

Ethics and Visitor Studies — Or, Not?

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Introduction

This paper may not live up to expectations. It is not going to provide an ethical blue-print — it will not be giving an answer. Instead we are going to pose some questions, challenge a dilemma, pose some other dilemmas, and suggest an approach.

Ethics are about moral decisions — rights and wrongs. Throughout this paper there is a deliberate conflating of the terms 'ethics' and 'morals' but we accept that ethics tend to be general principles of what ought to be done and morals refer to the rights and wrongs of a specific action. In fact, ethics is the science of morals and morality.

The underlying premise of this paper is that we are all morally responsible for our actions and for the consequences those actions have on others — philosophers may have debated this issue for centuries but the authors of this paper are clear in their belief that everyone has moral responsibilities. We are therefore morally responsible for the evaluations we conduct, commission and implement. This must be evident in the thinking we do in advance of our work — what might the consequences be? What impact might this have on the people who give us information? What effects might it have on staff, clients, trustees, or other evaluators? These questions should be asked in advance, and not dealt with in hindsight.

Aims

This paper has three key points to discuss and with which to try to come to some conclusions.

- The first is the focus of ethical considerations. Most of the texts we have read tell us that there is an "ethical dilemma" to be addressed. We will come back to this point but should say from the onset that we do not buy into this supposed dilemma.
- The second point is to highlight some areas of concern — what are the ethical and moral issues that need to be addressed?
- The third point is one of terminology and hierarchy: the mixing and confusing of the terms ethics, principles, standards, conduct and practice.

Some Examples

We would like to start with some stories — they are of course ethical allegories — and we will stop the story before the end and ask the reader to think about what you would have done if you had been us.

A telephone conversation:

Hi, Sandra this is Jane from the Press Office

Oh, Hi Jane, how can I help?

We need some good quotes from visitors

Er... For what?

For a Press Release

Oh. So, how do you think I can help?

Well, you do lots of stuff with visitors, you must have some good quotes we can use?

What do you mean by 'good'?

Well, you know, good stuff about the Museum, something about what a good place it is....."

A corridor conversation:

Sandra can I have a quick chat?

Sure, what's the problem?

I want to get some material ready for the opening of a new gallery

Uh hn

Are you still testing exhibits?

Yes (said with some suspicion)

Can we video the next couple of sessions?

In a meeting with colleagues:

We've been in contact with the college [a well respected place for education training] and they want to do some work here.

We're keen for them to do this as we don't know much about what visitors learn in the galleries.

What are they suggesting?

Using hidden cameras to record visitors' activities and then ask them to explain what they were doing.

What? Asking visitors to watch themselves on tape and say why they were doing whatever it was they were doing?

Yes, I think that was what they were suggesting.

And last, a request from a student:

We often get inquiries from students who want to do some work in the Museum. This is a description of a recent inquiry:

A member of staff was contacted, in person, by a post-graduate student based in an eminent university psychology department. The researcher wanted to do some survey work with visitors using a particular interactive exhibit based on a newly developed (and not yet in production) piece of technology. My colleague said she would find out and she contacted me.

I asked her to contact the student and suggest he write to me and give me details the research: its purpose and methods. I received a fax with a short covering letter explaining the topic of the student's thesis and ten pages of densely packed knowledge and attitude questions.

We will come back to these stories later.

Reasons for This Paper

This paper stemmed from our unease at how rarely things such as ethics and visitor rights are raised at VSA meetings. There are rhetoric mutterings about maintaining standards and occasionally I have picked up implicit references to the rights of researchers: we have a right to do this work; we have a right to publish; we have a right to interpret visitors' comments, actions and motives. This issue of researchers' rights (or, perhaps even the rights of research *per se*) causes us even greater unease than the lack of reference to the ethics of what we do and how we do it.

We have been surprised by this lack of discussion about the ethics of visitor studies work. Last year one of us disagreed with a view that only researchers should do research. I disagreed with this statement because I felt

it limited human abilities and limited the view points put forward in visitor studies work. However, I must concede one point: a trained researcher should know about the ethics of social science research.

I have assumed that most North American visitor studies people have an educational background in the social sciences — psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc. — and due to the legal requirements in this country I also assume that ethical practice would be rammed down the throats of all social science college students. Am I wrong? Or, is it so rammed down that it has become implicit rather than explicit? Is it so boring as to be considered unworthy of consideration? Was it taught in so matter-of-fact a manner that it has been forgotten? Was it never taught at all? Or, is it that we are so wrapped up with delivering actionable reports we forget to consider the ethics of what we are doing and to be reflexive — or, do we simply not have the time to consider these issues?

Social Science Ethics — The Status Quo

The standard line in most texts when thinking about the ethics of social science research is that of “the ethical dilemma of social scientists — the conflict between the right to research and the right of research participants to self-determination, privacy and dignity” (Nachmias and Nachmias: 73). Expressed in a more pragmatic way it “requires researchers to strike a balance between the demands placed on them as professional scientists in pursuit of truth, and their subjects’ rights and values potentially threatened by the research ... [a] costs/benefits ratio” (Cohen and Manian: 347). As a slight aside we find it interesting that in this last quote we are already talking in a language that subjugates participants’ rights — we are calling them “subjects”, people who pay reverence to royalty, the subservient; and we are suggesting that the researcher owns these people as they are described as “their subjects” (not as in subject of study but as the people being studied).

As mentioned at the start, we have serious misgivings with this analysis of ethics when concerned with visitor studies. But before discussing why this is so we will go through some of the areas where questionable practice can arise and the types of issues to be considered.

We must be in danger of going over what, for some, will be familiar ground. However, our justification is the infrequency with which we come across such issues in the visitor studies literature.

Every stage of a visitor study can pose ethical issues (Nachmias and Nachmias: 74; Cohen and Manian: 348). They can arise from the nature of the study itself: as in the summative evaluation where there are indications that the management wish to find some tangible data with which to blame someone for a perceived fault; or, a general point that by trying to refine an exhibit so that visitors use it in the intended manner we are actually exerting a control over visitors’ actions. There seems to me to be a moral issue

here: a fine line between guiding visitors' use of an exhibit and allowing visitors little or no scope for self-determination, no choice.

We also have the setting in which the research takes place: such as in public spaces, or in schools. Then we have the procedures required by the study design: doing things that might cause negative effects on the visitors, such as the prototype that doesn't work well but visitors assume it their fault, not the exhibit's or exhibit designer's fault, that they can't get the damn thing to work. The method of data collection can also pose ethical issues: the covert video recording, like my story about the eminent academic establishment's desire to do work in the Science Museum. The participants themselves: for example, can children give you informed consent? What about people with special needs, or people with specialist interests? The type of data can be problematic: what if quotes can be tied to the people who made them, say if staff were being interviewed as part of an evaluation? And how we present and use the data has ethical dimensions.

This last point is crucial and often seems to be missed. Janet Finch in a paper on 'Ethics and politics of interviewing women' says that "most discussions tend to focus upon the point of access or of data collection rather than upon the use of the material. These discussions implicitly assume that research 'citizens' [that means you and me] can *anticipate* potentially harmful uses to which such data can be put" (Finch: 175), but can we?

Others have identified a series of questionable practices in social research. I have a list of ten items (this is not inclusive, as I will explain in a moment):

1. Involving people without their prior knowledge or consent
2. Coercing them to participate
3. Withholding information about the true nature of the research
4. otherwise deceiving the participant
5. Getting them to do something that lowers their self-esteem, causes embarrassment, or a loss of dignity
6. Violating their rights of self-determination — the right to say no
7. Exposing participant to physical or mental stress
8. Invading their privacy (confidentiality, anonymity)
9. Withholding benefits from some participants
10. Not treating participants fairly, or with consideration, or with respect.

In almost all of these points I can give you examples of where my own work has unfortunately met these questionable practices — I would ask you to look for your own examples as I go through mine.

Consent

We track people around bits of the Science Museum. Usually we put up a general sign to say that people are working in the area but sometimes we forget; anyway we all know how few people read labels! Is this informed consent?

Coercion

To my shame I have heard myself utter the words “Oh, go on have a go”; usually paraphrased with the statement “but we can stop anytime you’re ready”.

Withholding Information and Deception

Thankfully I am not aware of any examples where I have fallen into these particular ethical traps. Although my corridor story about being asked to allow filming while I was talking to visitors might fall into this category: the people thought they were helping me with an evaluation but in fact were being media fodder for a gallery opening.

Self-Esteem

As part of a pilot for a general survey we asked visitors five true/false science questions. The questions came from a nation-wide survey of the public understanding of science. The questions we had selected were to enable us to tie our visitors’ knowledge to that of the UK population as a whole. One woman I was interviewing had already expressed the view that museums should not be ashamed of being elitist — there was no need to pander to the general public. We then came to the science questions and she knew that she did not know the answers. She went away looking somewhat embarrassed and uncomfortable. I do not share her view that museums are for the elite, and although she may have felt part of that elite her knowledge (or, rather lack of knowledge) of science may have caused her to question her membership of that club — her self-esteem was diminished by her experience of a visitor study.

I have always felt uncomfortable about testing visitors’ knowledge and have tried to identify why this is so. There are three main reasons: I don’t like making people feel stupid (because they can’t answer a question); they don’t come to the Museum to answer my questions; and, how exactly will knowing what visitors know really help staff to do their job better?

In general terms this is about accepting that visitors have a right not to be involved in a study, yet I deliberately craft the wording at the top of an interview form to minimise refusals.

Stress

At this point I would like to share with you one of the most horrible moments of my working life. It happened while I was working here in the States. I was trialing some label text and was asking visitors to help improve the text by reading back to me and then commenting on a number of issues. I approached a man in his mid-forties, and as soon as I started my explanation of what I wanted and why I became aware that something was very wrong. I suddenly realized “Oh shit, this guy can’t read”, and it was too late; no matter what reassurance I offered him I could not make the situation okay; I could see his fear and he rapidly moved off to the escalator.

Privacy

Again I offer you an example from my work in one of the Smithsonian Museums. This time I was testing some video clips and trying to assess the meaning visitors were placing on the silent clips. A couple in their late twenties sat next to me. I turned and asked if they would help. They politely listened and then also very politely explained the reason for their visit. The woman’s father had died the week before and they had come to see the case next to where I was sitting which contained some of his work. I thanked them for their time and quietly and slowly packed up my bits and pieces and left them to their grieving.

More generally, as I expect this story is not a common evaluation experience, this is an issue of confidentiality and anonymity. Two of the stories I started this session with are in danger of breaking these principles. Video recording people provides an identifiable record of the individual. What do you do? Promise to wipe the tape after a week; and then forget your promise? Keep it locked away? Ignore the issue? By the way, I did not agree to allow any of our evaluation sessions to be filmed and I have voiced ethical objections to the academic institution’s study.

I am very fond of an example I found in one of the textbooks (Nachmias and Nachmias: 85) I was looking at an example you may know. In the 60s a publication of life in a small town contained such unique and identifiable details of the lives of its inhabitants that it was apparent as to whom the fictional names in the book referred. Apparently the townspeople staged a parade in which each wore a mask bearing their fictitious name and at the end of the parade there was a muck (manure) spreader with an effigy of the researcher looking into the muck.

On first glance this seems rather peripheral to visitor studies but it might be applicable. Some visitors seem to find it a privilege to help us out with our evaluations. We have done special tours of soon-to-open galleries

and it is possible that other visitors, if they knew, would also wish to do this and feel rightly aggrieved if they were not invited to help out.

Consideration and Respect

The example I would give here is about the length of interaction. Is it reasonable to ask a visitors to spend half an hour going through an interview? Going back to the post-grad with ten pages of attitude and knowledge questions — was this an okay thing to do? My answer was that it was not appropriate.

In general we limit interview-based questionnaires to seven minutes (5% of the average stay in the Museum), and we try never to waste visitors time.

Summary of the Ethical Issues

This summary of ethical considerations has come from text produced for social scientists in general or specifically for behavioral researchers, anthropologists or educational evaluators — albeit augmented with my own examples. It is not specific to visitor studies and I feel that this is a problem. For example, an ethical issue I need to consider is potential damage to the Museum's reputation; and this includes our abilities to maintain credibility with sponsors — do you ask how many people noticed that an exhibition was sponsored and by whom? What if only 10% notice? How might the sponsor react?

There are also ethical considerations to be taken into account in the reuse of data for purposes beyond the study for which they were gathered. My first story of how the Press Office wanted some "good" quotes for a press release is a suitable example. This was an inappropriate request on a number of counts: a misuse of data, a biased representation of views, and the respondents had not given their permission for the reuse of their words in this way. But I also understand why the Press Office wishes to do this, and in refusing to provide quotes, am I potentially damaging the institution for which I work?

The point here is the need to focus ethical issues to the context of visitor studies and visitors. The nearest I have seen to this is a list of "ethical principles in 'action research'" (Robson: 33–4) which everyone seems to warn needs special attention. The issues raised include:

- Observe protocol
- Involve participants
- Negotiate with those affected
- Report progress
- Obtain explicit authorisation before you observe

- Obtain explicit authorisation before you examine files, correspondence or other documentation
- Negotiate descriptions of people's work
- Negotiate accounts from other points of view
- Obtain explicit authorisation before using quotations
- Negotiate reports for various levels of release
- Accept responsibility for maintaining confidentiality
- Retain the right to report your work
- Make your principles and procedures binding and known

Many of these points are implicit in the CARE document "Professional Standards for the Practice of Visitor Research and Evaluation in Museums" — which I hope is pinned above your desk. Or, is it in the filing cabinet? Or, have you never seen a copy?

When Is a Dilemma Not a Dilemma?

As I have already confessed, I do not buy into the "ethical dilemma" and its associated costs/benefits ratio. Please don't misinterpret this statement; there are real ethical issues involved in the work we do, and they must be carefully considered and addressed appropriately and consciously — and I have raised many of the points made by those who believe there is a dilemma. The points are real, but to me the dilemma is unreal. Let me try and explain why.

I have two themes to my disagreement, and both are philosophical.

Audience Advocacy

The ethical dilemma depends upon the acceptance that there is a conflict between the researcher's right to research in pursuit of "truth" and those being researched having their rights as humans maintained. In the costs/benefits ratio the social scientist is supposed to weigh the benefits of doing the research against the costs of not doing it and the benefits and costs to those involved in the research (from Cohen and Manian: 348, from Nachmias and Nachmias). The benefits include social ones, significant advances in theoretical and applied knowledge, and the cost of not doing it is ultimately a lost opportunity to improve the human condition. For the researched to benefit is perceived as satisfaction in making a contribution to science and greater personal understanding of the research area. I have to say that I have problems swallowing this and the politest I can be is to say that I wonder how much of this is really applicable to visitor studies? The costs to participants I readily accept: possible embarrassment, loss of dignity and self-esteem.

I am also of the opinion that the scales in this balancing act should be very much weighted in favor of the participants in the research, or the

evaluation. There are also other museum-related issues to be considered: e.g., the effect of the research on visitors' enjoyment and their likelihood of a revisit.

I am an audience advocate; and I find it difficult to see how museum-based visitor studies people can be anything other than audience advocates. My primary role as an evaluator is to enable judgements of worth from the users of museum "products" (exhibitions, exhibits, programs, etc.). As a researcher my role is still focused on the audience (and potential audience): predicting more generalizable uses, or benefits or consequences, and providing insights into the visit experience.

Just in case you are not familiar with the concept of audience advocacy, I will explain my view of it. Audience advocacy is about representing the audience and its interests in an effective and informed manner within a museum - on projects, in the development of programs, in planning and so on. It can therefore be seen to have both a political and an ethical role. The advocate should be able to defend the audience's views and their rights. This clearly undermines the "ethical dilemma" as the *prima facie* role of an audience advocate is the audience, i.e., the participants in any visitor study. The rights of the visitors thus become paramount.

When others have written that "Social scientists generally have a responsibility not only to their profession in its search for knowledge and quest for truth, but also for the subjects they depend on for their work" (Cohen and Manian: 359). I believe this should be turned around. The alternative might read: visitor studies professionals not only have a responsibility to the visitors they depend upon for their work but also to their clients, colleagues and others with a vested interest in this work.

The Sanctity of Research

There is another reason for my scepticism about the "ethical dilemma." Research is an activity, and in itself has no rights; it is not animate, it is not living. It is a little like the way people describe their place of work as a person: "the Museum has decided," "it is against Museum policy," "the Museum should look after its staff." Research likewise appears to be described as a person. Whereas, what is more accurate, is not to describe the rights of research but to describe the rights of researchers, or the people who fund research, or those who use research findings. Once described in these personal terms it becomes easier to disentangle the fallacy of the "ethical dilemma." It now becomes an assessment of the ethical rights of the researcher and the researched, or the research community and the community (or communities) being investigated; clearly this makes the issues political.

One of the issues that is apparent from the sociology of science, and to some extent from the field of the public understanding of science, is that scientists have their own community and tend to see the rest of society as "the general public" (a term used by scientists, science museums and the

public understanding of science researchers). These two groups do not share the same world view. For scientists this view is based on the explanation of nature by predictive theories, a presentation of truth in terms of scientific laws. In these terms — and shared by many of the texts quoted in this paper — the pursuit of knowledge, or pure research, is always justifiable. At the risk of accusing scientists of a Leninist approach then, the end justifies the means. But this world view should not be assumed to be held by “the general public” — nor is it held by all scientists.

A source of tension identified by others, but related to this theme is that which “exists between two sets of related values held by society: a belief in the value of free scientific inquiry in the pursuit of knowledge; and a belief in the dignity of individuals and their right to those considerations that follow from it” (Cohen and Manian: 360). I would argue that the former view — the value of free scientific inquiry — is not held by society as a whole, but is held very dear by that subset I have called the research and scientific community.

And, as I have tried to explain, both from a personal view and from the point of view of an audience advocate, I do not share this belief in the rightness of research (or science) over the rights of the individual who might become involved in the research. Again quoting from Janet Finch, she says:

I find sanitised, intellectual discussions about ‘ethics’ fairly irrelevant. I preferred to call my dilemmas ‘moral’ ones, but in fact they are also, it seems to me, inherently political in character. They raise the “whose side are we on?” question (Finch: 177).

A Visitor-Centric View

I briefly want to go back to the point that the rights of individuals called researchers have to be balanced against the rights of those individuals who are being researched. Who makes this judgement? Is it an arbitrator, or a disinterested party? The answer, as we know, is that the researcher is often the one who decides. But, the researcher may have a vested interest in the work going ahead! In more formalized arenas a committee may take the decision but I am unaware of such a committee existing for visitor studies — please correct me if I am wrong; although I assume CARE could fulfill part of this role.

This leads me to one of the few recommendations in this paper. This is preceded by an observation that as museum-based visitor studies people we are in danger of being a little hypocritical. We try to ensure that the work museums intend for their audiences are tested with representatives of those audiences. And here we are using (or not, as the case may be) codes of practice for the work we do with and for visitors, but has it been tested with them? Have we sought their views? Or are we in that smug and cozy retreat

called professionalization — where we professionals know best? I think at this point we should remember that we don't let other museum professionals get away with this attitude when their work involves visitors. The British Psychological Society's "Ethical Principles For Conducting Research With Human Participants" makes this point plain:

It should be borne in mind that the best judge of whether an investigation will cause offence may be members of the population from which the participants in the research are to be drawn (Robson: 471)

So, the recommendation is that whether we come up with a series of ethical principles, professional standards, a code of practice or a code of conduct, then they should be "tested" with visitors (and possibly other groups of people who have a vested interest in the type of work we conduct).

There is a very practical reason for this. When developing criteria to help us decide which studies are done in the Science Museum I developed a score sheet. My colleagues did not buy into this and it failed. This was not too surprising as I had not developed it in liaison and negotiation with internal clients.

We also have to "own" our visitor-centric ethical principles and codes. As Michael Scriven has said "ethics is an overwhelmingly superior policy when founded on ethical attitudes (that is *believing* that all humans have *prima facie* equal rights)". He also suggests that "if one adopts the ethical attitude, one no longer calculates payoffs in terms of just one's own benefit" (Scriven: 135). Recalling my story about the post-grad student who wanted to do research for a thesis. The prime motive for this work was based on self-interest — I need data to allow me to write my thesis, so I can get my master's degree — I did not sanction the work.

Definitions and Terms

Before I conclude this paper I wish to briefly try and clarify some terms. I have been discussing ethics and ethical issues, not standards, or codes of practice, or codes of conduct.

Ethics is the "branch of philosophy that investigates morality and, in particular, the varieties of thinking by which human conduct is guided and may be appraised. Its special concern is with the meaning and justification of utterances about the rightness and wrongness of actions, the virtue or vice of motives which prompt them, the praiseworthiness or blameworthiness of the agents who perform them, and the goodness or badness of the consequences to which they give rise."

Ethical guidelines, or principles set boundaries between what is okay and what is not okay. In a way they are like promises — we promise not to step over these boundaries.

These statements of ethical principle provide the framework for setting out more practical guides: codes of practice, codes of conduct and professional standards — “professional ethics covering practice” (Scriven: 136).

Much as I feel there is confusion between aims and objectives, so I feel there is confusion between ethics, ethical principles, standards and codes of practice. I find it helpful to think of this within an information hierarchy — where ethical considerations occupy the highest level and determine the standards we expect of our work and our colleagues’ work and these standards guide practice: the ways we actually do our work.

Popham suggests that in educational evaluation there could be documents for us to consult that lay out the pros and cons of various ethical choices in various circumstances. At present he sees that evaluators are “on their own in the ethical arena except for guidance supplied in the *Evaluation Standards*” (Popham: 358). He then suggests — much as I have been doing for the last 30 or so minutes — that at present the best we can do is assess our personal views on various moral/ethical stances and ask others what they think.

Conclusions

In our own little way Ben and I can play at being God. In general we can decide who does and does not do visitor research in the Science Museum (there are some areas we cannot control, but we do our best to have an influence). We act as gatekeepers between researchers and visitors. As self-confessed visitor advocates, our primary focus is the visitors’ (and secondarily the Museum’s) objectives. Frankly this makes the decisions we make much easier. The questions we ask ourselves are along the lines of:

What’s the point of this work?

Why should we support it?

What will the visitors gain from this (both individually and collectively)?

How might they feel about the process?

Is this an appropriate thing to do bearing in mind that they have paid to visit the Museum, not to take part in an evaluation, or in research?

Could it be done another way?

Will it help the Museum to do its job better?

How will it effect my colleagues?

In many cases Ben and I feel that we should not be making these decisions alone and in isolation from colleagues, peers and most especially, visitors. They are about ethics and morals and left to our personal interpretations of what is right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate.

Ethical guidelines “are necessary to clarify the conditions under which ...research is acceptable” (British Psychological Society, *Ethical Principles*). And, it has been noted that there are a number of advantages to fashioning an ethical code:

- Establishing membership with a wider community
- Making researchers more aware of their obligations to the people that are researching
- Consideration that there may be alternative ways of doing the same thing
- Helping to organize the researcher’s perceptions of the study
- Validating the researcher’s sense of rightness, and
- Brings discipline to the researcher’s awareness (adapted from Cohen and Manian: 381).

Ben has developed a draft code of ethical practice for the visitor studies group in the Science Museum but we are not, at present, going to share this with you — it would make it too easy! Each of us needs to develop our own personal version because whatever “professional” guidance is offered you will also have to consider your personal views, much as we have rejected the “ethical dilemma” in favor of the primacy of the audience and its individual members. You do after all have the right of self-determination!

Finally, as has been said we do not buy into the absolute right of research to pursue knowledge and truth (and anyway whose truth is this?). We try hard not to be sucked into the tunnel of “wouldn’t it be interesting to find out...”. The boring, restraining, but essential question has to be asked: what’s in it for the visitors?