

Social Interaction of Family Visitors at Heritage Tourism Sites: Establishing a Research Program

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Introduction

Traditionally, visitor studies have focused on the individual as a unit of analysis, with museum visitors dominating the field of study. One only has to look through the publications of the Visitor Studies Association and attend annual conferences to realize the dynamics and enthusiasm for such research is of the highest quality. There is no doubt that information thus collected and evaluated increases our understanding of individual visitors to museums and provides valuable insight and new perspectives for discussion (Bicknell & Farmelo, 1993).

Findings show that most visitors are accompanied by family and friends, yet groups appear to be a neglected area of study. There are, of course, significant American studies of family groups in museums with additional and significant studies by McManus and others in the UK (see studies by Blud, 1990; Cone & Kendall, 1978; Diamond, 1986; Hilke, 1988; Hilke & Balling, 1989; McManus, 1994). The purpose of my paper is to draw attention to the potential and dynamic of family group research and the need to establish a research program in a variety of heritage sites and attractions, not just museums.

Why Move Away From Museum Evaluation?

A recent article by Schouten (1995) bravely put into words what many non-museum professionals have known for years, that "large numbers of people never visit museums because they either perceive them as having no connection with their lives or are intimidated by the way in

which collections are presented and despite notable exceptions, many museums are loath to cater to the general public". Although museums are undergoing a 'renaissance' (Lumley, 1988) with attendance on the increase, resistance to museum visiting is still experienced by some sectors of the general public (Hood, 1993).

On the other hand, heritage tourism is burgeoning and visitor numbers are on the increase to a range of sites and new attractions, especially redundant textile mills and canal warehouses which have become the perfect catalyst for regeneration. Restored as new heritage attractions with themed interpretations, they are proving to be especially attractive as family leisure destinations.

Defining Heritage Attractions

Heritage attraction is a wide ranging term which covers a broad spectrum of places visited by the public. Most have a heritage theme, story or reference to the past. This need not be a factual past but may include elements of 'a sense of the past' or, indeed, a fantasized past. Heritage attractions may function for local or community needs or have a wider dimension in terms of entertainment, education, tourism and urban regeneration. Thus heritage attractions can range from theme parks to heritage centers to museums (traditional and 'new') and to sites of interest such as restored docklands and warehouses (Sterry, 1994).

Some heritage attractions do not fit neatly into museum ideology and have provoked hostile reaction from professional commentators, academics and the press (Hewison, 1984; Corner & Harvey, 1991; Walsh, 1992), as they are accused of blurring the boundaries between 'real' history and packaged heritage and are more akin to Disneyland and theme parks. This somewhat negative reputation, together with the considerable cost factor of research, has resulted in fewer visitor studies conducted at such sites. Yet visitors are clearly enjoying the new methods of interpreting the past found in heritage attractions. A visit appears to be rewarding not only because visitors participate and engage in a new leisure activity, but because the visit is an entertaining and stimulating way of experiencing the past. Indeed the context appears to be legitimized by visitor expectation and satisfaction. Research is needed to find out what is, at present, only supposition.

Heritage Tourism

In Great Britain, strategies for leisure development initiated by the government in the 1980s, to incorporate urban regeneration and economic revival of urban areas, have resulted in opportunities to commission imaginative new attractions, which do not fall under the banner of museum, but which nonetheless have collections of objects from the past and use theming of the past as a legitimate vehicle to attract a wider range of visitors.

The success of using redundant buildings from the past has been phenomenal. Many buildings once in complete disrepair and often eyesores in the community have been given a new role evolving into new heritage sites. Many use the title 'Heritage Center' as they provide the heritage tourist with a new location to visit that is based on the past.

Not only buildings, but redundant objects too, from the home and industry, have been given a new lease of life on display. From obsolete textile machinery to old fishing boats, from nostalgic items such as the rocking chair in the parlor to the cooking range and rag rug in a kitchen display, an endless supply of ephemera is used to enhance a wide range of diverse heritage themes. Reconstruction of the past can sit comfortably alongside genuine historic artifacts. New attractions differ from museums in that they are, in the main, not conceived to house a collection or bound within rigorous professional curatorial standards.

The Heritage Visitor Experience

Visitors are invited to experience the 'reality' of a coal-mine, the 'noise' of a textile mill, the 'horrors' of a town during the blitz; to remember the family wash day with the old copper boiler and scrubbing board or, indeed that rare treat, a day's holiday from work to enjoy the pier at the seaside and the fun fair. All evoke memories in older members of the family and an observer will be rewarded with a history that is both personal and absorbing as family tales are recounted and memories stimulated by even the most ordinary of objects.

Innovative Heritage Design

Designers play an important role in attractions such as Wigan Pier Heritage Center in the north of England, which has innovative displays and a 'packaged' heritage theme focusing on local identity and local history. Live interpreters explain the heritage theme or story, and visitors are encouraged to participate actively. The senses are stimulated by 'authentic' sounds and smells, thus enhancing visitors' sense of the past as it is presented. Similarly, Beamish in the northeast of England, has an open-air collection of redundant buildings, transport and objects from the past. Grimsby Fishing Heritage Center on the east coast interprets the pride of its successful 1950's fishing industry focusing on the town's proud past as it struggles to gain economic recovery in the present. The emphasis in new heritage attractions is on innovative displays, entertainment, and informal learning rather than a passive and instructional experience.

The Family Group Experience

Family groups share knowledge about the past as they visit new heritage attractions. The experience appears to provide an important social interaction and cultural activity for these groups. The value of objects on display is part of the complex and unique interpretation specific to each family group. Research has shown that family visitors appear to have the ability to recognize varied degrees of significance in heritage objects, themes and reconstructions, and to react accordingly (Sterry, 1994). There appears to be, as Walsh describes, "multiple contexts of reception" whereby different exhibits or recreations are interpreted by different people in different ways (Walsh, 1992).

Family groups are often accompanied by older people who remember the old ways. Indeed many older people have experienced working in cotton mills or coal mines and remember objects on display with nostalgia and fondness and want to pass on memories and reminiscences to their children and grandchildren. Such displays, themes, and interpretation are embracing the lives of ordinary people who gain much from a visit to a new heritage attraction, yet who might otherwise be isolated or disoriented in a museum or art gallery.

The Need for Family Learning Research in Heritage Sites

A survey of visitors to Disneyland found that a high proportion of visitors regarded the trip and visiting historic sites as closely related activities (Real, 1977). What of today's visitors' cognition? We need to develop a significantly better understanding of the impact of heritage visiting on family groups and of their benefits and continued viability. There is much rhetoric about learning dominating the field of visitor studies but little is articulated about the social interaction of family groups.

Family visitors are clearly not passive recipients of a heritage theme but active participants as they explore the interpretation and recognize a connection with their own history. This cognition of a past drawn from personal experience and recollection reconfirms and appears to give family groups a sense of their own history and identity.

Family Learning Research: Who Benefits?

Research data from family groups are as crucial to visitor studies as the vast exploration of the individual visitor. Clearly, there is a need to provide a flexible research model that embraces and confronts the new, and to develop research design that assesses the social interaction of family visitors to a range of heritage sites. Insights into learning, expectations, and family interaction, for example, will have benefits for a whole range of key players and goals in the success of such places, not only for the visitor, but also the designer, the planner and the marketing manager. How the past is portrayed and for whom is part of the dynamics and global success of cultural tourism and new leisure markets where commercial factors, design and marketing goals are often prioritized. A greater understanding of family social interaction and learning must also be prioritized.

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