Viewing Art Museum Visitors Through The Lens Of Identity

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Based upon the findings of hundreds of long-term interviews with museum visitors, Falk observes that museum visits generate complex, personally rich meanings for people. He hypothesizes that visitors have a working model of what an art museum affords and self-select to use the museum based on a limited set of identity-related self-aspects—traits, roles, attitudes, and group memberships associated with self-identification. He further hypothesizes that visitors utilize these self-aspects both prospectively in justifying their visit, revealed through self-defined visit motivations, and again retrospectively in order to make sense of their visit, revealed when reflecting upon and describing their visit. Although museum visitors could posses an infinite number of identity-related museum self-aspects, this does not appear to be the case; in general, the ways in which people describe their purpose for visiting museums tend to cluster into five basic categories. The results of numerous studies indicate that a majority of museum visitors can be categorized as possessing a single dominant one of these five identity-related motivations. The meanings made by individuals classified as falling within different motivational categories significantly differ, both in the short and long term. The article describes these five categories of identity-related visit motivations and provides initial thoughts about how these ideas might be used to improve art museum practice.

Introduction

Q: Do you remember your last visit to an art museum?

A: Yes, it was about a year ago at least, to this very museum.

Q: Do you remember if it was a weekday or a weekend?

A: It was the Sabbath. It was Saturday.

Q: With whom did you go to the museum?

A: My boyfriend at the time, now he's my husband.

Q: Whose decision was it to come?

A: We stumbled upon it, we were just wandering around, we were looking for the Natural History Museum—and we still haven't found it—we were going there [Natural History Museum] and ended up at the art museum.

Q: So it was okay for you to visit an art museum?

A: On Saturday it is the Sabbath so God said take pleasure in my creation on the Sabbath. So it didn't really matter whether it was a natural history museum or an art museum.

Q: So your purpose in visiting was spiritual?

A: Yes, to cherish God's creation, to take a part and take notice. But also to find out more for ourselves, to enrich ourselves in the process.

Q: What did you think was the most memorable thing you saw at the museum?

A: The most memorable thing was that it was interesting. That is why we came back today.

Q: Any specific exhibition stand out in memory?

A: The whole thing.

Q: What about particular works of art?

A: Yes, there was a beautiful painting that was quite abstract but reminded me of a sunrise. It had amazing shades of reds, pinks and oranges; all seeming to emanate from one source. It reminded me of the times I've sat and watched sunrises and thought about the glory of God and how much I have to be grateful for each and every day.

Q: Any other painting that stands out in memory?

A: Yes, there were a number of other beautiful paintings that I really liked, and then there was a contemporary art piece that showed embryos and babies. I remember that one in particular.

Q: Why did that painting stand out in memory, what about it was so memorable?

A: All the embryos and babies.

Q: Did you like that?

A: Well, personally, no. It scared me to death.

Q: Why did it scare you? Did it remind you of a personal experience?

A: Yes, I don't want to have kids.

Q: You don't?

A: No!

Q: I'm just curious, was that a topic of conversation with your boyfriend, now husband, at that time?

A: Yes, he's got his kids. I wanted to marry a man who was already through kids.

[Later during the interview…]

Q: What were your expectations for the visit?

A: Mainly we were looking to see what God has done. We got a lot more than we expected.

Q: In what ways?

A: You have an idea of the things that humans are capable of creating—but you come in and see all the little details and see that we are so complicated and capable of so much. Yet when you see someone on the street and think, "Oh it's just another human being." But each person is so chock full of things and ideas and there are millions of us chock full of all these different potentials. You walk away with a new appreciation of people.

[Later during the interview…]

Q: Would anybody be surprised to see you at an art museum?

A: Not me.

Q: Rate this sentence: "Going to an art museum is something that defines who I am."

A: I wouldn't say it defines me, but I would say that what defines me is that I have an inquisitive mind and a love of God. But just by knowing me you wouldn't say, "Oh that's where she'll be hanging out."

This is an excerpt from an extended interview with an individual who, for the sake of anonymity, we'll call Portia. Portia is Jamaican American, in her early 30s, who teaches mathematics at the university level. This interview is typical of the more than 100 interviews my colleagues and I have conducted with individuals about their long-term recollections of museum-going. Portia's interview in particular is quite intriguing as it reveals numerous layers of complexity about her, her experience at the museum, and her motivations for visiting.

Even in these brief excerpts, we can see the complex, personally rich meanings that museum visits have for people. Certainly this brief visit to an art museum was deeply intertwined with Portia's sense of who she is and what she wants to be. Although it wouldn't appear that Portia is deeply knowledgeable about art, visiting the art museum appeared to satisfy several important identity-related needs for her, including her religiously inspired sense of how humans fit within the universe, her relationship to her now-husband, and her sense of herself as a curious, inquisitive person. Although upon initial questioning Portia intimates that the motivation for her past art museum visit was quite random and accidental, we can infer from this brief interview that perhaps the exact venue was accidental, but there was nothing accidental about her desire to visit a museum. Portia appeared to be motivated by some fairly deeply held needs. And given that she and her husband were returning again to this same museum, we are probably safe in further inferring that her earlier visit to the art museum had actually been quite satisfying.

Portia's description of her art museum visit provides a fascinating lens through which to better understand the nature of the museum experience. Time and time again in these long-term interviews, particularly ones like Portia's where an effort was made

to probe deeply into the visitor's motivations for the visit and the satisfactions derived, what leaps out 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, prior to entering the art museum Portia would have talked about how this visit was all about her desire to honor the Sabbath, to, as she put it, "take pleasure in [God's] creation on the Sabbath." A year later, this was still not only a salient motivation for her, but also the dominant framework through which she made sense of her experience. Many, but not all of her memories of the experience revolved around this frame of reference. Both the ways in which individuals talk about why they come to museums and the ways they talk about what they remember from the experience invariably seem to have a lot to do with what they were seeking to personally accomplish through their visit, how these personal goals related to who they thought they were, and how the museum itself supported their personal goals and needs. The insights gained from this and subsequent research are leading to new ideas about how to view the museum experience, ideas that hold the promise of enabling museums to better customize and personalize their visitor's experiences. This new construct, which is just beginning to move from the theoretical into the practical realm, is based upon the thought that all visitors' motivations tend to cluster into one of a handful of predictable categories. These categories of motivations are expressions of visitor's desire to use the museum as a vehicle for satisfying a set of identity-related needs. By better understanding, identifying, and responding to each visitor's identity-related needs and motivations, museum professionals should be able to enhance the quality of the visit experience, which will lead to increased visitor satisfaction and use of the institution.

Visitor Motivation and Identity

Considerable time and effort has been invested in understanding the motivations of museum visitors. As previously reviewed by Falk (2006), a variety of investigators (e.g., Doering & Pekarik, 1996; Ellenbogen, 2003; Falk, 1998; Falk & Dierking, 1992; Gore, Mahnken, Norstrom, & Walls, 1980; Graburn, 1977; Hood, 1983; McManus, 1992; Merriman, 1991; Miles, 1986; Moussouri, 1997; Packer & Ballantyne, 2002; Pekarik, Doering, & Karns, 1999; Prentice, Davies, & Beeho, 1997; Rosenfeld, 1980) have sought to describe why people visit museums, resulting in a range of descriptive categorizations. More recently, investigators have begun to document the connections between visitors' entering motivations and their exiting meaning making (e.g., Briseno-Garzon, Anderson, & Anderson, 2007; Falk, Moussouri, & Coulson, 1998; Falk & Storksdieck, 2005; Leinhardt & Knutson, 2004; Packer, 2006; Packer & Ballantyne, 2002). This is not surprising if, as postulated by Doering and Pekarik (1996; Pekarik, Doering, & Karns 1999), one starts with the idea that visitors are likely to enter a museum with an *entry narrative* and these entry narratives are likely to be self-reinforcing, directing both learning and behavior, because visitors' perceptions of satisfaction will be directly related to experiences that resonate with their entering narrative. I (2006) took these ideas one step further and proposed that, although people have diverse reasons for choosing to visit museums, these diverse reasons tend to cluster around a relatively small number of motivational categories, categories that appear to be related to visitors' desires to use the museum as a setting for satisfying their 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., Baumeister, 1999; Bruner & Kalmar, 1998;

McAdams, 1990; Rounds, 2006; Simon, 2004; Woodward, 2002). 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." Perhaps more 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.

The model of identity that I utilize has antecedents in the work of a number of other investigators. Like Bronfenbrenner (1979), Holland, Lachiotee, Skinner, and Cain (1998), and Simon (2004), I subscribe to the view that identity is the confluence of internal and external social forces—cultural and individual agencies, and, like Bruner and Kalmar (1998) and Neisser (1988), I would also acknowledge the important evolutionary influence on identity of innate and learned perceptions about the physical environment. From this perspective, identity emerges as malleable, continually constructed, and 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 family, culture, and personal history. Each of us maintains numerous identities (cf. Cooper 1999; McAdams, 1990) which are expressed collectively or individually at different times, depending upon need and circumstance. Although each of us possesses and acts upon a set of enduring and deep identities (big "I" identities) for example, many individuals possess a strong sense of gender, nationality, or, like Portia, religion much of our lives are spent enacting a series of more situated identities that represent responses to the needs and realities of the specific moment and situation (little "i" identities). Thus, any particular event in our lives can be thought of as involving some combination of "I" and "i" identities—sometimes "I" identities dominate, other times "i" identities dominate, and other times both are at work.

Following on the work of Linville (1985) and Simon (1997, 1998, 1999, 2004), my premise is that, as active meaning seekers, most museum visitors engage in a degree of self-reflection and self-interpretation about their visit experience. 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 ones 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), behaviours (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. The research of Cantor, Mischel, and Schwarz (1982) and Schutte, Kenrich, and Sadalla (1985) reinforce 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 believe this is quite likely what visitors to museums also do.

Visitors have a working model of what

the museum affords and then ascribe a series of self-aspects to their museum experiences framed around these museum affordances. Visitor's self-aspects are congruent with both the situational prototypes of the context 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" (Erikson, 1968, p. 190). I have hypothesized, and my colleagues and I have found evidence supporting the proposition, that visitors then utilize these self-aspects to both prospectively justify their visit and then again retrospectively in order to make sense of their visit (Falk, Heimlich, & Bronnenkant, 2008; Falk & Storksdieck, 2004; Falk & Storksdieck, in press).

Identity is something all of us intuitively understand at some level, but it has proven a notoriously challenging idea to scientifically operationalize. There is currently no universally agreed-upon definition of or way to measure identity. The way my colleagues and I have chosen to define and measure identity utilizes visitors' own rationales for visiting, both prior and subsequent to their visit, as windows into visitors' identity-related needs and desires. 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 we recontacted 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."

These interpretations are invariably self-referential and provide 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 being a curious person or, as in the case of Portia, finding reinforcement for the belief that the spirit of God is revealed through human creativity. Others 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.

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 human expression, then you might actively seek out an art or 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 religious behavior, 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 feedback loop. The loop begins with the public seeking leisure experiences that meet specific identity-related needs, such as personal fulfillment, par-

enting, 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. Finally, they and others will then seek out this or other museums in the future for the same reasons.

Over the course of several studies, in a variety of museum settings, my colleagues and I have found evidence to support the existence of these identity-related feedback loops (Falk, Heimlich, & Bronnenkant, 2008; Falk & Storksdieck, 2004; Falk & Storksdieck, in press; Stein, 2007; Storksdieck & Stein, 2007). 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 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 and the work of Moussouri (1997) and Packer and Ballantyne (2002), I have 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've always liked art and like to see the new exhibitions when they come to town. It's not that I need to see these things, but I really enjoy it. It exposes me to new ideas and images."

- 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 spend time with [my] friends. This is one of things we do. Actually, I'm not really that big an art person, but several of my friends are so I come along with them. I must confess, I probably enjoy the time afterwards, in the coffee shop more than [the time in] the galleries. Is that a terrible thing to say?"

- Professional/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 collect Asian ceramics, so I have a lot of interest in the collection here. Not only the ceramics on display, but particularly the information on the different shapes and glazes characteristic of the different periods. I'm hoping to pick up some useful information."

- 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 and had heard they have a really spectacular art museum here."

- Spiritual Pilgrims: 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."

As predicted, and evidenced in these quotes and the interviews with Portia fea-

tured at the start of this article, museum visitors use museums to satisfy identity-related needs—both deeply held identities such as their religious views and their sense of themselves as "art people" as well as more ephemeral identities such as the need to visit some place emblematic of a city they are visiting or to escape the hum-drum of the world. 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 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 these five categories, but individuals within a category behaved and learned in ways that were different from individuals in other categories. 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 visitors' museum experience.

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 museums seem to arrive with one of five 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 the needs and interests of their visitors; not a one-size-fits-all perspective, but information about key groupings of visitors. For example, our 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 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. Professional/Hobbyists tend to enter with very specific, content-oriented interests and use the museum as a vehicle for facilitating those interests (e.g., a personal collection or taking photographs). Finally, Spiritual Pilgrims, like Experience Seekers, are more focused on the gestalt of the day. But unlike Experience Seekers, Spiritual Pilgrims 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 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 of these groups. The content was just right for some, and totally missed the mark for others. By learning more about the specific needs of each of these groups at any specific institution, it should become possible to better serve the needs of each particular group of visitors. 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 "behind the scenes" tours and other chances to feel that they are seeing things that others are not. Provide Explorers with a unique museum experience and you will fulfill their need to feel special and encourage them 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. 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 art museums are working hard to attract more family groups to their institutions. Many of the adults in such groups are likely to be Facilitators, primarily visiting in order to be good parents. Under these circumstances it would make great sense to acknowledge and reinforce that

motivation. One way to do so might be to explicitly "thank" these visitors for bringing their children to the museum, such as by saying, "You were a really good parent today. It looks as if your children had a really great time, and I know they learned a lot, too." And if you were able to communicate with visitors before the visit, you could help Spiritual Pilgrims 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 Spiritual Pilgrims to visit at those times when they could find the rejuvenation they seek. A surprisingly high percentage of members are likely to be Spiritual Pilgrims; knowing this provides useful insights into how to specifically please these important patrons.

In short, I believe that customizing museum offerings to suit the distinct needs of different identity groups will not only better satisfy regular visitors' 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 art museums at all. This is because I do not see the five basic categories of identity-related needs as unique to museum-goers. What separates those who go to art museums from those who do not is whether they perceive art museums as places that satisfy these basic needs. In other words, if we could figure out how to help more people see art 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 art museums with preconceived expectations. They use the museum to satisfy those expectations and then remember the visit for that reason. Therefore, categorizing visitors as a function of the five identity-related motivations yields some measure of predictability about what those visitors' experiences will be like. Each visitor's experience is of course unique, but each is likely to be framed within the socially/culturally defined boundaries of

how an art museum visit affords exploration, facilitation, experience seeking, professional and hobby support, and spirituality. Other types of experiences no doubt occur, but most visitors appear to seek them out or enact them with relative infrequency.

The lens of identity-related museum motivations thus provides a unique window through which we can view the nature of the museum experience and potentially can improve it. Although much of what I've discussed here remains a 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 art museum visitors, improve the likelihood that occasional art museum visitors will become regular visitors, and provide new and improved ways to attract groups of individuals who historically have not thought of art museums as places that meet their needs.

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