Contextual approaches to visitor studies research: Evaluating audience segmentation and identity-related motivations*

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Abstract

This paper assesses the use of audience segmentation in visitor studies research through an analysis of its application in the identity model of museum visiting proposed by Falk (2007, 2009). As an example of audience segmentation within visitor studies, we critically examine this model’s application in a specific case at US zoos to elaborate some of its limitations. We argue that conventional short-term, episodic approaches to visitor research should be challenged and supplemented by a more contextually sensitive and longer-term model. We contend that audience segmentation approaches, and in particular Falk’s theorisation and operationalisation of an identity model of museum visiting, is problematic. As such, we argue that research should place museum visits within a holistic and long-term framework of individual life circumstances, relationships and trajectories. We discuss how research and theory from education and cultural studies could complement existing visitor research approaches by acknowledging complexity, change over time and the interwoven and developmental nature of the socio-cultural variables influencing visitors’ appropriation of new ideas and experiences in museums.

Key words: Audience segmentation, Identity, Visitor Studies, Museum, Zoo, Research Methods
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Museum, gallery and zoo visitors have been the subject of a great deal of research interest in recent years. However, to date little headway has been made in terms of developing a rigorous and valid theoretical understanding of museum visitors, their reasons for visiting and the value such visits hold for them. In seeking to address these issues audience segmentation approaches, initially developed to model consumer behaviours for marketing purposes, have been adapted for visitor studies. Segmentation methods break museum visitors into sub-groups for purposes of analysis and intervention. While judicious use of taxonomic approaches can offer some advantages for visitor studies and cultural institutions, we identify a number of disadvantages which undermine the value of audience segmentation for visitor research. In this paper we critique the theorisation of audience segmentation currently being taken up by leading visitor studies researchers by exploring the identity model of museum visitors proposed by Falk (2009), as well as the development and application of this model in a specific case of visitor research conducted by Falk et al. (2007) at zoos in the United States.

At the outset, we wish to express our support of Falk’s argument that the conventional short-term, episodic approach to museum research should be challenged and supplemented by a more contextually sensitive model of museum visits. However, we contend that audience segmentation tools, and the specific way in which Falk has theorised and operationalised this shift are problematic and ultimately reductionist. In raising these points, we seek to promote a ‘contextual turn’ in visitor studies research, which abandons short-term, behaviourist approaches in favour of a model that authentically accounts for the ways in which museum visitors approach and make sense of their visits to cultural institutions. To develop this argument, we examine Falk’s model as a leading example of audience segmentation approaches. In particular, we argue that the theorisation of identity in Falk’s model is not sufficiently pluralistic and developmental in nature, the rejection of demographic variables is premature, the claim to predictive power is counterfactual and the model’s implementation in a major research project has been hampered by methodological and inferential errors that undermine Falk’s claims. Recent book reviews have summarised Falk’s identity model of museum visitors, highlighting the lack of evidence presented (Bickford, 2010) and the links between Falk’s model and standard museum practice (McCray, 2010). We note Falk’s acknowledgement of shortcomings within the model he proposed and we suggest that a more authentically contextual and systemic understanding of the role of museum visits within the lives of visitors would overcome certain problematic elements of the model.

Originally a market research tool, audience segmentation techniques are not new to visitor studies. In 1998 Rentschler suggested museums and similar institutions had strategically adopted segmentation tools as part of becoming commercially competitive organisations. This theme has been echoed by Horn (2006) who positioned segmentation tools, and the motivational segmentation model developed for Museum Victoria, as a key tool for improving visitor experiences and developing “products and position in the leisure marketplace” (p. 78). Indeed, Black (2005) went further and stated that, “No introduction to visitor studies can begin without a basic understanding of market segmentation.” Audience segmentation is therefore believed
to offer clear benefits to commercial organisations seeking to improve their customers’ experiences and their market share. Black highlighted a number of characteristics in his review of segmentation, including demographic and geographic data, socio-economic, educational and hobby details and what he called a ‘psychographic’ approach, whereby visitors are grouped according to their views. It is this crucial dimension of segmentation, where people are grouped according to specific characteristics (whether demographic or ‘psychographic’), where we see the disadvantages that are the focus of this article. In particular, we take issue with the decontextualisation inherent in reducing people to their generic details, whether these are demographic characteristics or motivations. Such a process is essentialist, reductive and ultimately of limited value to visitor researchers since it paints a misleading portrait of museum visitors and museum visits, while offering no portrait at all of those who do not visit.

To develop this critique, we turn to the application of segmentation methods to visitor studies within Falk’s ‘identity-related’ visitor segmentation model. We focus on this model in particular because we believe the issues raised by Falk speak to a number of widely used concepts and tendencies within what might be described as ‘typical’ museum visitor studies. Of these issues, the emphasis Falk placed on the broader and longer term contexts of museum visits in the lives of visitors, while not novel in the broader field of educational research, is worth adopting in a museum research context, where much evaluation is project specific and therefore narrowly framed in space and time (Economou, 2004). Despite the advantages offered by broadening the focus of visitor research, the identity model of museum visitors developed by Falk raises a number of theoretical and methodological questions. To what extent is his model of identity valid theoretically and methodologically? Is his side-stepping of standard demographic or contextual factors, such as race/ethnicity, gender and age justifiable? And finally, can visitors really be segmented into five identity-related groups, which predict their visiting patterns and outcomes?

We consider some of the underlying issues raised by Falk’s model, while placing Falk’s contribution into the broader context of educational (classroom studies) and cultural research (Bennett et al., 2009; Bourdieu, 1984). In so doing, we are necessarily selective in our critical analysis of Falk’s model, concentrating on a few issues we believe are particularly instructive for visitor studies research.

**Audience segmentation: The identity model of museum visitors.**

The ‘identity-related’ visitor segmentation model proposed by Falk (2009) presents a welcome opportunity to discuss in more detail the use of segmentation as a research approach for visitor studies. Falk’s model falls under Black’s category of ‘psychographic’ segmentations (2005). Falk (2009, p.73) criticised the tendency of conventional museum visitor research to construct visitors in terms of their demographic characteristics such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, social grouping and so on, or ‘big ‘I’ identities’. Instead, Falk segmented visitors by their behavioural and self-reported characteristics, to identify and analyse what he describes as “little ‘i’ identities” (p. 73). Falk posited five little ‘i’ identities from his research with museum visitors: the explorer, the facilitator, the experience seeker, the professional/hobbyist and the recharger (also called a ‘spiritual pilgrim’ elsewhere in Falk’s work, see Falk et al. 2007). Furthermore, in keeping with his previous research in museum settings, Falk developed this segmentation model to
take into account how visitors construct meaningful experiences before, during and after a museum visit.

Falk deployed the five ‘identity-related’ categories of museum visitors in his predictive model of museum visitor experiences, based on the relationships he outlined between the ‘type’ of visitor and their motivations for visiting a museum. He argued that museums would better serve their visitors by meeting the visit-based needs prompted by visitors’ identity-related motivations. Falk (2009, p. 176) suggested that each visitor ‘type’ can be related to a typical visit trajectory for that ‘type’, that “we can see that a visitor’s entering identity-relative motivation predisposes the visitor to interact with the setting in predictable ways”. Thus, explorers tend to follow a relatively similar ‘explorer-trajectory’ in their museum visits. Falk proposed that while museum visits will always contain an unpredictable element, the available opportunities afforded by museums combined with an understanding of the five visitor types allow museums to predict most visitors’ experiences and their longer-term outcomes. Therefore, although he noted certain problems with the model, Falk suggested this ‘identity-related’ segmentation model would enable museums to better anticipate the needs, trajectories and outcomes of their visitors’ experiences, thus developing a provision that can be more tailored to different visitors’ needs. This suggested application of visitor segmentations is in keeping with the use of such approaches in market research and commercial settings, wherein the ‘segments’ become the basis of tailored marketing and, to a lesser extent, service provision.

**Widening the analytical lens: the museum visit in context**

Falk (2009) argued that the horizons of museum visitor studies should be broadened in two key directions, widening our understanding of the context of museum visits and concomitantly shifting how visitors are conceptualised. It is the greater contextualisation of museum visitor research that we see as the main contribution of Falk’s museum visitor model. Museum visitor studies have traditionally tended to employ a short-term, positivist model of museum visitors that is located solely within the museum context. This model assumes the museum visit is a significant intervention in visitors’ lives, and that this intervention will have an immediate, measurable effect on visitors within the timescale of the visit itself. This model is operationalised though a number of methodological techniques based on pre- and post-testing of visitors’ attitudes, knowledge, or both (Soren, 2007). Building on his earlier work (e.g. Falk, 2004), Falk (2009) argued that extending the scope of visitor research to include a broader context provides a more valid way of investigating museum visiting.

For most people, museum-going is just a small slice of daily life, just one of many experiences in a lifetime filled with experiences...If we are to answer our fundamental questions of why people visit museums, what they do there, and what meaning they make of the experience, we must see the museum visitor experience as a series of nested, seemingly interrelated events. (Falk, 2009, pp. 34-35)

Thus Falk suggested museum visits should be viewed as related events in people’s lives, rather than as standalone interventions with immediately identifiable impacts.
Indeed, we would support his statement at the outset of the zoo study we examine below: “visitors do not arrive at a zoo or aquarium tabula rasa; they arrive with prior knowledge, experience, interest and motivations for their visit” (Falk et al., 2007, p. 6). Falk is not alone in promoting a more holistic view of museum visits as embedded in complex and overlapping life contexts. However, his is the most recent and detailed application of this perspective to a model of museum visitor research that has been widely circulated amidst visitor researchers and cultural institutions. By developing an awareness of how museum visits are integrated into visitors’ lives over time, we agree with Falk that museum research can develop far richer and more useful insights into visitors’ experiences. However, we contend that such contextualisation needs further development. For example, classroom research offers some initial insights into how context might be better understood and applied to theorise museum visiting.

Education research has developed a broad, long term perspective of people’s experiences in particular learning-oriented environments, especially in the field of classroom studies. For example, Wortham’s (2000, 2007) ethnographic classroom studies have highlighted the relevance of multiple timescales, including those of the local research site, students’ homes and longer political timeframes, when exploring situated practices and how events are positioned and understood by those involved. Although Falk considered some contextual variables, for Falk the visits remain unquestionably the site of primary interest, still positioned broadly as a learning intervention, and not as simply one event amongst many. When researching learning in science classrooms Lemke (2000, p. 284) argued that meanings are made and remade as “the trajectory of the developing social person takes him or her from classroom to classroom, from school to schoolyard, to street corner, to home, to the shopping mall, to TV worlds”. Thus, although there is some acknowledgement of the broader context in which museum visits are situated for visitors, Falk’s model is still limited by a primary focus on the museum rather than visitors’ lives.

Reconceptualising museum visitors: Identity and difference in visitor research

The second contribution of Falk’s model we wish to highlight is his reconceptualisation of museum visitors to acknowledge the relevance of visitor identities to visitor studies. One of the key arguments underpinning the ‘identity-related’ visitor segmentation model is that personal identities of museum visitors can be related to their motivations for visiting, and when combined with the experiences offered by museums, can be used to understand and predict their visit trajectories and outcomes. While we question the averred durability of those motivations and the claim to prediction, we endorse Falk’s emphasis upon people’s day to day behaviours, attitudes and requirements.

The type of identity that does figure prominently into the myriad everyday decisions in our lives, including leisure, are what I have called “little ‘i’ identities” – identities that respond to the needs and realities of the specific moment and situation. (Falk, 2009, p. 73)

In this respect Falk has much in common with Hood (1993, p. 78), another museum visitor researcher whose work, drawn on by Falk, is informed by what she described as “psychosocial” characteristics based on her analysis of people’s perceptions of themselves, their attitudes, personality and social behaviours. Both Falk and Hood
have emphasised that museum visitors can be grouped according to their personalities and interests, rather than their demographic characteristics (Falk, 2009; Hood, 1993).

By focusing on visitors as individuals with character traits, personal preferences, habits and attitudes, Falk pointed towards a tendency in museum visitor studies to categorise visitors in terms of broader demographic characteristics including gender, age, ethnicity and so on. Furthermore, Falk argued that demographics do not help museums understand their visitors; “it is not just race/ethnicity that provides a poor explanation for museum-going, so too do other demographic variables such as age, income, and education” (Falk, 2009, p. 29). In reconceptualising museum visitors as individuals with personalities, attitudes and interests Falk does museum studies a great service, in challenging how visitors have become pigeon-holed. However, it is in this part of Falk’s model that further tensions begin to emerge, between the theories informing his model, and the model itself. Of these we unpick one issue around the averred stability of identities and the concomitant problems of employing little ‘i’ categories usefully, and some of the issues raised by dismissing demographic factors.

In developing his model of five museum visitor identities, Falk drew on a great deal of identity-related research. Of these we concentrate on some of the ideas developed by Holland et al. (2001), which Falk (2009, p. 72) referenced in his discussion of “view that identity is the combination of internal and external social forces – both cultural and individual agencies contribute to identity”. What Holland et al. (2001) have highlighted in their work, drawing on many fields within sociology, psychology and cultural studies, is the complicated, nuanced and fluid nature of identity as a social product in practice. It is within this changing landscape of multiple selves and identity construction that tensions arise between the theoretical formulations of identity presented by Falk (2009, p.158) and the five categories he described when he argued that “most identity-related museum motivations fall into one of five categories: Explorer – Facilitator – Experience seeker – Professional/Hobbyist – Recharger”. Given the theories Falk cited in his discussion of identity, it seems incongruous to conclude that museum visitors, by and large, can fit into five identity-related motivation boxes (albeit with some room for manoeuvre between boxes, and as Falk himself acknowledged, the possibility to be simultaneously in multiple boxes). Thus, despite a discussion of the varied, changeable and contextual nature of identity construction, in his attempt to develop a model for practical use, Falk is ultimately too reductive in his treatment of the complexity of museum visitors’ experiences.

A further tension within Falk’s model can be located in the de-emphasising of demographic factors’ role in identity construction. Demographic factors such as gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, ability/disability and socio-economic status have been described by Holland et al. (2001, p. 271) as “the second context of identity…positionality”. Researchers have explored the relationship between demographic factors and behaviours, attitudes, expectations and experiences over a number of years and across a number of fields (e.g. Sandell, 2002). In his development of museum visitor studies through his exploration of identity constructions, Falk (2009) explicitly dismissed demographic factors, which Holland et al. (2001, p. 271) described as “the more durable social positions” and the role such factors have to play in understanding museum visitors. Although we would similarly
question the use of demographic factors as the only basis for visitor segmentation, by dismissing them altogether Falk’s model is self-limiting. That the model ignores the importance such factors hold for museum visitors and that it assumes museums are perceived in similar ways regardless of ethnicity, age, class background or personal history, is also problematic.

Demographic factors influence people’s attitudes, experiences and behaviours, as demonstrated by a wealth of research in sociology, cultural studies and educational research, as well as in museum visitor research. Although criticised by Falk (2009, p. 37) as being concerned with “an esoteric philosophical analysis”, Bourdieu’s work on cultural habitus has demonstrated the relevance of social class as a crucial factor in how people construct different experiences of museums and other cultural offerings. For example, in their large-scale study of European art museums, Bourdieu and Darbel (1991/1969) concluded that class was a paramount factor in both the enjoyment of art and in explaining non-visiting. They argued that “‘museums for all’ is in practice “false generosity, since free entry is also optional entry, reserved for those who, equipped with the ability to appropriate the works of art [through their middle or upper class upbringing], have the privilege of making use of this freedom” (p. 113). Moreover, Bourdieu’s classic study Distinction (1984) in which he demonstrated the role of ‘taste’ in constructing cultural distinctions in favour of the upper classes was recently recreated in a contemporary UK context and the findings emphasised again the important effects of social class and, in this case ethnicity, on people’s attitudes and recreational activities (Bennett et al., 2009).

Ethnicity is of critical importance in terms of how different aspects of culture are perceived and experienced (Hall, 1996, 1997). In educational contexts, research has indicated that ethnicity, gender and religious affiliation are influential factors in students’ behaviours, self-perception, attainment and future choices (Archer, 2003; Corrigan, Dillon, & Gunstone, 2007). Furthermore in the context of museum visitor research the importance of factors like ability/disability and ethnicity have been well established (Golding, 2009; Sandell, 2002). While Falk’s attention to issues atypical for museum research is admirable, his attempt to dismiss these crucial sociological factors entirely from his analysis is problematic. Social justice theorists advocating the recognition of difference in culture and politics have argued that underestimating the importance of differences between people, whether in terms of their class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or other factors, can create damagingly homogenous constructions, where those who do not fit in are simply ignored (Benhabib, 1996; Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Young, 1990). By overlooking demographic factors, this is a problem Falk’s identity model of museum visitors faces.

Related to problems associated with the dismissal of demographic variables is the failure of the model to account for non-visitors to museums and other cultural institutions. There is an unsurprisingly strong tendency in museum visitor research to focus on those who already visit museums. Unlike Hood (1995) who argued that museums ought to carry out research on communities instead of limiting themselves to their visitors, Falk’s research focused on people who do visit museums. As a result we suggest Falk’s model starts with a flawed premise.

“The model postulates that virtually all people who visit museums begin from a relatively common, culturally-shared frame of
reference – museums are leisure educational institutions that afford a suite of possible benefits” (Falk, 2009, p. 173).

We suggest that Falk has overestimated the degree to which there is a shared frame of reference across different groups, for example, across groups of varying socio-economic status or groups from minority ethnic backgrounds. However, this last critique is particularly problematic because Falk (2009) applied his model to the issue of developing new audiences for museums. Falk’s model was developed on the basis of research with existing museum visitors, yet he assumed that its validity holds for non-visitors as well.

Therefore, we suggest that the way in which Falk has theorised identity, with a focus on ‘little ‘i’ segmentation at the expense of the ‘big ‘I’”, is problematic. We see great promise in developing museum visitor studies beyond the limits of purely demographic analysis. However, we propose the more useful development would be a model combining demographic variables with other aspects of identity, rather than pursuing one at the expense of the other. We acknowledge that the complexity involved in Holland et al.’s (2001) model of identity may not be as easy to apply within museum visitor studies. The ‘figured world’, ‘positionality’, the ‘space of authoring’ and the ‘making of worlds’ suggested by Holland et al. (2001, pp. 272-273) cannot be neatly diagrammed, nor does their appreciation of improvisation, or their acknowledgement of change and fluidity result in a simple model of museum visitors. Nevertheless, we contend that exploring how visitors and non-visitors understand museums is neither a neat nor simple undertaking, and to do justice to such complex processes requires a sufficiently complex view of identity.

**Operationalising Identity-related motivations**

In order to demonstrate the limitations of the identity segmentation model of museum visitors it is important to consider the way in which these ideas have been put into practice. Falk (2009) provided limited evidence of the empirical research on which he has based his theoretical model (Bickford, 2010). Therefore the case we explore here is one of several studies that has employed Falk’s identity-related segmentation model, a landmark zoo visitor study dubbed the multi-Institutional research program or MIRP. In this multi-part study, Falk et al. (2007) set out to evaluate zoo visitors’ motivations for attending and any changes in conservation-related attitudes or knowledge. Falk defined this task in terms of ‘identity-related motivations’. The focus on these motivations is explained in positivist terms as a prerequisite for ‘prediction’ of visitor outcomes: “we need to capture the essence of what motivates visitors so we could better predict what they might gain from their visit” (Falk et al., 2007, p. 6).

In order to access the ‘essence’ of visitor motivation, the first phase of this three-year study comprised a “confirmatory study” to establish the validity and reliability of Falk’s proposed ‘five identity-related motivations’ (Falk et al., 2007, p. 15). This phase began with the selection of 100+ statements of reasons or motivations for attending the zoo. Different subsets of these statements were then tested at different zoo and aquarium locations using statistical methods such as factor analysis to identify the items with the greatest internal reliability. Following these activities, Falk et al. (2007, p. 15) claimed to have identified a 20-item scale comprising a “single measure for validly and reliably capturing zoo and aquarium visitors’ identity-
related motivations”. Phase 2 of the research then used this 20-item scale as an independent variable in concert with other scales intended to measure ‘cognitive development’ and ‘affective response’ by having respondents select and rank five items that most closely matched their reasons for attending that day.

Reification and essentialism in the identity model of museum visitors: Towards development

Falk et al.’s (2007, p. 9) fundamental thesis was that visitors arrive at museums or zoos with “specific identity-related-motivations and these motivations directly impact how they conduct their visit and what meaning they make from the experience”. He developed this thesis with his audience segmentation approach, described above, and referred to visitors as durably belonging to one of his five categories (or ‘segments’). The problem of reductionism is evident in Falk et al.’s (2007, p. 15) study, which began its methodological discussion by reducing the initial aim of developing “a meaningful categorization of visitors based on their knowledge, interests, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, and motivations” to an “instrument development” task based on Falk’s previously developed ‘five identity-related motivations’ framework. At the outset, it is assumed that “many of these multiple ‘entry’ variables could be successfully subsumed into a single, multi-dimensional variable related to visitor’s identity-related motivations” (sic) (Falk et al., 2007, p. 15). In referring to the knowledge, interests, etcetera of visitors as ‘entry’ variables, Falk is recapitulating the kind of narrow vision of the museum visit from a museum or zoo’s perspective rather than carrying out the kind of museum research that should begin with the lives of visitors and seek to understand the role of these institutions within this longer term ‘whole life’ framework.

In the MIRP study, Falk et al. claimed to have developed a valid and reliable instrument for capturing the identity-related motivations of zoo visitors. However, validity is not addressed by the instrumental form of psychometric scale development employed in this study. The methodological effort and evidence is focused on the internal reliability of the scale. It was not demonstrated, for example, through systematic qualitative analysis, whether the selected statements used in the psychometric scale were understood by visitors in the way they were intended, nor was any inter-coder reliability reported to demonstrate that the categorisation of different statements as one or another identity-related motivation was valid. That is, the validity of the instrument- or degree to which the selected statements measure what they are intended to measure- remains unproven in this research.

The operationalisation of Falk’s model is also undermined by inferential errors that exaggerate the quality of the evidence supporting this approach. Although Falk (2009) made claims about the predictive power and validity of his proposed identity-related motivations model, the empirical evidence within the MIRP study does not seem to support these claims. For example, at the outset of the MIRP study, Falk et al. stated “the motivations of the vast majority of visitors appeared to cluster around just a few identity-related motivations” (Falk et al., 2007, p. 7). Despite the use of closed-ended methods wherein respondents had to choose five statements from within the 25 statements employed in Falk et al.’s scale, this clustering was not as widespread as avverred. Namely, by Falk et al.’s (2007, p. 10) own unspecified standard, less than half (48%) of their respondents “began their zoo or aquarium visit with a single, dominant identity-related motivation; the rest possessed multiple motivations for
visiting”. Moreover, it is reported that “a different profile of motivations was found at each of the four institutions” (Falk et al., 2007, p. 10). Such a diverse motivations profile could have signalled to the researchers that the scale may not be as valid and reliable as they assumed, but instead extra-methodological variables were introduced to try to discount this result.

This questionable interpretive approach can be seen in the authors’ explanation for the finding that the two aquariums studied had different visitor motivation profiles: “these differences may have been due to the fact that data were collected in different seasons rather than representing a real difference in the profiles of aquarium visitors” (Falk et al., 2007, p. 10). However, given that identities would not be expected to change with the seasons, this empirical finding would seem to fundamentally undermine Falk’s thesis that these motivations are in any way tied to identity. Yet, this disconfirming finding was not accepted as undermining Falk’s thesis. Such handling of results is inconsistent with the very hypothetico-deductive methodological approach underpinning the study’s emphasis on scale development over meaning and interpretation. Instead, it signals a commitment to the ‘five types’ model regardless of negative findings.

Falk et al. (2007, p. 14) made other claims in this study that exceed their evidence, for example, it is claimed that the study “shows that individuals not only choose to visit or not visit zoos and aquariums based upon these identity-based motivations”. This quote makes a claim about the decision not to visit a zoo or aquarium, yet the study includes no data from non-visitors. That is, the research only accessed individuals already visiting a zoo or aquarium and therefore does not provide evidence about the non-visiting public. Another claim was that “segmenting visitors by identity-related motivations (Explorers, Facilitators, et al.) provided the best way to understand both what visitors did in the institution as well as the short and long-term meaning they made from the experience” (Falk et al., 2007, p. 10). However, this study does not report testing other variables (e.g. demographic) or attempt an amalgamation of demographic and motivational variables as we suggest in this article, thus raising unanswered questions about the basis of Falk et al.’s claim that the ‘five types’ approach is ‘best’. Moreover, it is questionable whether Falk et al. employed valid measures of ‘what visitors did in the institution’ or of ‘long-term meaning’. As such, this key conclusion from the MIRP study is also questionable. Overall the case of the MIRP is indicative of the systematic use of problematic assumptions and inferences to validate the five identity-related motivations thesis, regardless of contradictory evidence. When the theoretical and conceptual problems of this thesis are also taken into account, there is good reason to cast doubt on these five motivations and their link to identity, much less claims made about their predictive power.

Conclusion

As we have argued above, Falk’s identity model of museum visitors offers a useful challenge to the mainstream museum studies framework, which focuses narrowly on the duration of the museum visit. Such an episodic framework should be rejected and Falk (2009) made a compelling argument for a broader perspective. Indeed, widening the analytical lens to include interests and motivations of visitors based on factors outside of the immediate museum context is likely to be much more fruitful in developing an accurate understanding of museums’ impact.
However, we identified a number of limitations in the theorisation and application of Falk's visitor segmentation model. The small 'i' identities that comprised these visitor segments, we argue, are too reductive; they essentialise visitors' identities, directing attention away from the diverse multiplicity of motivations that draw individuals to museums and other engagement experiences (e.g., Holliman et al., 2009). Moreover, this approach ignores the empirically demonstrated pattern of development in visitor expectations, perceptions and mindsets before, during and after visits to cultural institutions (Wagoner & Jensen, 2010). That is, individuals do not maintain a stable and unchanging orientation towards the visit; rather their initial expectations develop and change as they encounter new ideas and experiences (Jensen, 2009). For example, a visitor initially arriving with the expectation of 'enjoyment' may very well leave having had valued 'learning' experiences (Jensen, 2010).

The segmentation framework assuming there are five distinct visitor profiles and that overlapping, shifting and indistinct visitor motivations should be ignored is problematic. Following its dual genealogy of market research and conventional personality psychology approaches, Falk’s visitor segmentation model summarised large groups of people under the auspices of ‘five types’ which are then intended to provide the basis for museums’ “interpretation, marketing, evaluation and even fund-raising” (Falk et al., 2007, p. 14). The claim to have exhausted the range of possible visitor motivations with these types is particularly at odds with other studies that showed a wider range of reasons for museum attendance (Packer, 2008; Packer & Ballanyte, 2002; Yalowitz, 2002). Moreover, the very concept that all visitors can be reduced to ‘types’ essentialises these individuals and downplays the richness and complexity of their life context. The result of this essentialism is an exclusionary framework that inaccurately demarcates the boundaries of possible visitor identities.

Falk’s ‘Personal Context’ variables or little ‘i’ characteristics are assumed to have a predictive power that demographic variables do not: “Unlike demographic variables, Personal Context variables have the potential to predict changes in visitor knowledge and conservation attitudes” (Falk et al., 2007, p. 6). However, the a priori rejection of demographic variables in favour of the ‘five identity-related motivations’ model entails a concomitant rejection of all the crucial insights about the complex role of class (e.g. Willis, 1977), educational attainment (e.g. Bourdieu & Darbel, 1991/1969), social exclusion (e.g. Baumann, 1996) and other socio-cultural factors in the decision to attend or not and the ultimate value of museum visits for particular individuals.

We challenge Falk’s dismissal of demographic variables and advocate for a more inclusive approach that incorporates motivations, identities and sociological variables such as class and ethnicity. Such an inclusive approach would, we contend, provide a much better basis for researching non-visitors as well. In addition, we argue that Falk’s proposed five types (or ‘segments’) of museum visitor identity-related motivations is too restrictive and does not sufficiently take account of the development and change in motivations during and after the museum visit, thus contradicting Falk’s theoretical emphasis on the need to broaden the context in which museum visitor research is carried out. Finally, given the many factors not accounted for in Falk’s segmentation model, and a review of its development and use in practice
in the MIRP, we suggest that the claim that it is predictive is not sustainable. Rather than seeking “prediction” within a behaviourist market research framework, we propose that museum visits should be understood within a holistic and long-term framework of individual life circumstances, relationships and trajectories. Our proposed approach would acknowledge complexity, change over time and the interwoven and developmental nature of socio-cultural variables (Jensen & Wagoner, 2010) influencing visitors’ appropriation of new ideas and experiences encountered at the museum. Such research would be inclusive, rather than exclusionary, and sensitive to difference as an important issue for museums to face. This is an approach that could also inform the difficult task that museums have recently begun to acknowledge of widening access and participation amongst individuals and groups that have long been excluded from the sphere of cultural engagement (also see Jensen, 2010).

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