

Leisure Decisions Influencing African-American Use of Museums

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Museums have expressed a desire to provide a wide ranging array of quality learning experiences to all parts of American society. This reflects a desire for museum educational efforts to be inclusive of the diverse cultural, ethnic and racial groups that comprise the society. Implicit in the statement of these goals is the understanding within the museum community that, as a whole, museums are currently under-utilized by African-Americans (cf., Robinson, et al., 1986; DiMaggio and Ostrower, 1990; Birney, 1990; Doering and Black, 1989; ASTC-AAAS, 1987; American Museum of Natural History, 1977, 1986; Kaplan and Talbot, 1988; Ziebarth, Doering and Bickford, 1992; Bickford, Doering and Smith, 1992).

Reported here are the results of two research studies conducted within a one-year period. The studies were intended to investigate the relative importance of a variety of critical variables postulated as possible reasons for the under-utilization of museums by African-Americans. The first study focused on the background and interests of users of science-related museums such as science centers, natural history museums and zoos. The second study consisted of open-ended, in-home interviews with a diverse cross-section of African-Americans focused on what individuals and families do during their leisure time and why. Each interview eventually got around to the question of museum use. Both studies were designed to be exploratory in nature, but sufficiently structured to provide initial answers to the questions posed. A complete description of the methods, results and conclusions can be found in Falk (1993).

The first study compared 50 African-American and 50 white visitors at each of four science-related museums. The overwhelming impression left by the data was that, despite a number of differences in the background, interests and behaviors of African-American and white science-related museum visitors, these two populations were very similar. On virtually every measure — interest in science, education, occupation, annual income, going to museums as children, what factors influenced their decision to visit the museum, the frequency of museum going and their leisure time preference ratings — the general pattern of response was consistent between blacks and whites. In general, both black and white visitors to these four institutions, and by extension other similar institutions, can be described as generally affluent, well educated and with a strong interest in science. Demographically, these results square with a wide array of investigations showing that museum visitors tend to be of higher education and socio-economic status than the population as

whole (Cheek, et al, 1976; Balling and Cornell, 1985; Hood, 1988, Robinson, et al., 1986; Doering and Black, 1989). There was also evidence these museum visitors, like others studied before, self-select which institutions to visit based upon their personal interests (cf. Falk and Dierking, 1992).

The second study was a multi-factorial analysis of African-American leisure behavior. Half of the 333 individuals interviewed indicated that they never go to museum-like settings. Two-thirds of those interviewed do not go to any museum-like setting even once per year. Of the one third who go at least once per year, only 6% visited some combination of institutions an average of once every three months (go to museum-like settings 4 or more times per year). Overall, this was not a population that frequently visited museums; then neither do most white Americans (cf. DiMaggio and Ostrower, 1990); the data suggested that blacks were half as likely to visit museums as were whites.

A variety of factors positively correlated with museum-going, including a high level of education, a high level of income, residence in a racially integrated community, being over the age of 40 years and regularly participating in church-related activities. The data suggested that individuals fitting this profile are more likely than individuals not fitting this profile to go to museums, but given that museum-going was so infrequent among African-Americans, these variables do not reliably predict museum-going behavior, even when all are present.

There was no evidence that taking school field trips to museums influenced adult museum going, though childhood reading and participation in out-of-school organizations like scouts and 4H did. There was no evidence that either growing-up in the North or in non-rural areas positively influenced adult museum going. There was no evidence that expressing a strong concern about a child's education predisposed adults to take their children to museums.

There was evidence, much of it subjective, that past as well as present day perceptions of museums as racist institutions persist and that these perceptions negatively influence museum-going. Although only a very small number of individuals expressly stated that they had observed or experienced racism in museums, there was a widespread sense that such problems still exist. Or at the very least, museums are not really a "black thing."

A recurring theme of interest and focus for many, if not most, of those surveyed was a desire to learn more about their African and/or African-American heritage and culture. This notion came up time and time again, in many different forms and cut across gender, age, education and income. However, this widespread interest in things African was not reflected in attendance at African-oriented museums or by reading and subscribing to African-American newspapers or magazines.

Of all the various factors influencing museum-going, four emerged as the most important. Three of these operated

negatively to reduce museum visitation among African-Americans: socio-economic variables, racism (real and perceived) and, most importantly, the museum-going habit (past and present). The fourth variable, church-going, was a positive factor which appeared to increase utilization.

The perspective provided by this research suggests that structural changes in leisure patterns may require time to change, more time than just the few years in which intensive efforts by the museum community have currently been made. The current museum visitation patterns of African-Americans were not created overnight and it may require at least another generation before long-term changes in these patterns occur.

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Minorities and the Detroit Zoo

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A telephone survey of Detroit residents was conducted in order to discover the degree to which the Detroit Zoo was visited by minority residents. A previous study had estimated that approximately 80% of all Zoo visitors were white, while only 20% were black. However, because 75% of those visitors resided outside the city of Detroit, it was hypothesized that the larger white presence was a reflection of heavy participation by suburban families. The purpose of this study was to produce evidence of the degree to which the Zoo was serving the needs of Detroit's minority residents, since the city is responsible for the Zoo's funding.

Care was taken to provide a research sample which adequately represented low-income minority families. Results showed that an approximately equal number of white and non-white respondents had visited the Zoo in the five previous years. In addition, white and non-white respondents who had been to the Zoo during that time had visited with similar frequencies. It was concluded on the basis of these findings that the Zoo was serving minority citizens as well as whites, and that the disproportionate number of white visitors were, in fact, from the suburbs.

Further examination of survey data found that zoo-going is a family activity of parents between the ages of 25 and 34. When those who had not been to the zoo during the previous five years were asked why they had not visited, both whites and non-whites stated that they did not have children or friends with whom they could visit. While it was theorized that the number of non-whites visitors was reduced by economic factors such as a lack of cars, the fact that a larger portion of the white population was older, and therefore had no children at home, helped to balance minority/non-minority representation at the Zoo.

Summarized by Don Thompson