientists have traditionally used to describe and categorize the public.

A predictable outcome of segmenting groups into various measureable categories such as demographics is that patterns emerge, whether those patterns are actually meaningful or not is another question. So it is perhaps not surprising that a number of demographic variables have been found to positively correlate with museum-going, including education, income, occupation, race/ethnicity and age. One fairly consistent finding is that museum-goers are better educated, more affluent, and hold better paying jobs than the average citizen. This is true of visitors to art, history and science museums as well as visitors to zoos, arboreta, botanical gardens and national parks. As documented by a range of researchers (particularly BOURDIEU e DARBEL, 1991/1969), social class appears to be an important variable. In addition to social class, the other demographic

variable that has been intensively studied is race/ethnicity. Considerable attention has been focused in recent years upon the issue of whether museums are under-utilized by non-majority populations. In the U.S. particular attention has been focused on African Americans and more recently Asian Americans and Latino/a populations. In an intensive multi-year investigation of the use of museums by African Americans, I came to the conclusion that race provided only limited insights into why black Americans, did or did not visit museums (FALK, 1993); and subsequent research in Los Angeles has confirmed that race/ethnicity, as well as age, and even education, were poor predictors of who did or did not visit one particular museum (FALK e NEEDHAM, 2011).

Although almost every museum has at one time or another attempted to count and sort their visitors based upon demographic categories, I would assert that these categorizations yield a false sense of explanation. By classifying visitors demographically we think we know our visitors, but I would argue that we do not. As summarized above, we think we "know" that museum visitors are better educated, older, whiter, wealthier and more female than the public as a whole, but what does this actually mean? Although these statistics are on average true, museum visitors are not averages, they are individuals. Knowing that someone is better educated, older, whiter, wealthier and more female than the public as a whole provides insufficient information to predict whether or not they will visit a museum. Equally, knowing that someone is less educated, younger, browner, poorer and more male than the visiting public as a whole provides insufficient information to predict that they will not visit a museum. In fact, the major conclusion I have reached after studying thousands of visitors over more than three decades is that museum-going is far too complex to be understood merely on the basis of easily measured, concrete variables such as demographics or for that matter tangible qualities like "type of museum" or "exhibition style" (e.g., hands-on, didactic, interactive, etc.). The fact is that the museum visitor experience is not readily captured with tangible, immutable categories. The museum visitor experience is much too ephemeral and dynamic, it is a uniquely constructed relationship that occurs each time a person visits a museum.

Towards a new model of understanding of the museum visitor experience

Why visitors come, what they do there and what they take away – collectively thought of as the museum visitor experience – cannot be adequately described by understanding the content of museums, the design of exhibitions, by defining visitors as function of their demographics or even by understanding visit frequency or the social arrangements in which people enter the museum. To get a more complete answer to the questions of why people do or do not visit museums, what they do there, and what learning/meaning they derive from the experience, turns out to require a deeper, more synthetic explanation. So, despite the considerable time and effort that museum investigators have devoted to framing the museum visitor experience using these common lenses, the results have been depressingly limited. Arguably these perspectives have yielded only the most rudimentary descriptive understandings and none come close to providing a truly predictive model of the museum visitor experience.

Over the past decade and a half, I have begun to develop what I think is a more robust way to describe and understand the museum visitors' experience. Undergirding this new approach have been a series of in-depth interviews, now numbering in the several hundreds, in which my colleagues and I have talked to individuals about their museum experiences weeks, months and years after their museum visits. Time and time again what leaps out in these interviews is how deeply personal museum visits are, and how deeply tied to each individual's sense of identity. Also striking is how consistently an individual's post-visit narrative relates to their entering narrative. In other words, what typically sticks in a person's mind, as important about their visit usually directly relates to the reasons that person stated they went to the museum for, in the first place, and often they use similar language to describe both pre- and post-visit memories. The ways in which individuals talk about why they went to the museum as well as the ways they talk about what they remember from

their experience invariably seem to have a lot to do with what they were seeking to personally accomplish through their visit. Visitors talk about how their personal goals for the visit relate to who they thought they were or wanted to be, and they talk about how the museum itself supported these personal goals and needs. The insights gained from these interviews led me to totally re-conceptualize the museum visitor experience; and led me to appreciate that building and supporting personal identity lay at the foundation of virtually all aspects of the museum visit.

Visitor motivation and identity

Considerable time and effort has been invested in understanding the motivations of museum visitors. A variety of investigators have sought to describe why people visit museums, resulting in a range of descriptive categorizations (cf., FALK, 2009). More recently, investigators have begun to document the connections between visitors' entering motivations and their exiting meaning making. This is not surprising if, as postulated by Doering and Pekarik (1996) visitors are likely to enter a museum with an *entry narrative* and these entry narratives are likely to be self-reinforcing, directing both learning, behavior and perceptions of satisfaction. My interviews support this view as well. Interestingly, though I detected a strong pattern in these entry narratives. At some level, each of the hundreds of visitor entering narratives I heard were unique, but stepping back a little, it was possible to see an overall pattern in these narratives. The entry narratives appeared to converge upon a relatively small subset of categories that could best be understood by thinking of them as describing an individual's motivations for visiting the museum. These motivational categories, in turn, could best be understood as designed to satisfy one or more personal identity-related needs.

For more than 100 years, the constructs of self and identity have been used by a wide range of social science investigators from a variety of disciplines. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, there is no single agreed-upon definition of self or identity, though there are a number of useful reviews of these various perspectives (cf., FALK, 2009). Highlighting the complexities of the topic, Bruner and Kalmar (1998, p. 326) state, "Self is both outer and inner, public and private, innate and acquired, the product of evolution and the offspring of culturally shaped narrative." It has been characterized as the product of endless dialogue and comparison with "others" – both living and nonliving (BAKHTIN, 1981). Perhaps most pointedly, Simon (2004, p. 3) states that:

> even if identity turns out to be an "analytical fiction," it will prove to be a highly useful analytical fiction in the search for a better understanding of human experiences and behaviors. If used as a shorthand expression or placeholder for social psychological processes revolving around self-definition or self-interpretation, including the variable but systematic instantiations thereof, the notion of identity will serve the function of a powerful conceptual tool.

It is just such a conceptual tool that I was seeking as I tried to better understand the nature of the museum experience.

As outlined in my 2009 book *Identity and museum visitor experience*, the model of identity that I have adopted has antecedents in the work of a number of other investigators. I subscribe to the view that identity is the confluence of internal and external social forces—cultural and individual agencies. That identity is always influenced, to a greater or lesser extent, by innate and learned perceptions about the physical environment. And that the creation of self is a never-ending process, with no clear temporal boundaries. From this perspective, identity emerges as malleable, continually constructed, and as a quality that is always situated in the realities of the physical and sociocultural world—both the immediate social and physical world an individual may be immersed in as well as the broader social and physical world of an individual's past (and future) family, culture, and personal history. A key understanding of identity is that each of us has not a single identity but rather maintains numerous identities which are expressed collectively or individually at different times, depending upon need and circumstance. Each of us possesses and acts upon a set of enduring

and deep identities (what I call big "I" identities). Examples of "I" identities might be one's sense of gender, nationality, political views or religion; these are identities we carry with us throughout our lives and though they unquestionably evolve, they remain fairly constant across our lives (e.g., most of us do not change our sense of gender or nationality, though our sense of what that gender or nationality means does evolve). These are the types of identity that have been most frequently studied by social scientists and most frequently spring to mind when we think of identity. However, I would argue that much of our lives are spent enacting a series of other, more situated identities that represent responses to the needs and realities of the specific moment and circumstances (what I call little "i" identities). Examples of "i" identities might be the "good niece/nephew" identity we enact when we remember to send a birthday greeting to our aunt who lives in a different city or the "host/hostess" identity we enact when someone comes for a visit to our house. If we were about to get the Nobel prize and someone was interviewing us, these kinds of "i" identities would not be likely to top our list of characteristics that we offer as descriptors of "who we are", but undeniably these types of identities play a critical role in defining who we are and how we behave much of the time. It was my observation that, for most people, most of the time, going to a museum tended to elicit predominantly "i" identities. In other words, people went to museums in order to facilitate identity-related needs such as a desire to be a supportive parent or spouse, to indulge ones sense of curiosity or the feeling that it would be good to get away from the rat race for a little while. Nationality, religion, gender or political affiliation did not seem to be the primary motivations behind most peoples' visits to most museums, including art museums, children's museums, zoos and science centers.

Following particularly on the work of Simon (2004), I hypothesized that as active meaning seekers, most museum visitors engaged in a degree of self-reflection and self-interpretation about their visit experience – in other words they were "dialogic", with the museum serving as a context for that dialogism. According to Simon (2004, p. 45), "through self-interpretation, people achieve an understanding of themselves or, in other words, an identity, which in turn influences their subsequent perception and behavior." In Simon's model, self-interpretation involves a varying number of "self-aspects"—a cognitive category or concept that serves to process and organize information and knowledge about one's self. According to Simon (2004, p. 46), self-aspects can refer to:

> generalized psychological characteristics or traits (e.g., introverted), physical features (e.g., red hair), roles (e.g., father), abilities (e.g., bilingual), tastes (e.g., preference for French red wines), attitudes (e.g., against the death penalty), behaviors (e.g., I work a lot), and explicit group or category membership (e.g., member of the Communist party).

In other words, within a specific situation, individuals make sense of their actions and roles by ascribing identity-related qualities or descriptions to them. A variety of other investigators have reinforced this model, they found that individuals do indeed construct identity-relevant situational prototypes that served as a working model for the person, telling him or her what to expect and how to behave in situations of a particular type. I believed that this was also quite likely what most visitors to museums were doing.

People who visit museums typically possess a working model of what going to a museum entails; and they also have a sense of what benefits will accrue to them by visiting. Thus I reasoned, visitors would ascribe a series of self-aspects to their museum experiences framed around what they perceived those museum experiences would afford them. Visitor's self-aspects would, therefore, be congruent with both, their understanding of what the museum had to offer and their own perceived identity-related roles and needs. As described by Erikson (1968), individuals have no choice but to form their identities using as a framework "the existing range of alternatives for identity formation" (p. 190). I hypothesized, and my colleagues and I have now found evidence supporting the proposition, that visitors utilize their pre-visit self-aspects twice – first to prospectively justify why

they should visit the museum and then again to retrospectively make sense of how their visit was worthwhile.

For example, many art museum visitors describe themselves as curious people, generally interested in art. They see art museums as great places for exercising that curiosity and interest. When one particular individual was asked about art museums she responded, "Art museums are great places to visit because they put together exhibitions designed to cultivate people's interests and understandings of art." When asked why she was visiting the art museum today she answered, "I came to see what's new here. I haven't been in a while and I was hoping to see some really new and interesting art." Several months later when I re-contacted this person, she reflected back on her visit and said, "I had a superb time at the art museum, I just wandered around and saw all of the fabulous art; there were some really striking works. I even discovered a few works that I had never seen or known anything about before. That was really wonderful" (FALK, 2008).

The visitor's understanding of their museum visitor experience is invariably self-referential and provides coherence and meaning to the experience. Visitors tend to see their in-museum behavior and post-visit outcomes as consistent with personality traits, attitudes, and/or group affiliations such as the person above who saw the museums as a mechanism for reinforcing her view of herself as a curious person. Other visitors use the museum to satisfy personally relevant roles and values such as being a good parent or an intrepid cultural tourist. Despite the commonalities in these self-aspects across groups of visitors, individual visitors experience these self-aspects as expressions of their own unique personal identity and history. However, how you see yourself as a museum visitor depends to a large degree upon how you conceptualize the museum. In other words, if you view yourself as a good father and believe that museums are the kind of places to which good fathers bring their children, then you might actively seek out such a place in order to "enact" such an identity. Or, if you think of yourself as the kind of curious person who goes out of your way to discover unusual and interesting facts about the human condition, both in the present and in the past, then you might actively seek out a history museum during your leisure time. I believe that this is what a large percentage of visitors to museums actually do, not just with regards to parenting and curiosity, but as a means for enacting a wide range of identity-related meanings.

As museums have become increasingly popular leisure venues, more and more, people have developed working models of what museums are like and how and why they would use them—in other words, what the museum experience affords. These museum "affordances" are then matched up with the public's identity-related needs and desires. Together, these create a very strong, positive, dialogic feedback loop. The loop begins with the public seeking leisure experiences that meet specific identity-related needs, such as personal fulfillment, parenting, or novelty seeking. As museums are generally perceived as places capable of meeting some (though not all) identity-related needs, the public prospectively justifies reasons for making a museum visit. Over time, visitors reflect upon their museum visit and determine whether the experience was a good way to fulfill their needs, and, if it was, they tell others about the visit which helps to feed a social understanding that this and other museums like it are good for that purpose. As a consequence, these past visitors and others like them are much more likely to seek out this or another museum in the future should they possess a similar identity-related need.

Over the course of numerous studies, in a variety of museum settings, evidence is beginning to mount supporting the existence of these identity-related feedback loops. The ways in which individuals described their museum experiences appear to reflect visitor's situationally-specific, identity-related self-aspects. Although, in theory, museum visitors could posses an infinite number of identity-related "self-aspects", this does not appear to be the case. Both the reasons people give for visiting museums, and their post-visit descriptions of the experience have tended to cluster around just a few basic categories, which in turn appeared to reflect how the public perceives what a museum visit affords. Based upon these findings I proposed clustering all the various motivations

visitors ascribe to visiting museums into just five distinct, identity-related categories. Descriptions of the five categories and some typical quotes from visitors follow:

> • **Explorers**: Visitors who are curiosity-driven with a generic interest in the content of the museum. They expect to find something that will grab their attention and fuel their learning.
> "I remember thinking I wanted to learn my science basics again, like biology and that stuff. . . . I thought [before coming], You're not going to pick up everything, you know, but you are going to learn some things."
> • **Facilitators**: Visitors who are socially motivated. Their visit is focused on primarily enabling the experience and learning of others in their accompanying social group.
> "[I came] to give [my] kids a chance to see what early life was like . . . it's a good way to spend time with the family in a non-commercial way. They always learn so much."
> • **Professionals/Hobbyists**: Visitors who feel a close tie between the museum content and their professional or hobbyist passions. Their visits are typically motivated by a desire to satisfy a specific content-related objective.
> "I'm starting to put together a saltwater reef tank, so I have a lot of interest in marine life. I'm hoping to pick up some ideas [here at the aquarium]."
> • **Experience Seekers**: Visitors who are motivated to visit because they perceive the museum as an important destination. Their satisfaction primarily derives from the mere fact of having "been there and done that."
> "We were visiting from out-of-town, looking for something fun to do that wouldn't take all day. This seemed like a good idea; after all, we're in Los Angeles and someone told us this place just opened up and it's really neat."
> • **Rechargers**: Visitors who are primarily seeking to have a contemplative, spiritual and/or restorative experience. They see the museum as a refuge from the work-a-day world or as a confirmation of their religious beliefs.
>
> *"I like art museums. They are so very quiet and relaxing, so different than the noise and clutter of the rest of the city."*

Within the last year, as I have considered a wider range of cultural institutions and contexts, in particular venues like memorials and ethnic-focused museums, I've proposed two additional categories (BOND e FALK, in review):[2]

• **Respectful Pilgrims**. Visitors who go to museums out of a sense of duty or obligation to honor the memory of those represented by an institution/memorial.

• **Affinity Seekers**. Visitors motivated to visit because a particular museum or more likely exhibition speaks to the their sense of heritage and/or personhood.

As predicted, and evidenced in these and many other quotes I could have selected, museum visitors use museums to satisfy identity-related needs—occasionally deeply held identities, such as the person who sees themselves as first and foremost an "art," "science," or "history" person, but more commonly, visitors describe themselves in terms of more ephemeral identities, such as the person looking for an appropriate, for them, way to spend an afternoon in a city they are visiting or as a person who likes to occasionally "check-out" what's happening at the museum. Perhaps most important though, is that my research has produced strong evidence that categorizing visitors as a function of their perceived identity-related visit motivations can be used as a conceptual tool for capturing important insights into how visitors make sense of their museum experience – both

[2] I have only recently created instruments for capturing these identities and evidence for these latter two categories are only now emerging.

prior to arriving, during the experience and over time as they reflect back upon the visit. In the most detailed study to date, the majority of visitors could not only be categorized as falling into one of the initial five categories described above, but individuals within a category behaved and learned in ways that were different from individuals in other categories (FALK, 2009). Specifically, individuals in some of the categories showed significant changes in their understanding and affect, while individuals in other categories did not; for some categories of visitor the museum experience was quite successful, while for others it was only marginally so. Thus, unlike traditional segmentation strategies based upon demographic categories like age, race/ethnicity, gender, or even education, separating visitors according to their entering identity-related motivations resulted in descriptive data predictive of visitor's museum experience. Also unlike demographic categories, these categories are not permanent qualities of the individual. An individual can be motivated to go to a museum today because they want to facilitate their children's learning experience and go to the same or a different tomorrow because it resonates with their own personal interests and curiosities. Because of the differing identity-related needs, the nature and quality of that single individual's museum experience will be quite different on those two days.

Implications for practice

I believe that this line of research has important implications for practice. Not only is research revealing that the majority of visitors to most types of museums arrive with one of five (seven) general motivations for visiting, it appears that these identity-related motivations directly relate to key outcomes in the museum setting, such as how visitors behave and interact with the setting and importantly, how they make meaning of the experience once they leave. In other words, being able to segment visitors this way gives museum practitioners key insights into why visitors come to their museum, what they do once there and how they make meaning from the experience. In other words, it provides direct insights into the needs and interests of visitors. This is very different than the one-size-fits-all perspective that has historically dominated our interactions with museum visitors. For example, my research has revealed that Explorers are focused on what they see and find interesting, and act out this me-centered agenda regardless of whether they are part of a social group like a family with children or not. Facilitators are focused on what their significant others see and find interesting, and they act out this agenda by, for example, allowing their significant others to direct the visit and worrying primarily about whether the other person is seeing what they find interesting rather than focusing on their own interests. Experience Seekers are prone to reflect upon the gestalt of the day, particularly how enjoyable the visit is. *Professionals/Hobbyists* tend to enter with very specific, content-oriented interests and use the museum as a vehicle for facilitating those interests (e.g., information that will support their own personal collection or taking photographs). Finally, Rechargers, like Experience Seekers, are more focused on the gestalt of the day. But unlike Experience Seekers, Rechargers are not so much interested in having fun as they are interested in having a peaceful or inspiring experience. By focusing on these needs/interests, museum professionals could begin to customize and personalize the visitor's experience and satisfy more people more of the time.

Another important conclusion from this line of research has been that the "one size fits all" experiences provided visitors by most museums (e.g., exhibits, programs, tours) do not work equally well for all visitors all the time. The content may be just right for some, and totally miss the mark for others. By learning more about the specific needs of each visitor, at least categorically, it should become possible to better serve the needs of more visitors, more of the time. It also should be possible to begin to create more satisfied visitors. The closer the relationship between a visitor's perception of his/her actual museum experience and his/her perceived identity-related needs, the more likely that visitors will perceive that their visit was good and the more likely they will be to return to the museum again and encourage others to do so as well.

For example, Explorers are a particularly common group of art museum visitors. Explorers are individuals with a natural affinity for the subject matter, but generally they are not experts. These visitors enjoy wandering around the museum and "bumping" into new (for them) objects and exhibits. Provide an Explorer with the opportunity for a unique museum experience and you will fulfill his/her need to feel special and encourage her/him to come back for more. Professional/ Hobbyists, on the other hand, tend to be quite knowledgeable and expect the museum to resolve questions others cannot answer. Not surprisingly, these are the folks who will sign up for special lectures or courses but will eschew the general tour. Figure out how to reach them – perhaps by advertising in hobby magazines or on hobby/professional websites – and get information about upcoming learning opportunities into their hands. And perhaps most importantly, recognize these individuals when they come into your institution; these folks want to be acknowledged as possessing expertise and passion and do not want to be treated as just another one of the "great unwashed." Experience Seekers simply want to have a good time and see the best of what the museum has to offer. These are the visitors who will gravitate to a tour of collection highlights; they'll also be the first to be turned off by poor guest services, such as unfriendly ticket sellers, overly officious guards or unclean bathrooms. If your museum attracts a lot of out-of-town visitors, attending to these "guest service" issues will pay dividends in positive word-of-mouth from one Experience Seeker to another.

Many museums are working hard to attract more family groups to their institutions. Many of the adults in such groups are likely to be Facilitators (though not all), primarily visiting in order to be good parents. Under these circumstances, it would make great sense to acknowledge and reinforce that motivation. Whether directly or indirectly, "thanking" these visitors for bringing their children to the museum that day will make them feel successful and inspire them to return again. If you can improve your ability to communicate with visitors before they begin their visit, you could help Rechargers know where the least crowded, most peaceful places in the museum are to visit. Or if yours is a particularly crowded institution, you could invite Rechargers to visit at those times when they could find the rejuvenation they seek.

In short, I believe that customizing museum offerings to suit the distinct needs of individuals possessing different identity-related needs will not only better satisfy regular visitor's needs but provide a vehicle for enticing occasional visitors to come more frequently. I also believe that this approach opens the door to new and creative ways to attract audiences who do not visit museums at all. This is because these five (seven) basic categories of identity-related needs are not unique to museum-goers. What separates those who go to museums from those who do not, is not whether they possess one of these basic categories of need but rather whether they perceive museums as places that satisfy those needs. In other words, if we could figure out how to help more people see museums as places that fulfill their needs—and then deliver on this promise—more people would visit.

Conclusion

A large number of visitors arrive at museums with preconceived expectations. They use the museum to satisfy those expectations and then remember the visit as an experience that did just that – satisfied a specific expectation. Therefore, being able to ascribe one of the five (seven) identity-related motivations to a visitor provides some measure of predictability about what that visitors' experiences will be like. Each visitor's experience is of course unique, as is each museum. Both are likely to be framed within the socially/culturally defined boundaries of how that specific museum visit affords things like exploration, facilitation, experience seeking, professional and hobby support, and spirituality. Other types of experiences, no doubt, could and do occur in museums, but it appears that most visitors seek out and enact these alternative needs relatively infrequently.

The lens of identity-related museum motivations provides a unique window through which we can view and potentially improve the nature of the museum's visitor experience. Although much of

what I've discussed here still remains within the realm of theory, there now appears to be sufficient evidence to justify efforts to use these ideas for improved practice. The hope is that this approach will lead to dramatically better ways to enhance the experience of current museum visitors, improve the likelihood that occasional museum visitors will become regular visitors, and provide new and improved ways to attract groups of individuals who historically have not thought of museums as places that meet their needs.

Ultimately, creating more satisfying museum experiences for ever more visitors is fundamental to the future of museums. We live in an increasing competitive world where every museum is competing for audiences and resources not only against other museums but against an ever-widening number of other leisure and education options. In a world of shrinking government budgets, financial support has become a zero-sum game – resources allocated for one thing (e.g., culture and arts) are resources unavailable for other things (e.g., public health or safety). If museums are to survive, let alone thrive in the coming decades, they will need to get measurably better at understanding and serving their visitors. I believe that this can only happen if museum professionals begin from a foundation of understanding the three basic questions posed in this article. The model of identity-related visit motivations described here provides one possible mechanism for achieving this goal.

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