

# UNDERSTANDING MUSEUM VISITORS' MOTIVATIONS AND LEARNING

**DR. JOHN H. FALK**, Sea Grant Professor of Free-Choice Learning at Oregon State University and Director, OSU Center for Research on Lifelong STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics) Learning, is known internationally for his expertise on free-choice learning; the learning that occurs in settings like museums and parks and on the Internet.

John H. Falk has authored over one hundred scholarly articles and chapters in the areas of learning, biology and education as well as more than a dozen books, and he has helped create several nationally important out-of-school educational curricula. Some notable recent books include: *The Museum Experience Revisited* (2012, with Lynn Dierking); *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (2009); *Free-Choice Learning and the Environment* (2009, with Joe Heimlich and Susan Foutz); *In Principle, In Practice: Museums as learning institutions* (2007, with Lynn Dierking and Susan Foutz); *Thriving in the Knowledge Age: New business models for museums and other cultural institutions* (2006, with Beverly Sheppard), and *Lessons without Limit: How free-choice learning is transforming education* (2002, with Lynn Dierking).

Before joining the faculty at Oregon State University, he founded and directed the Institute for Learning Innovation where for 20 years he oversaw more than 200 consulting projects across a wide range of free-choice learning institutions. He also worked as an early child science educator at the University of Maryland and spent 14 years at the Smithsonian Institution where he held a number of senior positions including Director, Smithsonian Office of Educational Research. In 2006, Falk was recognised by the American Association of Museums as one of the 100 most influential museum professionals of the past 100 years. In 2010, he was further recognised by the American Association of Museum's Education Committee with its highest award, the John Cotton Dana Award for Leadership.



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I remember best [what] I did with my kid. It was an interactive computer program to add sound to a moving film to show how sound added to our senses of fear or anxiety. We watched a short, hum-drum film about 1 minute long and then edited it to add sound effects like creaking doors, a loud bang, or the screech of a tire. Then we watched the movie again and saw how it suddenly became very scary. ... Later at home we talked about this again as we were watching a TV show; [my son] was wondering what parts of the show they had added in [during post-production].

### Long-term recollection of a visitor to the California Science Center, USA

What do people remember from their museum visits? And more importantly, what factors seemed to most contribute to visitors forming these long-term memories? To answer this question, my graduate student Katie Gillespie and I qualitatively analysed the museum recollection transcripts of 22 museum visitors.<sup>1</sup> Each of these individuals had visited an interactive science centre roughly six months previously. The 22 conversational telephone interviews were transcribed and coded in order to understand what visitors remembered about their visit, and to identify the factors that may have shaped these memories. Memories fell into 10 categories:

1. Exhibits
2. Social
3. Personal
4. Setting information
5. Previous visits
6. Feelings/emotions
7. Temporal agendas
8. Interactive nature of the experience
9. Interview participation
10. Visiting the gift shop/café

Visitors' responses varied from naming or listing to deep reflection. The partial transcript at the beginning of this article, related to us by an approximately 40-year-old man who had visited the science centre with his 10-year-old son, typifies the kinds of recollections we heard. Our analysis revealed that four factors seemed to influence the memories of all 22 of these visitors:

- Things that supported their entering needs and interests.
- Things that were novel.
- Things that had high emotional content for the individual.
- Things that were supported by later experiences.

Although what someone remembers from a museum visit is not exactly the same as what someone learns, the two are clearly related. We can think of memories as the visible part of the iceberg that is learning. Thus understanding what someone remembers from their visit turns out to be critical to understanding the entire museum visitor experience. So, how can we use these insights to better understand something about the museum experience itself? Not surprisingly, there is a causal link between what someone actually experiences while at the museum and what they remember. So memories help us understand how visitors utilise museums. Perhaps more surprising, though, is the discovery I made roughly a decade ago that there is also a causal link between visitor memories and the reasons someone has for visiting the museum in the first place.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the issues of why people visit, what they do when they visit the museum, and what they learn/remember from their visit are not in fact three separate questions, but intimately inter-related versions of the same question. To say this reality has not always been appreciated is an understatement.

### HISTORICAL APPROACHES TO INVESTIGATING THE MUSEUM EXPERIENCE

For more than a generation, researchers have worked at describing and understanding the museum visitor experience better. I would assert that the validity and reliability of much of this earlier research, including much of my own research, must be questioned. Research has been done on who visits museums and to a degree why. Research has been done on what visitors do in the museum. Research has been done on what visitors learn from the museum. However, only rarely has research been done in ways that allow understanding of the whole visitor and the whole visit experience – research on individuals whose life-course intersects with the museum experience prior to as well as after the visit. The reductionist ways in which museum visitors have typically been studied, beginning with a focus on 'who' visits the museum, have long prevented us from truly understanding the museum visitor experience.

For example, over the past several decades, thousands of visitor studies have been conducted in order to better understand who is visiting the museum; in fact this kind of research is overwhelming the most common type of visitor research conducted in museums. 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 centre, has variously counted and in some measure, attempted to describe who their visitors are. Overwhelmingly, these many efforts to describe museum audiences have utilised traditional demographic categories like age, education, gender and national origin/ethnicity; qualities of individuals that do not vary from day to day – a white Danish male is always a white Danish 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. More recently, museums have also begun to classify museum audiences using sophisticated psychographic tools such as the Gallup Kompas social psychological, two-dimensional values-oriented segmentation system; e.g., as used in recent Danish User Surveys.<sup>3</sup>

As a consequence of these many years of research, we have discovered that worldwide, museum visitors are disproportionately more affluent and well-educated than the general public.<sup>4</sup> In most Western countries, museum visitors are also much more likely to be drawn from the majority population, which in most cases are white individuals of European extraction; Danish museum-going populations are a prime example of this generalisation. As the recent Danish national *User Survey 2012* has shown, the typical Danish museum user is female, Danish, late middle aged, well-educated, and using the Gallup Kompas framework, disproportionately from the ‘Modern/Community-Orientated’ segment.<sup>5</sup> This is what we know; or at least think we know. Arguably, this long-standing way of thinking about who does and does not visit museums may actually obscure rather than enlighten our understanding of museum visits.

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 categorisations yield a false sense of explanation. We think we know our visitors, but I would argue that we do not. As summarised above, we think we ‘know’ that museum visitors are better educated, older, from the local country, more urban-modern, 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, from Denmark, more urban-modern, wealthier and more female than the public as a whole provides insufficient information to predict

whether or not they will visit a museum or what they will do in the museum and remember from the experience. Equally, knowing that someone is less educated, younger, not from Denmark, more rural-traditional, poorer and more male than the visiting public as a whole provides insufficient information to predict that they will not visit a museum or that their visitor experience will be significantly different from other visitors. 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 demographic or psychographic variables or for that matter tangible qualities like the ‘type of museum’ (e.g. art, cultural history, natural history etc.) 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. And the same person can visit the same museum on two different days and be an entirely DIFFERENT visitor.*

#### **TOWARDS A NEW MODEL OF THE MUSEUM VISITOR EXPERIENCE**

The museum visitor experience cannot be adequately described by understanding the content of museums, the design of exhibitions, by defining visitors as a function of their demographics and psychographics 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 understanding and none comes close to providing a truly predictive model of the museum visitor experience.

Over the past decade, 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 hundreds, in which my colleagues and I have talked to individuals about their museum experiences weeks, months and years after their museum visits (an excerpt from one of these interviews leads off this article). 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 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 reconceptualise the museum visitor experience; led me to appreciate that building and supporting personal identity was the primary driving motivation behind virtually all museum visits.

### 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 categorisations.<sup>6</sup> 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, visitors are likely to enter a museum with an *entry narrative* and these entry narratives are likely to be self-reinforcing, directing learning, behaviour and perceptions of satisfaction.<sup>7</sup> 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 was 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. Despite the wide-spread use of identity as a concept, there is no single agreed-upon definition of self or identity, though there are a number of useful reviews of these various perspectives.<sup>8</sup> Highlighting the complexities of the topic, Bruner and Kalmar state, "Self is both outer and inner, public and private, innate and acquired, the product of evolution and the offspring of culturally shaped narrative."<sup>9</sup> It has been characterised as the product of endless dialogue and comparison with 'others' – both living and non-living.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps most pointedly, Simon 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 behaviours. 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."<sup>11</sup>

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 and 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 is 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 card to our aunt who lives in a different city or the 'host/hostess' identity we enact when someone visits our house for the first time. 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 would 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 one's 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 people's visits to art museums, children's museums, zoos or science centres.

Following particularly on the work of Simon, I hypothesised 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, “through self-interpretation, people achieve an understanding of themselves or, in other words, an identity, which in turn influences their subsequent perception and behaviour.”<sup>12</sup> In Simon's model, self-interpretation involves a varying number of 'self-aspects' – a cognitive category or concept that serves to process and organise information and knowledge about one's self. According to Simon, self-aspects can refer to:

“generalised 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), behaviour (e.g. I work a lot), and explicit group or category membership (e.g. member of the Communist party).”<sup>13</sup>

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 serve 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 visitors to museums were doing.

People who visit museums typically possess a working model of what going to a museum entails; 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 that those museum experiences would afford them. Visitors' 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, individuals have no choice but to form their identities using as a framework “the existing range of alternatives for identity formation”.<sup>14</sup> I hypothesised, and my colleagues and I

have now found evidence supporting the proposition, that visitors utilise their pre-visit self-aspects both prospectively to justify why they should visit the museum and then again retrospectively in order to 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.”

The visitors' 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 behaviour 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 conceptualise the museum. In other words, if you view yourself as a good father and believe that museums are the kind of places to where 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 fulfil 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 visitors' situation-specific, identity-related self-aspects. Although, in theory, museum visitors could possess 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 appear 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.<sup>15</sup> Descriptions of the five categories and some typical quotes from visitors follow on the next page.

**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.”**

**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 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.”**

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 himself as first and foremost an ‘art person’, but more commonly important but more ephemeral identities, such as the person looking for an appropriate, for them, way to spend an afternoon in a city they are visiting. Perhaps most important, though, is that my research has produced strong evidence that categorising 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 categorised as falling into one of these five categories, but individuals within a category also behaved and learned in ways that were different from individuals in other categories.<sup>16</sup> 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 fixed demographic or psychographic categories like age, nationality, gender, or social class, separating visitors according to their entering identity-related motivations resulted in descriptive data predictive of visitors’ museum experience. Also unlike fixed demographic or psychographic 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 museum 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.

In summing up, it is important to emphasise, though, that what we are measuring with this model are not visitors’ identities, but the ways identity-related needs influence why people visit museums. These identity-related needs are made *visible* through visitors’ descriptions of their museum visit motivations/expectations. Finally, these visitors’ motivations/expectations do not just emerge out of thin air, nor are they some kind of constructed psychographic framework. Rather, these five identity-related reasons for visiting museums are a direct reflection of how the public currently perceives the attributes and affordances of museums; in other words, what the public perceives are the *right* reasons for visiting museums.

#### WHY IS KNOWING VISITORS’ IDENTITY-RELATED MOTIVATIONS IMPORTANT?

So let us return to where we began this paper, by looking at what determines what a visitor remembers/learns. As summarised at the beginning of the paper, four factors seem to be critical to influencing what people remember about their museum visit:

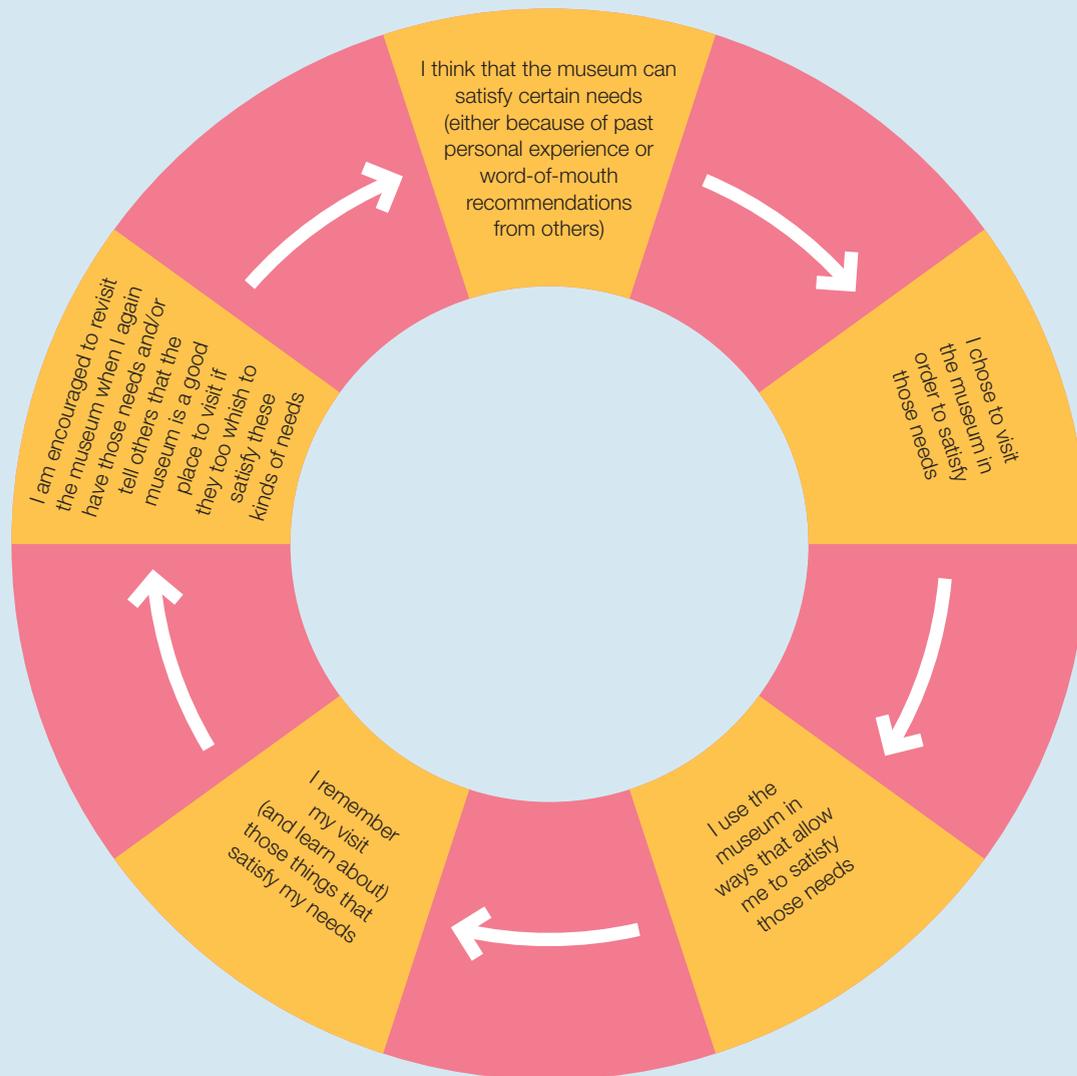
- Things that supported their entering needs and interests.
- Things that were novel.
- Things that had high emotional content for the individual.
- Things that were supported by later experiences.

Not all four of these factors are related to visitors’ entering identity-related motivations, but two of the four are! We can see this illustrated in the short visit recollection transcript that leads off this paper. Although not included in the transcript, but as part of the interview process, we asked each visitor to tell us more about the reasons they visited the science centre on the day in question. The particular visitor featured in our transcript quickly volunteered that his son had been the reason for his visit; he thought his son would find the science centre interesting and educational. In other words, this visitor was a Facilitator. We can see in his transcript how this man’s entering visit motivation shaped his memories – his most salient long-term memory was an exhibit that his son found particularly compelling. It does not take a huge leap of faith to see how this particular exhibit experience actualised this father’s identity-related visit goal – it was at this particular exhibit that our interviewed father was able to help facilitate an engaging and rewarding experience for his son. This direct relationship between a visitor’s entering identity-related motivations, in-museum experiences and subsequent memories emerged time after time in these interviews. As suggested earlier, visitor identity-related motivations form a key part of a typical museum experience cycle, which can be summarised as follows on the next page.

Although visitors can and do respond to new and novel experiences, they primarily attend to those things that help them accomplish their original visit goals. For example, the Explorer finding something new and/or novel to experience, the Recharger finding that bit of peace and/or transcendence they are looking for or the Experience Seeker seeing the things that make this area or collection special. When this happens, then the experience is not only satisfying but memorable.

Research in psychology has consistently demonstrated an association between memory and emotion.<sup>17</sup> Emotionally arousing events are likely strongly remembered because of the increased activation of the brain’s limbic system, which has been correlated with enhanced explicit memory for both pleasant and unpleasant events.<sup>18</sup> Recent research by Falk and Gillespie<sup>19</sup> and Staus<sup>20</sup> has confirmed the important role of emotion in museum memories and learning. But what is the connection between

## MUSEUM EXPERIENCE CYCLE



emotion and identity-related motivations? As outlined elsewhere, the events most likely to have emotional salience for visitors are those that satisfy their needs and interests; in other words, their entering identity-related motivations.<sup>21</sup> Such appears to be the case illustrated in our sample transcript. Although the exhibit described by our father on making a film ‘scary’ was probably, in and of itself, not the most ‘exciting’ exhibit at the museum, and thus emotion-laden, the fact that it emerged as the exhibit that enabled him, on this day, to successfully enact his identity-related goal of engaging his son in an educational experience, made it an emotionally exciting experience for him as a Facilitating father. Thus if I am visiting as a Facilitator in order to ensure that my son or daughter has a great museum experience, seeing my son or daughter enjoying him-/herself will light up my limbic system. The same holds true for visitors with other identity-related visit motivations. For example, if I am a true connoisseur/lover of a particular artist and the local art museum has a special, one-of-a-kind exhibition on this artist, visiting the museum in order to see these rare paintings – i.e. visiting as a Professional/Hobbyist – is likely to be very emotional for me; and highly memorable.<sup>22</sup> In short, the connection between emotion and identity-related motivation, though not explicit, is likely implicit in many, if not most museum visits.

Of course, how visitors experience the museum, and thus what they learn, is influenced by a wide range of factors, not just their entering identity-related motivations.<sup>23</sup> Among the important influences are the visitors’ entering prior knowledge and experience and their social group. Also important, of course, are their experiences inside the museum such as the exhibitions and programmes they engage with. Finally, as indicated above, post-visit reinforcing experiences such as conversations, news articles or programmes on television also play an important role in remembering and learning. However, without question, visitors’ entering motivations appear to have a particularly strong and important influence on both in-museum experiences and learning.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

I believe these findings have important implications for practice. Not only is research from an ever-growing number of studies revealing that the majority of visitors to most types of museums arrive with one of five general motivations for visiting,<sup>24</sup> 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 in this way gives museum practitioners key insights into the needs and interests of their visitors. This is very different from the one-size-fits-all perspective that has historically dominated our interac-

tions with museum visitors. For example, my research has revealed that Explorers are focused on what they see and find interesting, and they act out this me-centred 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. Professional/Hobbyists tend to enter with very specific, content-orientated 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 customise and personalise 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 for visitors by most museums (e.g. exhibits, programmes, 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 visitor 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 in Denmark, Explorers are a common group of museum users across all types of institutions.<sup>25</sup> 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 fulfil his/her need to feel special and encourage him/her 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 people 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, recognise these individuals when they come into your institution; these people 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 want to have a good time but they also want to see the best of what the museum has to offer. Given the high proportion of foreign tourists visiting Danish museums,<sup>26</sup> going out of the way to ensure that these visitors can see the things they feel they have come to see, and are acknowledged as having different needs than local visitors, is likely to be rewarded by great word-of-mouth back home; which in turn will result in more foreign tourists visiting in the future.

Many museums are working hard to attract more family groups to their institutions; and these types of visitors are already attracted to natural history museums.<sup>27</sup> 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, 'telling' these visitors that bringing their children to the museum that day was a wonderful thing to do will make them feel successful and inspire them to return again.

Finally, Rechargers appear particularly drawn to Danish art museums.<sup>28</sup> Working to understand these users' particular needs and interests could be as simple as helping them know where to find the least crowded, most peaceful places in the museum. 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 customising museum offerings to suit the distinct needs of individuals possessing different identity-related needs will not only better satisfy regular visitors' needs but also 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 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 fulfil their needs – and then deliver on this promise – more people would visit.

In 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 these five identity-related motivations, or some other group of identity-related motivations, to a visitor provides some measure of predictability about

what that visitor's 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 leisure-time rejuvenation. 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. Ultimately though, these specific categories are not important – all such categories are fluid and likely to vary as a function of institution, place and situation. The key idea embedded in this model of identity-related motivations is that it is really important to deeply understand *why* individuals choose to visit *your* museum.

The lens of identity-related museum motivations provides a unique window through which we can understand how best to accommodate museum visitor needs; it allows us to better understand the nature of the museum experience and potentially improve it. Initial evidence suggests that applications of this model can enable museums to dramatically enhance the experiences of their current museum users, improve the likelihood that occasional museum users will become regular users, and provide new and improved ways to attract groups of individuals who historically have not thought of museums as places that meet their needs.<sup>29</sup> My hope is that this model will provide a usable and practical tool that enables museum professionals to design ever more attractive, satisfying and memorable experiences for visitors.

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## Endnotes

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## Credits

p. 120 John Falk. Museum Experience Cycle.





