

Thoughts While Visiting

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Studies of visitor behavior are usually conducted by professionals who impartially observe the activities of visitors in museums, zoos, etc. Seldom, if ever, do the professionals write about their own experiences as visitors. A recent two-week trip to Hong Kong and Beijing provided the occasion to do just this. Periods of time were reserved during the trip to reflect upon and record my experiences as a visitor.

Unlike many visitors I did not travel to China with a tour group. Two long-time friends, frequent visitors to China, accompanied me during much of my travel. Nor was the purpose of my visit to escape from work and relax, enjoying the assuring accommodations and food of my hotel. Rather, like many other tourists, I wanted to see and experience first-hand, as much of the life in this part of the world as I could.

Upon reviewing my travel notes, I found that many of my observations pertained to two related themes. The first deals with what the sociologist Talcott Parsons has called "system maintenance." Upon arriving in Hong Kong I was struck by how new and different things were, including language, the physical characteristics of the people, the signs, and the clothing. However, while the sights and experiences were unique, the rhythm of my daily activities was strikingly familiar, inasmuch as I had previously traveled abroad. This rhythm was composed of consciously planning and then arranging for such matters as sleep, food, elimination, clothing, and currency exchange. Visitors traveling at my level are continually faced with decisions of the sort: first, "where can I find a hotel?"; then, "are less expensive hotels available?" The same goes for restaurants. And ditto for money changers. After a while laundry becomes a problem. And finally, throughout any day the traveler must keep an eye out for the availability of toilets. Large hotels, public buildings, department stores, and restaurants are identified and noted as places of possible relief should the occasion arise.

Some thoughts have arisen from these observations. One is that many visitors are bombarded with decisions quite different from those faced in their normal lives. (Packaged tours remove the need of the traveler to make these very decisions.) This condition undoubtedly contributes to both the excitement and fatigue experienced by visitors, since all of the above decisions are "forced" upon the visitor: you must find a room before you can rest; you must find food; etc. Another, is that substantial portions of any traveler's day are consumed with such "system maintenance" activities. (An examination of any foreign travel guide will show that major parts of the

book pertain to hotels and restaurants alone.) The consequence is that the actual amount of "free time" available to visit "the sights" is much smaller than common expectations allow. Finally, the importance of "system maintenance" activities to travelers helps point out their vulnerability. The normal support systems that individuals maintain in their communities are unavailable to these individuals as travelers. The friends, medical doctors, dentists, and optometrists, etc., that we know and feel free to call upon in times of emergency are generally unavailable during travel. Those who travel must hope that they will not need the help of professionals. If they do experience some emergency, they are somewhat at the mercy of the professionals who have been called upon to assist them.

The second theme relates to what Becker called the "outsider." Visitors, by definition, are outsiders. Like many other outsiders, they have imposed this status upon themselves. Visitors are members of an alien culture who have deliberately chosen to expose themselves to the new culture, whether it be the local museum or to some far off civilization. (Should a person choose to live for a period of time in a foreign country the status of the person changes from "visitor" to that of an "alien resident" or "expatriot.") Given this perspective on visitor behavior, it is not unexpected then to observe that when visitors to new cultures encounter other visitors they are faced with the problem of how to interact.

One common pattern of interaction among visitors, found in museums, zoos, and other areas within one's own society is to provide social supports: "we stayed at the Marriott hotel and ate at Fred's restaurant," etc. However, visitor interaction in foreign countries has, in my experiences, been quite different, especially among fellow visitors from my own country. The North American and European visitors I have encountered on the streets of Beijing have almost had an aversion toward one another. Recognition, in terms of eye contact, let alone conversation, is usually avoided. Why? One possible explanation stems from the "outsider" role played by these foreign visitors. If a person has traveled half around the world to experience and immerse oneself in a new culture, then the experience is perhaps spoiled by the association with people who could have been met only 20 miles from home.

Another observation is that a status hierarchy seems to exist among visitors of the sort that I met. Namely, the person who has been to the most remote or the most unvisited areas seems to gain the most status points. Visitors brag about having been to "out of the way" places, and even travel guide books and tour groups attempt to identify settings that are "unspoiled." A woman I met who had traveled alone by train for a month throughout China was accorded considerable recognition among us "China visitors" because of the unique

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experiences she had had. Few Westerners travel across China, and even fewer travel by train. As an "outsider" she had experienced something quite rare. Had she been a native Chinese, her travels might have been viewed as necessary tedium.

Of course "system maintenance" and the status of the "outsider" are integral parts of visitor behavior. They are inseparable. The vulnerability of being a visitor is precisely because the visitor is an outsider. But then, would such visitors want it any other way? □

Factors Affecting "Hands-On" Exhibits

From A. W. Melton (1936). Distribution of Attention in Galleries in a Museum of Science and Industry. *Museum News*, 14(3), 6-8.

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects on visitor behavior of manual operation of exhibits demonstrating electricity. Automatic operation of the exhibits was compared with manual operation. Before Melton intervened, five exhibits on electricity were programmed in a sequence such that the first exhibit would operate for ten seconds; a five second delay occurred; the second exhibit would operate for ten seconds; etc. until all five exhibits were completed. Under these conditions the mean time looking at the exhibits were 13.8 seconds. When visitors were allowed to manually operate three of these exhibits with a crank, the average time increased to 23.8 seconds. In addition, the average reading time increased from 4.5 seconds to 5.7 seconds after the manual condition was implemented. Melton argued that: "It seems reasonable to conclude that the manual operation stimulated interest of the type museums are attempting to foster." (p.7) □

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MESC designed the study to help member museums understand and compare audiences so individual museums can become aware of their impact, and learn more about the role museums play in American society. The book presents the results of the study, a detailed analysis, and a copy of the questionnaire along with other procedural materials.

The first chapter discussed the demographic profile of visitors. The data are presented in a straight-forward manner with comparisons to 1980 U.S. Consensus data

and results from other visitor surveys. The second chapter provides an in-depth picture of key demographic characteristics in relationship to each other and to the type of museum visited. Matrices are used to compare the variables of age, sex and education with museum type. The results indicate that preferences for museum type is significantly influenced by these three variables.

Next is a detailed analysis of three (Asian American, Black, and Hispanic) ethnic minority audiences who are infrequent visitors (together they total 15.7% of the survey audience) to museums in Southern California in spite of the fact they comprise more than one-half of the regional population. The results show that younger ethnic minorities are a potential audience for museums in Southern California. The attention paid to the visiting behavior of minorities is worthwhile in that museums now have explicit information to help them develop specific programming for segments of this potential audience.

The final chapter examines with whom one chooses to visit the museum and the number of companions in a visiting group. The author uses the data to discuss the idea of the family and social group audience in a larger context: the role museums can play in American life. She suggests that museums re-examine current programming trends (group tours) and consider developing alternative programs for the small group, whether it be family or friends.

The data collected for this study were analyzed very thoroughly. The authors made excellent use of the data. As always, carefully defining the goals of a research project is the key to a successful and useful study. The apparent thought process behind the data analysis and the inclusion of the procedural materials are the most positive aspects of the book.

All surveys were conducted between January and March because other existing studies have shown more local visitors attend museums during this period and MESC wanted to focus on the local population. While there is an inquiry about place of residence, those results are not reported.

The book is a model for individual museums and those in regional associations who are interested in cooperating to conduct a visitor study; however, it must be realized that a project of this scope is not an easy task. There are many problems that are inherent with survey work that the book does not discuss. A description of some of the problems would have been useful to readers. On the whole, this inexpensive book is a worthwhile reference for those who conduct surveys and for those interested in museum audience statistics.

The book can be ordered from MESC Publications, Museum Educators of Southern California, P. O. Box 27854, Los Angeles, CA 90027. \$8.50 (\$7.50 MESC members) and \$1.50 postage (book rate) or \$2.50 (first class). Add \$ 0.40 postage for each additional copy.