

Chapter 8

WHAT SOCIOLOGY HAS TO OFFER VISITOR STUDIES

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Some General Observations

I would first like to begin with some general observations. One is that while the invited papers at this session to discuss the respective contributions of cognitive psychology, environmental psychology and sociology to visitor studies, the range of areas represented here is severely limited. Every science and applied science provides a distinctive contribution to visitor studies. The question asked of me regarding sociology's contribution could profitably be asked of representatives from such diverse areas as architecture, anthropology, economics, and geography, just to name a few. I would also have included business and marketing to the above areas but I suspect that their contributions are already well-employed.

A second observation is that the nature of the contributions of each field are similar. Each science, whether applied or not, has concepts that are unique to it or at least to a limited number of other areas. And, each science has a set of models and perspectives which are commonly employed. It is through the concepts, models and perspectives that sociology and other areas provide their contributions.

Third, I would like to note that the concepts, models and perspectives of sociology are such that visitor behavior is interpreted in the context of groups, organizations, the society, and the culture of that society. In other words, the contribution of sociology to visitor behavior is the context in which visitor behavior is examined. And that context is framed in such social units as groups, organizations, and the society.

A fourth, and last, observation is that whether recognized or not, the concepts, models, perspectives, and practices found in sociology are already guiding thinking in visitor studies. I am admittedly biased. However, I feel that the impact of sociology is greater than most people recognize, and includes what are now "standard" demographic analyses of visitor characteristics, survey sampling, questionnaire construction,

interviewing techniques, distinctions based upon social status and role, and a myriad of social psychological concepts, not the least of which is "attitude."

Having said this, let me now mention a few of the concepts, models and theories that sociology has to offer.

Concepts from Sociology Potentially Relevant for Visitor Studies

First, I would like to identify a few concepts that have potential relevance for visitor studies. You may already be familiar with some of them. Rather than simply identifying the concepts, however, I would like to help show their utility by asking questions which employ the concepts.

Social class is one of the major distinguishing concepts in sociology. We might ask: How do patterns of attendance vary by social class? How does the nature of the experience vary by social class? And, for what purposes do various social classes use museums, etc.?

Family life cycle is a useful way of summarizing many common changes in a person's life regarding age, marital status, and number of children. Idealized stages in the family life cycle include: young single adult; young married without children; married with children; older married without children; and widowed. At what stages in the family life cycle are people most likely to visit one type of exhibit versus another? (Zoos, for example, seem to attract disproportionately large numbers of single couples and married women with young children.) How does the nature of the experience vary by stage in family life cycle?

Subculture is another useful concept. We know that every society has its own culture. However, groups and organizations within a society also have their own distinctive characteristics which comprise what are called "subcultures." Included in any group or organizational subculture are norms (or rules) for how to talk and dress and values regarding what objects, behaviors and beliefs are important or not. How are the subcultures of zoos, museums, parks, etc. similar to one another, and how do they differ? In other words, what forms of behavior and what values, etc. are encouraged or discouraged at each type of facility. Who is responsible for creating the rules and values which zoos, museums promote and nurture? Is it the directors? the staff? the patrons? And, what types of behavior from visitors do museums, zoos, etc. encourage or discourage? Subcultures also contain beliefs and symbols which specify, among other things, who are the "heroes" and "villains". It might be revealing to examine exactly who are these figures in museums, etc. How is government viewed? What about evaluators, for that matter?

Models that Provide Contributions to Visitor Studies

Diffusion of Innovations Models. Two good models for visitor studies to consider come from rural sociology and deal with what is called "the diffusion of innovations" literature (Rogers, 1983). These models are particularly useful for new exhibits or programs or even new museums, etc. The models focus upon the decision-making process that many people go through before deciding to engage in some behavior, whether it be buying a compact disc player or attending a temporary exhibit at a museum. The first model suggests an idealized set of stages that many people pass through before finally adopting some practice: awareness; interest; evaluation; trial; adoption.

Significantly, while the media are important in creating awareness, friendship networks are credited with greater importance in decisions regarding trial and adoption.

The second model builds upon the first and distinguishes between types of adopters, based upon when they decide to adopt a particular practice. Using a bell-shaped curve to describe the typical frequency with which people adopt a behavior, analysts distinguish between what they call: innovators; early adopters; early majority; late majority; and laggards. The innovators are the people who first adopt the practice, and the laggards are those who last adopt it. Significantly, each of these groups has different social characteristics. The innovators tend to be the most venturesome and cosmopolitan. The early adopters are characteristically localite, the most integrated into the community, and have the greatest opinion leadership.

Resource Mobilization Models. Another set of models were developed in both the social movements (Zald & McCarthy, 1979) and rural sociology (Thomas, Potter, Miller, & Aveni, 1972) literature. These describe necessary ingredients for organizations to become fully integrated within the communities (or societies) in which they are located. The application for visitor studies is clear. For museums, zoos, or other exhibitions to develop and continue to grow, they must develop linkages or ties with those segments of their environment which provide vital resources.

Important resources include money, legitimacy, power, and information. These resources are located among such diverse groups as government, business, education, and, importantly among social and civic groups within communities. Critical to much thinking in this area is the notion that, of all people, organizational leaders provide the greatest potential amount of resources and that such persons are important to recruit.

Perspectives That Provide Contributions to Visitor Studies

Structural Functionalism. One of the most dominant perspectives in sociology has been structural functionalism (Merton, 1957). Simply stated this perspective focuses upon social structures in the community or society and on the functions which they perform. It asks us to temporarily assume that the functions performed by such structures as museums, zoos, etc. may be either intended or unintended. Structural functionalism then invites us to explore what these might be. For example, what are the functions or purposes of a museum (or zoo; or exhibit) in the community? And are these functions the originally intended ones or have they emerged rather unnoticed? Does it include education? Entertainment? Promoting citizenship? Providing sex education for young people? Promoting concern over the environment? Challenging existing belief? Reaffirming existing belief? Mobilizing people to action? Providing a setting for the community elite to congregate? Providing a location for the homeless to go for warmth?

Dramaturgy. Another perspective that can be taken on museums or other visitor-related organizations is called a "dramaturgical" approach (Goffman, 1959). This approach borrows concepts from the theater and applies them to social settings. It says we are all actors playing roles. We play these on a stage and we thus behave very differently when "front stage" than when we are "back stage". The stage itself is a creation, something constructed to achieve a particular effect. Underlying the dramaturgical approach is the assumption that both our behavior and its setting are socially constructed to achieve outcomes which we believe are favorable to ourselves. We continually engage in "impression management." The application of this approach to an analysis of museums, zoos, or any other organizations is straightforward. The particular answers we arrive at will depend upon the characteristics, and even the "culture" of the organization in question. Regardless of the answers, the dramaturgical approach can help us to better understand the problems and perspectives of such museum staff members as directors, exhibit developers, evaluators, and tour supervisors. All play parts which are radically different depending upon whether they are located "front " or "back stage". Some have quite different stages and different audiences. All are engaged in impression management, however.

Final Thoughts

Max Weber (1947), the sociologist, economist and philosopher, who wrote in the early part in the 20th century, noted an increasing amount of rationalization of life in modern society. By rationalization he meant the

study of human behavior so that it could be better organized, ultimately to achieve greater efficiency and productivity. This trend has spread to virtually all aspects of society today, including museums and zoos.

The study of visitor behavior, and the very purpose of this conference, is part of this trend toward rationalization. Weber had mixed feelings about how people and institutions responded to rationalization. We might well share his feelings. The scientific analysis of visitor behavior can provide important improvements to museums, zoos and other such organizations. It can provide exhibits which are more instructive, attractive, and even entertaining. It can help bridge the gap between the intention of exhibit designers and the actual impact upon the visitor.

However, there are dangers to the rationalization of museums and zoos. These dangers extend to visitor studies, and should be everpresent in our minds. The dangers come not from science or analysis. Rather, the dangers come from misuses of procedures, misinterpretation of results, poorly framed questions or problems, and from faulty assumptions and goals. From a technical standpoint the misuse of procedures and misinterpretation of results are easy to see. Good researchers can identify poorly drawn samples and poorly constructed questionnaires, etc. Even good researchers can sometimes be drawn into other traps, however. One such pitfall involves the unquestioning adoption of the assumptions and goals of those sponsoring the research. For example, is the best exhibit the one that attracts the most people, or that has the most return visitors? Is the best display the one that holds peoples' attention for the longest number of minutes? These are assumptions that seem to be commonly made while conducting and discussing visitor behavior studies.

Our assumptions regarding the desired outcome of a visit to a museum, etc. deserve careful consideration and debate. Their political ramifications should be discussed. Not because this issue is pressing at the moment. At some time in the future, however, state and federal funding agencies may require that museums and zoos provide "outcomes assessments" of institutional success before funding increases or continuations are granted. And there is little doubt regarding how they will determine success: they will use the turnstiles. Unless museums and zoos have established precedents for conceptualizing and measuring "success", "productivity", and "effectiveness" they will become easy prey for external groups to do it for them.

I would like to close this paper by identifying one additional danger of rationalization as it pertains to visitor studies. The scientific analysis of visitor behavior should not be held out as the model for "how to develop a successful exhibit." This confuses the analysis of visitor behavior as an end rather than a means to an end. Visitors can tell us what they like or dislike. We can learn how they experience a display. In other words, we can see if the directions taken by the display creators are

positively viewed, informative and properly understood. Such analysis is not in any way a substitute for the leadership and direction which a museum professional staff should provide in the first place in determining what to present to the public and why it should be presented over some other alternatives. By analogy, most of the American automotive industry has given the American public what their scientific surveys said that they wanted rather than exercising product leadership, which of course, has greater risk. The recent "success" of the Ford Thunderbird and Taurus, as measured in number of sales, can be attributed to the design leadership exercised by Ford. No scientific survey of customers would have yielded the concept or predicted the favorable outcome.

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