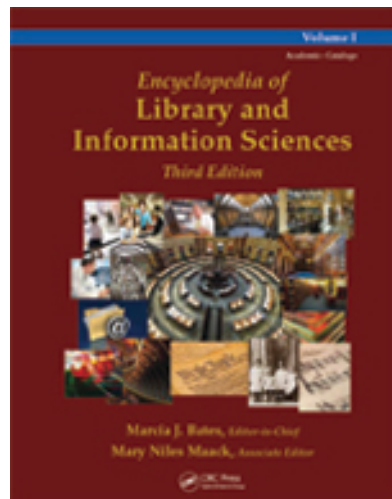


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Visitor Studies

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Abstract

The field of visitor studies seeks to document and understand the experiences and outcomes of visitors to museums and other informal educational settings. Both research and evaluation studies help to inform what we know about visitors to these settings and the impacts of their visits. This entry explores the theoretical foundations, goals and objectives of the field, commonly used research methodologies, and what we have learned about visitors in museum-like settings.

INTRODUCTION

The field of visitor studies is grounded in the context of museums and other informal learning environments, such as science and nature centers, zoos, aquariums, gardens, national parks, IMAX movie theaters, planetariums, or libraries. The main objective of visitor studies is to understand how people benefit from and utilize these settings, and to help inform institutions in the development of exhibitions, programming, and other public education activities. In contrast to marketing research, visitor studies focuses on institutions and experiences that have a learning agenda or educational mission. This “learning” is defined broadly within visitor studies to encompass all levels of cognition, affect, skill development, and personal growth. Researchers in the field focus on the experience and impacts on the “whole person,” not just the learning of facts.

While educational theorists and other scholars began to study the visitor experience in museums in the early part of the twentieth century,^[1–4] visitor studies did not fully emerge as a recognized discipline until the 1980s, roughly coinciding with the founding of the U.S.-based Visitor Studies Association (VSA) and its initial publications. This period also saw a substantial increase in the number of research studies related to visitor learning in museums and other informal contexts.^[5] These efforts to understand the impacts of museum programs and exhibits on visitors were driven largely by mandates from federal funding agencies to show accountability for grants received, but also out of recognizing the value of incorporating the “visitor’s voice” into museum exhibition and programmatic planning.

While requirements from funders still drive many studies, the field has continued to expand in the past several decades and many institutions now utilize visitor studies to help establish mission and goals, align programs and exhibits with mission, develop and refine visitor experiences, and better meet the needs and interests of a diverse

range of audiences. The field of visitor studies has addressed such issues as motivation for visitation, socially mediated learning, family learning, personal meaning-making, cultural relevance, the role of identity and memory in museum learning, and long-term impacts of museum experiences. In this entry, we will address the definition of visitor studies, the key theoretical foundations that underlie the field, goals and objectives of the field, commonly used research designs and methods, what we have learned about visitors in museum-like settings, and current trends in visitor studies research.

WHAT IS VISITOR STUDIES?

Visitor studies takes place within multiple disciplines, including museum studies, leisure and tourism studies, interpretation, informal science education, and environmental and conservation education, though it is considered by many an academic and professional discipline in its own right. In contrast to marketing, visitor studies provides the voice of the visitor, while marketing research aims to provide the visitor with what the visitor wants or expects. Visitor studies, however, allows for audience input into a system that is also driven by other criteria, such as curatorial and educator input, or alignment with the institution’s mission and goals. It is also important to note that visitor studies extends beyond actual visitors to a museum or museum-like setting, and can include the perspectives of potential visitors, non-visitors, or even a community as a whole.

The field of visitor studies is often divided into two key activities: 1) research and 2) evaluation, or applied research. While both research and evaluation use similar approaches and methods, they differ in their questions, goals, and applications. Basic research in visitor studies, as in any discipline, seeks to expand the knowledge of the field and provide generalizable data—that is, knowledge that is not bound by one specific context or situation.

This research can be hypothesis-driven (deductive) or emergent (inductive). Evaluation, on the other hand, seeks to answer specific questions about a particular population's experience of a specific exhibit, program, or other informal learning activity. The results of evaluation are not intended to be generalizable beyond the specific circumstances in which the study was carried out.

Evaluation is divided into three main stages: 1) Front-end evaluation, which is conducted in the early stages of planning and development, is designed to assess the needs, interests, and perceptions of potential visitors and non-visitors as a means to inform the planning process, test assumptions, and reveal visitors' awareness, knowledge, and understanding about a specific topic or idea; 2) Formative evaluation, which takes place during the development of an exhibition or program, when changes are still possible, aims to change or improve the exhibit or program based on visitors' responses, reactions, and behaviors (when a program or exhibit is completed and tested in full and in situ, the evaluation is referred to as "remedial" evaluation); and 3) Summative evaluation, which is carried out after an exhibit or program is considered complete, is designed to assess the effectiveness of the exhibit or program in reaching its intended goals and outcomes for visitors.

It is important to note that while visitor studies and evaluation are often thought of as synonymous, museum evaluation in itself does not necessarily include the visitor voice—it is only within the context of visitor studies that evaluation becomes visitor-centered. Evaluation is also a much larger field of study, reaching beyond museums, to focus on diverse educational and social enterprises. The American Evaluation Association (AEA) defines evaluation as "assessing the strengths and weaknesses of programs, policies, personnel, products, and organizations to improve their effectiveness."^[6] Indeed this is the role evaluation plays within visitor studies, but visitor studies is commonly thought of as being somewhat different from evaluation.

Multiple terms have been used to define the type of learning studied by visitor studies. One is "informal" learning, meaning learning that takes place outside a formal, structured environment such as school. Another commonly used term is "free-choice learning," which emphasizes the idea that individuals are generally choosing to spend time at places like museums, zoos, science centers, and gardens—or, even if they are taken there by someone else, such as a parent or grandparent, they make choices about where they go and what they do. In a free-choice learning environment, no curriculum guides the learning and visitors attend to what is interesting to them. Other terms commonly used in visitor studies are "non-formal learning" which is often used in environmental education to distinguish visitors who take part in defined programming from those who self-explore, who are called informal learners; and "lifelong learning," which is used

to emphasize this type of learning as taking place in informal settings across one's lifespan.

It should be noted that "informal" learning is referred to in other disciplines, such as sociology, as learning that takes place when sender and receiver of information have no learning or teaching agenda—for example, when people exchange information in conversations or through observing others in their daily life. Visitor studies looks at this particular aspect of learning only as it occurs within the walls of the institutions we study.

Another key component of this type of learning is that it is not measured or assessed through testing, as in formal education, and allows for multiple experiences and outcomes. Informal or free-choice learning is not entirely predetermined by the institution staff, but rather influenced by the environment that is created. This type of learning also differs from formal education as it occurs throughout one's lifetime in a variety of contexts. While visitor studies is focused on "learning" in informal contexts, the field defines learning in broad terms to include outcomes related to personal and social growth, building awareness, shifting attitudes, and affective or emotional responses—not just the cognition of "facts." The field recognizes that experiences in museum-like settings provide individuals with more than just the opportunity to learn new facts, but to make connections to themselves and to others, reinforce or challenge knowledge and ideas they already had, or to inspire curiosity or interest in new topics.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF VISITOR STUDIES

Visitor studies has naturally drawn a great deal of its theoretical foundation from education and learning theory, as well as cognitive psychology and human development. We will briefly describe some of the key theoretical foundations here. The basis of all theories of knowledge and learning is the field of *epistemology*, which asks "What is knowledge?"^[7] Epistemological theories generally lie on a spectrum between two extremes: realism, which purports that there are objective truths in the world that can be known or learned by individuals; and idealism, which states that knowledge exists only in the minds of individuals and that there is no objective truth. Most theories of learning reside somewhere in between these two extremes.

One framework that has informed visitor studies is *behaviorism*. Descriptions of behaviorism focus on attempts to understand people's actions through observable behaviors in response to stimuli without regard to internal processes or mental states. In some visitor studies circles, this has led to the linking of behaviorism with the "transmission-absorption model" of communication, whereby it is assumed that a fact or concept, if communicated well, will

be understood by a target audience. Within visitor studies, behaviorism has influenced the development of methods designed to use observable behaviors as indicators for learning and other processes. A more commonly used framework in visitor studies is *constructivism*, which posits that learning occurs through the active participation of the learner, who “constructs” or makes meaning as they explore and discover.^[8] In other words, learning is highly personal, internally constructed, and based more in the process than in outcomes. Another key foundational theory used in visitor studies is *socioculturalism*, which asserts that an individual’s social world plays a significant role in how that individual interprets what they see, experience, and learn.^[9] In this perspective, it is crucial to examine the social and cultural context in which learning takes place in order to fully understand the processes and impacts of such learning.

More recently, researchers have explored learning theories such as social learning, in which learning is viewed as a social process where individuals build or “scaffold” on each other—rather than an individual pursuit. Often this social learning is explored through the analysis of conversations that groups have during museum visits.^[10] Within this realm, some researchers have focused specifically on family learning,^[11] or how intergenerational groups connect, interact, and learn from and about one another in informal learning contexts. Some researchers have focused specifically on youth learning, sometimes drawing upon *positive youth development* frameworks to understand the broader impacts of programs on the development of youth in relation to areas such as self image, confidence, social skills, compassion, empowerment, and civic engagement.^[12]

Researchers in visitor studies have also explored how identity and motivation might relate to learning, or to what degree and in what ways an individual’s “entry narrative” (or prior knowledge, perspectives, interests, and motivations for visiting) impact what and how they learn, and the degree to which identity plays into the experience of learning itself.^[13–16] Other theoretical pursuits include the role of memory as a precursor to impacts; that is, the role of the museum in the construction of the self and “possible selves” (who one can become, both personally and professionally) over the course of one’s lifetime.^[17] Another lens recently used by researchers in visitor studies is that of long-term impacts, or how experiences in informal learning contexts may affect an individual over time. The idea behind this perspective is that the impacts of a museum visit do not all occur during or immediately after the experience, but may develop and shift for days, weeks, months, or years beyond it.

At the applied level, visitor studies often uses program theory to structure experiences that align goals and objectives with activities, in order to achieve specific outcomes. A process of *logic or program modeling* is used to help institutions plan or reflect upon the ways in which

their mission is reflected in their outputs (or activities and products) and, ultimately, in visitor outcomes. Drawn from the field of program evaluation, this technique helps the researcher and the program staff to verify that the program accomplished what it sets out to do. Program modeling helps institutions understand to what degree activities and actions provided are linked to visitor outcomes.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF VISITOR STUDIES

The overarching goal of visitor studies is to bring the “visitor voice” to the table when it would not otherwise be present. That is, as museums and other informal learning institutions engage in planning, development, and alignment of their mission with outputs and activities, visitor studies allows these institutions to incorporate the perspective of current and potential visitors, as well as non-visitors, into these processes. It is important to recognize that the work of visitor studies is not prescriptive; it does not tell institutions what to do or how to do it, but serves as a tool by which to inform them of how visitors and non-visitors think and feel about a given experience (e.g., exhibit or program), concept, topic, or even the museum as a whole, as well as to measure the effectiveness of an exhibit or program, and underlying mechanisms that support or hinder visitor engagement.

Visitor studies can be viewed as supporting four main, though not necessarily distinct, objectives: 1) providing valuable information on the effectiveness or impacts of a specific exhibition or program; 2) supporting visitor learning more broadly, including a wide range of audiences based on type of group (e.g., families or intergenerational, school groups, the elderly), cultural background, personal interests, prior knowledge, or identity; 3) informing strategic and interpretive planning for informal learning organizations; and 4) increasing our knowledge of how, where, what, and why people choose to learn in their spare time across their lifespan.

One of the most basic objectives of visitor studies is to provide feedback, from the visitors’ perspective, on specific museum experiences, most often an exhibition, exhibit component, interpretive strategy, or program. In this way, visitor studies supports informal learning institutions in creating accessible, relevant, and valuable experiences that align with institutional goals and mission. Essentially, visitor studies can be used in very specific, targeted ways to assess the nature or impacts of a particular experience.

Another primary goal of visitor studies is to more broadly support the needs and interests of a wide range of visitors. Museums were historically designed and developed as collecting institutions and were not concerned with the value of those collections vis-à-vis the general public. Even as museums became more aware of themselves as important learning institutions in the first half of the twentieth century, exhibits and programs were largely

created from the curatorial perspective with little understanding of visitors' wants, needs, or prior knowledge related to a given topic. In more recent years, visitor studies has been recognized as an essential practice in understanding and supporting the broad range of needs, interests, and learning styles of museum visitors and visiting groups.

Through the accumulation of knowledge about the visitor experience in museums, professionals engaged in visitor studies have increasingly served the role of informing institution-wide strategic and/or interpretive planning efforts. Often focusing on more than one specific exhibition or program, the objective of these efforts is to help institutions think more broadly about the audiences they serve, approaches to engaging new audiences, and how to integrate visitor perspectives throughout all levels of the institution. In this capacity, visitor studies provides empirically based knowledge (through research, evaluation, and/or literature reviews) that supports informal learning institutions in making crucial decisions about exhibition design, interpretive approaches, and public outreach and education strategies.

Finally, one of the underlying objectives of visitor studies is to increase our general knowledge of how people learn, what motivates them to learn, the types of factors that influence learning (such as an individual's "entry narrative"—which includes prior knowledge, experience, attitudes, and reasons for visiting), and the role of the sociocultural context in which learning takes place. This knowledge adds to our understanding of the significant role that museums and museum-like settings can play in people's lives across their lifespan.

VISITOR STUDIES AS A PROFESSION

Visitor studies as a profession in its own right emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. One of the early visitor studies-focused publications, *Visitor Behavior*, was first published in 1986. The journal exemplified the need for those already engaged in visitor studies to create a space for communicating findings and supporting professional practice.^[18] Two years later, in 1988, VSA was founded and held its first conference.^[19] At this first conference, a major goal was to identify indicators that visitor studies had emerged as a distinct field, including a critical mass of professionals involved in visitor studies, institutional commitment to the field, and a literature base.^[20] VSA became the publishing organization for *Visitor Behavior*, the full archives of which can be accessed through the VSA Web site (<http://www.visitorstudies.org>). Concurrently, the field of evaluation also coalesced into a recognized discipline, as exemplified by the first annual conference of the AEA in 1986.^[21]

Since the 1980s the field of visitor studies has become increasingly professionalized and academically minded.

Developments include the creation of the **Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation (CARE)** within the American Association of Museums (AAM) and the committee's authoring of professional standards of "competent and responsible support and practice of visitor studies."^[22] A continuing concern facing the field is supporting and ensuring professional practice by identifying key competencies and hosting professional development workshops. In another parallel with the broader evaluation field, visitor studies professionals and organizations have pushed for a formalized system of credentialing professionals. Unlike evaluation or museum studies, which are degree granting fields taught at universities, visitor studies as such has no degree program at this time. However, there are advanced degree programs in informal learning, such as through the Center for Informal Learning and Schools, a partnership of the Exploratorium, King's College London, and UC Santa Cruz (<http://cils.exploratorium.edu>), University of Pittsburgh's Center for Learning in Out of School Environments (<http://upclose.lrdc.pitt.edu/>), and the program in Free-Choice Learning at Oregon State University (<http://seagrant.oregonstate.edu/freechoice/index.html>).

Major associations and conferences that present visitor studies and support the profession include VSA, AAM, the Association of Science-Technology Centers (ASTC), the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), American Educational Research Association (AERA). **Journals that publish visitor studies include** *Visitor Studies* (published by VSA), *Curator*, *Science Education*, *The Journal of Museum Education*, *Informal Learning Review*, *Environmental Education Research*, and *Museums & Social Issues*.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

As is typical in social science-based research and evaluation, visitor studies may use quantitative or qualitative research designs or use a mixed-method approach. A review of the literature is recommended before the study is begun to ground the study in what is already known about the subject. Given the interdisciplinary nature of visitor studies, researchers tend to review literature from a wide range of disciplines for any one study they undertake. Theories from the social sciences may inform the lens the researcher uses to frame their investigation (e.g., behaviorism, constructivism, socioculturalism), to provide focus to the subject of the investigation or to interpret the data.

While research designs can be broadly categorized as quantitative, qualitative, or mixed, it is important to note that specific methods used to gather data (such as surveys, interviews, and observations) are not for the most part tied to being quantitative or qualitative, and can be analyzed through either lens, depending on the nature of the research or evaluation questions.

Quantitative Research Designs

Quantitative research designs are commonly used in visitor studies. These studies may use experimental, quasi-experimental, or nonexperimental designs. **Experimental** designs usually compare two different treatments based on random assignment to the treatments. This design is more likely to be used in a laboratory-type setting, rather than on the museum floor, because it allows for greater control of the experience by the researcher. An example of an experimental design could be asking two or more groups to complete the same task but some element of the experience is varied, like the signage, for each group. **Quasiexperimental** designs also use two or more treatments, but the treatments are not based upon individual random assignment. Instead, a matched-sampling technique may be used, as is common in studies of school groups where two similar classrooms or schools are matched together, each receiving a different treatment. **Nonexperimental** quantitative designs use no comparison groups or multiple treatment types. This design is commonly used in surveying visitors as they complete an exhibition or program. The sampling technique used may or may not be random, depending on the nature of the research question(s) being asked.

Quantitative research designs use methods that allow for statistical analysis and the reporting of numerical data. Surveys, interviews, observing visitor behavior, and visitor tracking are used to gather quantitative data about visitor's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. SPSS and SAS are social science software packages designed for the analysis of quantitative data, although Microsoft Office applications may also be used.

Qualitative Research Designs

Qualitative research designs are commonly used in visitor studies. Qualitative research designs are used to uncover the meanings behind events, gather perspectives from participants, and find out how or why something occurred. Qualitative designs are intended to contextualize events, people, and behaviors. All qualitative study designs have in common the use of techniques which generate word-based descriptions that attempt to capture "thick descriptions" of people, events, or phenomena.^[23] While multiple types of qualitative methodologies have been identified,^[24] case studies and ethnography are used most frequently.

Qualitative methods include interviews, observations, focus groups, and other methods to generate textual data that is not analyzed numerically. These data may be analyzed using techniques of pattern, theme, and content analysis.^[25] Specifically designed software such as Atlas.ti, HyperRESEARCH, NUD*IST and NVivo are becoming more common tools for qualitative data analysis as the capabilities of the software improve.

Mixed Method Research Designs

Mixed method studies use both qualitative and quantitative methods within a single study. Methods may be combined to use the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative approaches or for triangulation of data. For example, both tracking and interviews may be combined in an attempt to understand how visitors utilize an exhibition, with one set of data confirming, supporting, or enriching the other. Mixed method studies are often nested or iterative, meaning the project is multistage and one study builds upon another. A good example of this would be using an open-ended interview to explore an idea with a limited number of visitors and then a close-ended survey to gather more generalizable data, or using a survey with visitors as they leave an exhibition and following up months later with an open-ended telephone interview.^[26]

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT VISITORS

Who Visits and Why Do They Visit

Other than the number of tickets sold on an annual basis, museums often have very little detailed information about their visitors. In the United States, organizations such as AAM, AZA, and ASTC annually survey their member institutions. This information adds to our knowledge about who visits these institutions, as well as field-wide differences. For example, zoos commonly have higher attendance than other types of museums and attract a larger number of families.

Over the last 30 years, statistics have shown that museum visitors are well-educated, have relatively high incomes compared to the rest of the population, and are usually White/Caucasian. According to the National Science Board, roughly 60% of the population averages three visits a year to museums.^[27] These trends in attendance are relatively stable over time and across multiple countries. A study comparing Southern Californian museum visitation in 1984 and 2005 found that despite the increasing percentage of Latinos in the general population, museum visitors were no more likely to be Latino; instead Caucasians made up the majority of museum visitors in both 1984 and 2005.^[28] However, a critical factor that is more relevant in predicting who will visit is childhood visitation. Regardless of education or income, visiting museums as a child with one's family has a positive correlation with visitation as an adult. Note that school visitation as a child does not have the same impact on adult museum-going habits as visiting with one's family.

Marilyn Hood undertook some of the field's original studies into who visits museums, who does not, and why. Non-visitors do not visit because the message or value of

the museum has not been communicated to them.^[29] In a study of visitors, occasional visitors, and non-visitors in the Toledo, Ohio, area, Hood found that non-visitors valued leisure experiences that allowed for social interaction, active participation, and feeling comfortable in their surroundings, and did not visit museums because they felt museums did not encompass these attributes.^[30] Recent studies have shown that non-visitors perceive specific museums as not being culturally relevant and also hold negative preconceptions about museums in general.^[31]

Visitors come to museums and museum-like institutions for a range of reasons. While museum professionals often think of their institutions primarily in terms of the educational mission, visitors think of much more than education. Museums are seen as a place for entertainment, spending quality time with family and friends, a “must-see” destination, or even a place to go to get out of the rain or the summer heat. The field of social psychology has much to share with researchers investigating visitor motivations. Underlying these reasons for visiting a museum are issues of self-determination, self-fulfillment, and intrinsic motivation.^[32,33] People visit museums because they find something appealing or rewarding in the visit. Visiting is an intentional behavior that allows for the fulfillment of desires or perceived needs, all within an enjoyable setting.

What Are the Outcomes of the Visit

Just as a range of reasons for visiting have been identified, a range of outcomes have also been identified by the field of visitor studies. These outcomes are grouped under the heading of “learning” and include knowledge, affective responses, and behaviors. Visitor studies traditionally emphasized the knowledge-based or cognitive outcomes from a visit. Museum practitioners wanted to know how much of the main message or big idea of the exhibition or program visitors could express at the end of their visit. Visitor studies supplied the data that allowed designers to see how many visitors “got” the exhibition.

As the field grew, researchers pushed the boundaries of what counted as “learning” in or from an experience. Books like *Family Learning in Museums* and *Learning Conversations in Museums* and the Contextual Model of Learning posited by Falk and Dierking embraced the idea that visits do more than impart factual knowledge to visitors.^[34–36] Recent discussions in publications like *Informal Learning Review*, *Science Education*, and *Environmental Education Research* broadened the perspective of possible and desirable outcomes further.^[37–39]

Learning during and after a visit is embedded in the social and physical contexts of the visitor. With this broadened view of what learning is and how it occurs, researchers began to look more broadly at learning outcomes from a visit. Current studies are just as likely to investigate

emotional or affective responses as cognitive gains. Affective responses include attitudes and perceptions towards an exhibition itself or the content. How did a visitor feel about modern art before, and after, an exhibit?

Visitor studies research also investigates visitor behaviors during and after the visit. Behavior change is an important facet of many conservation-focused institutions such as zoos or aquariums. These organizations have a strong interest in teaching their visitors about the wildlife in their collections, and how human activity impacts the ecosystems of these organisms in the wild. These institutions, however, commonly attempt to leverage this knowledge of nature and ecosystems to have their visitors make a change in their behavior: recycle, use less water and energy, donate to WWF, or write their congressperson. The field of visitor studies is just beginning to tap into the wealth of knowledge on behavior change from other fields. Drawing from fields such as health, psychology, and environmental education, the interdisciplinary nature of visitor studies allows researchers to seek out theories that have been formulated in other fields and apply them to visitor studies.

One can state that most experiences that are researched by visitor studies are of relatively short duration, and hence the relative intensity of individual impacts is sometimes rather small: latent knowledge is brought to the fore, awareness is raised, emotional connections are made, enjoyment and fulfillment is reached, a sense of belonging is rekindled, or quality family time is spent. In contrast to school assessment, visitor studies often deals with small changes on the individual level that, aggregated over many visitors, amount to considerable benefits to society. Few experiences that visitor studies concerns itself with are transformative for individuals alone, and those tend to come from programming that is longer-lasting and more involved, like volunteering as an interpreter in a museum or taking part in a citizen-science project. A new field in visitor studies is focusing on the value of entire institutions to their community and on the relative contribution of individual experiences within a stream of lifelong engagement in leisure-time learning. It is within these contexts that the field of visitor studies is able to document the benefits of lifelong, informal, or free-choice learning.

CURRENT RESEARCH TRENDS IN VISITOR STUDIES

As more is learned about visitors and why they come, we realize how much there is that we do not know. The boundaries of the field have been sketched and now there is a real push to add to the depth of knowledge. Researchers have been pushing for more longitudinal studies, more investigations into the role of social groups in learning, and personal factors such as motivations and identity.

This is not to say that researchers have overlooked these issues, only that the field as a whole needs to know more about the role of these factors in visitation and the impacts of visitation.

Longitudinal studies allow researchers to learn more about aspects having to do with on-going behaviors or outcomes of a visit. For example, a study conducted six months after a visit to an aquarium allows researchers to ask questions about whether behavior change *actually happened*, whereas at the time of the visit only a visitor's *intention* to change can be documented.^[40] A recent review of long-term visitor studies pointed out, however, that there are few such studies and most look at a relatively short length of time (i.e., a year or less).^[41] The field needs to undertake more longitudinal studies and studies of greater temporal length. These types of studies will allow the field to say with more certainty what the impacts of visitation really are and how museum visits fit into the fabric of a person's life.

Likewise, more research is needed on how the outcomes of a visit are mediated by the social group with which one visits. Both what and how people learn is impacted by the social setting in which the learning takes place. People within groups talk about their own experiences in relation to what they are seeing, they draw upon the skills and memories of others, and the act of visiting creates another shared experience among the group. In light of the fact that most museum visitors come to the museum as part of a social group, visitor studies research has only just begun to touch upon the social aspects of visiting, learning, and visit outcomes.

Greater investigation into personal aspects such as motivations and identity are also needed in the field of visitor studies. Recent studies and discussion in the field have described motivations for visiting in terms of the enacted or situated identity of the visitor. In one recent study, researchers grouped zoo and aquarium visitors into five identity-related motivations (explorer, facilitator, experience seeker, professional/hobbyist, and spiritual pilgrim) and found that slightly more than half (55%) of those interviewed had a single strong motivating factor for their visit.^[42] These conversations hearken back to the reason why people choose to visit in the first place. What do we really know about how a museum visit supports a person's view of themselves? By continuing to draw from the theories and results of diverse disciplines, researchers will add to our knowledge of what drives visits to museums.

The field of visitor studies also is under increasing pressures from forces outside the field. Funding agencies such as the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health play a role in shaping the practices of the field, both the questions that are asked and the way the research is conducted. Recent trends include the push for rigorous studies as defined by the U.S.

Department of Education Report of the Academic Competitiveness Council from May 2007 (mostly experimental or quasiexperimental research designs), and the enforcement of federal regulations guiding the protection of human subjects in research in educational settings that had previously not focused on these issues (NSF-ISE, NIH-SEPA).^[43] Professional associations like VSA and AEA are working to actively shape policy and let funding agencies know how these changes effect how visitor studies are conducted.

CONCLUSION

Visitor studies have impacted the way museum practitioners view their visitors and, therefore, the types of experiences that are created. Whether through evaluation or basic research, visitor studies pushes the museum field to learn more about why visitors come to these institutions and what happens during and after the visit. Visitor studies are increasingly being used to frame the importance of learning throughout the lifespan.

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