

Indigenous Australians: Australia's First Peoples has been an important first step in re-presenting the Indigenous cultures of Australia in a contemporary way by one of Australia's major museums and should prove to be a fascinating summative evaluation study.

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The Family Experience of Museums: A Pilot Study of Ten Family Group Visits to the Queensland Museum

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Theoretical approach

Museums need to sharpen their perceptions of their audiences and it is widely recognised that audience research can provide the tools to change this. Understanding more of visitors' needs for, and experiences of, museums can however be jeopardised by a linear communication model whether this is explicit or implicit in museum planning. This model limits the thinking about visitors to their role as the destination for the museum's messages. To consider adequately the visitor experience of museums, the focus must include their personal and social agendas and their subjective experiences. The framework should not reduce the visitors' role to passive receivers nor privilege the museum professional as the creator and sender of interpretative messages, nor limit understanding by too narrow a conception of visitors' experiences.

The study

This pilot study looked at one context for museum visiting - the family group - and aimed to construct an understanding of its members' subjective experiences of museum visiting. Three ways to frame audience activity were identified - the visitor experience model (Falk & Dierking, 1992), a hunter gatherer model (McManus, 1994) and a meaning - making model (Silverman, 1995). These frameworks were explored for their appropriateness to construct answers to three main research questions:

- 1) What are the motivations for family visits to museums?
- 2) What are the strategies adopted by the family on the visit?
- 3) What sense does the family group make of the visit afterwards?

To investigate these issues, ten families were observed throughout their visit to the Queensland Museum, a museum which records and preserves the social, technological and natural history of Queensland. The adults and children completed a questionnaire on demographics and psychographics at the end of the visit and an interview was conducted with the family group in their homes within a month of the visit. At the interview children were asked to draw their recollections of the visit. Data from these research instruments were analysed and compared to provide a layered construct of the family visit experience.

The families were found to be far from passive audiences and instead were physically dynamic and personally and socially active. The parents' museum visits were motivated by their children's learning but inextricably linked with doing something together as a family. 75% of the visit focused on the exhibits with the remainder on other things such as the social group and parenting. Visit strategies were strongly influenced by personal agendas influenced by prior knowledge, experience, interests and attitudes as well as the social nature of the experience. While the personal agendas of all family members were evident, those of the children had the most influence on the pace and structure of the visit. The sense made of the visit was linked to recollections of the museum content and to the personal and social contexts of the visit. The outing generated activity and some learning continued to take place as a result of the visit.

Elements of all three frameworks were found to be valuable in constructing the picture of the family experience. The 'forage, broadcast and comment activity of the hunter gatherer' (McManus 1994) was certainly evident, as was the interaction of the personal, social and physical contexts of the visit. Most importantly for the conceptualisation of the audience as active creators of meaning from the museum text, the study found families using personal and subjective strategies for making meaning including reminiscence, recognition, judgement, evaluation, storytelling and fantasy as well as relating knowledge.

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