

The Impact of a Museum Visit on University Students: An Analysis of Racial Differences

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Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of a museum visit on university students. Students from an introductory psychology class visited the Anniston Museum of Natural History as a class assignment on a day when the instructor was out-of-town. This report focuses only on racial similarities and differences in responding. One of the advantages of using university students for a comparison of racial differences is that the white and African-American groups were closely matched with respect to age, education completed, parents' education, university courses taken, geographical residence, etc. Thus, the comparison between whites and African-Americans is less likely to be confounded by a variable other than racial background.

Method

Participants included 85 white and 22 African American students enrolled in an introductory psychology class at Jacksonville State University. As part of a class assignment, students were instructed to visit the museum between Thursday and Sunday and were told they would be required to complete a detailed questionnaire upon their return to class. Thus, the survey was completed one to three days after the visit. The survey took approximately 30-45 minutes to complete and included information on demographics as well as reactions to and memories of the museum visit. Only the data comparing African-Americans and whites are reported here.

Results

Table 1 shows the percentage of African-Americans and whites who reported taking courses in various subject areas and the percentage of students who rated each subject area as highly interesting (rating of 4 or 5 on a five point rating scale). African-Americans and whites differed only slightly in terms of courses they had taken. African-Americans were more likely than whites to have taken a course in sociology and geology, otherwise the percentages of students in each group indicating they had taken these courses were similar.

In terms of expressed interest in the subject matter, only three areas suggest a difference in interests — African-Americans tended to show greater interest in sociology and Caucasians were more likely to express interest in psychology and anthropology.

Self-knowledge ratings of natural history also differed between the two groups. Caucasians had an average rating of 2.81 (with "1" below low and "5" being high on knowledge) while African-Americans had an average rating of 2.27.

Table 2 shows the ratings of African-Americans and Caucasians for each exhibit area of the museum across five experiential factors (learning, interest, involvement, comes to life, and enjoyment). As indicated by Table 2, by far the most consistent differences between African-Americans and Caucasians were found in ratings of the African Culture exhibit. African Americans consistently rated this exhibit higher than Caucasians on all experiential factors. All of these differences were statistically significant.

For Dynamic Earth, only the difference between Caucasians and African-American ratings of "involvement" was statistically significant. Caucasians rated Dynamic Earth an average of 3.65, while African-Americans rated this area 3.22.

Table 3 gives the ratings of participants to their overall museum trip experience in terms of "enjoyment," "wanting to learn more," and "relaxation." There was a trend for African-Americans to rate the "want to learn more" item higher than Caucasians, but this difference was not statistically significant. Ratings for "enjoyment" and "relaxation" differed very little between the two groups.

Discussion

The major racial differences in this study were found in one exhibit area — African Culture. This area obviously has more relevance for African-Americans than for whites in terms of personal history. Interestingly, ratings of the African Plains exhibit area did not show racial differences. The difference in responding between African-Americans and Caucasians in this study is clearly influenced by culture — people of African descent are more interested in African culture. While this is not a bombshell in terms of expectations, it does point out an important point. If a museum wishes to attract multicultural audiences, exhibits should be designed that will appeal to each of these cultural audiences.

Because of the small number of participants in this study (107) we must be cautious about making conclusions concerning the generality of findings. However, the difference in ratings of the African Culture exhibit is consistent with reports from other museums.

Table 1
Courses Taken and Interest Levels in Subject Areas

	COURSES TAKEN		HIGH INTEREST RATINGS		
	White	Black	White	Black	
Biology	100.0%	95.7%	Natural history	35.3%	27.3%
Sociology	36.5	60.9	Physics	8.3	0.0
Psychology	90.7	100.0	Chemistry	14.0	9.6
Geology	17.7	30.4	Art	53.0	63.6
Anthropology	11.8	8.7	Biology	41.9	31.8
Chemistry	66.3	65.2	Psychology	73.3	34.8
Physics	31.8	26.1	Anthropology	32.5	4.9
			Sociology	34.9	52.1

Table 2
Average Ratings of Experience for Each Exhibit Area

Exhibit	Race	Learning	Interest	Involvement	Comes to Life	Enjoyment
Dynamic Earth	White	3.77	3.84	3.65	3.73	3.97
	Black	3.72	3.72	3.22	3.61	3.94
Attack & Defense	White	3.83	4.10	3.58	4.14	4.23
	Black	3.56	3.67	3.00	3.78	4.00
Bird Hall	White	3.51	3.39	3.23	3.63	3.63
	Black	3.78	3.78	3.44	3.83	4.06
African Plains	White	3.59	3.87	3.45	3.86	4.04
	Black	3.61	3.83	3.39	3.61	3.94
African Marsh	White	3.31	3.41	3.12	3.56	3.57
	Black	3.22	3.50	3.28	3.54	3.61
African Culture	White	3.31	3.41	3.12	3.56	3.57
	Black	3.94	3.94	4.00	4.11	4.28
Egyptian Mummy	White	3.90	4.04	3.52	3.86	4.14
	Black	3.56	3.78	3.11	3.61	3.89

Table 3
Ratings of Overall Museum Visit

Race	Enjoy	Want to learn more	Relaxing
White	4.12	3.58	4.07
Black	3.95	4.00	4.10