Application of Sociological and Anthropological Concepts to Visitor Research

Marilyn G. Hood
Hood Associates
Columbus, OH

Though numerous methods and theories from sociological and anthropological research are applicable and useful in museum settings, few museum administrators, designers, or educators are familiar with them. These concepts are worth exploring because they can provide clues to new approaches to audience development and exhibit design, and can benefit the entire philosophy of a museum.

Some basic concepts from these two disciplines are presented in separate chapters by Dr. Adrian Aveni, Chair of the Sociology Department at Jacksonville State University in Alabama, and Dr. Jeffrey Bonner, Director of Research and Special Projects at St. Louis Science Center. Dr. Aveni's chapter discusses the sociological concepts of visitor behavior as primary and secondary group behavior and Dr. Bonner's chapter presents the concepts of learning, socialization, and cultural change through the perspective of anthropology.

My chapter should be read in conjunction with Dr. Aveni's and Dr. Bonner's chapters because my function in the session at the 1990 Visitor Studies Conference was to illustrate the sociological and anthropological concepts with examples of how they can be or have been applied in museums. Our tripartite aim was to help museum professionals become aware of how their institutions can utilize these concepts in practical ways to benefit both the institutions and their audiences.

I have used subheads drawn from the other two papers to link my comments to specific sections of those papers. This session was designed as a trialogue, with each specialist presenting several basic ideas, followed by my illustrations of how to apply these sociological and anthropological concepts in the museum setting.

Primary Groups (Aveni)

In my research I probe audience psychographic and demographic characteristics and leisure participation patterns to determine the likelihood of people going to leisure places like museums. I coordinate the

characteristics into personality profiles of these real people, which I use in workshops with docents, to help them devise ways of interesting infrequent visitors into coming to the museum.

One of these real people is a young man I call Tony. He is high school educated, a welder by trade, and his leisure activity is motorcycle riding, racing, and repair. His peer group is other bikers. Tony would not go to an art museum unless something very significant happened to him because his primary group (family and close friends) has never been museum-goers. Though he hasn't been to the museum since his sixth grade tour, he has no negative feelings about the place. (In his telephone interview, he said that the museum was "a lovely place," but it was not his kind of place.)

However, suppose Tony is riding down the street past the art museum on a Sunday afternoon when he sees a sign announcing *Welded Sculpture Show*. The sign intrigues him because the subject relates directly to his daily life. He goes in, looks at the show from his technical perspective as a welder, and is pleased with what he sees.

The next day when he goes to work, or in the evening at the bar, his fellow bikers ask him, "Tony, why didn't you come riding with us Sunday afternoon? Where were you?" Is he going to say proudly – in the context of his primary group's behavior – "I went to the art museum!"? Will that elevate him in their esteem? Or, will they disdain him for having flouted the group's norms?

We have to realize that this is the circumstance we're dealing with when we proclaim, "We want to get the factory workers into the museum." When we're not cognizant of the norms and sanctions of group behavior, we fail to realize that, in some circles, going to a museum can carry a stigma. Unless we recognize and acknowledge the powerful influence of primary groups on an individual's leisure attitudes and behavior, we will have little chance to develop these audiences.

Secondary Groups/Friendship Networks (Aveni)

The only way museums can make connections with the factory worker and welder is through their secondary groups – their unions, hobby or special interest clubs, PTAs, churches, senior citizen centers, fraternal organizations, or whatever association they value. Since practically no one starts a new leisure activity alone or without the approval of his/her primary or secondary group, it is through these groups that museums must appeal to individuals.

Usually the people who are not attracted to museums are those who are lesser-educated, who work in jobs that require conformity or routine, and who are not decision makers or entrepreneurs. For them to venture into a new, untried place requires approval from their primary or secondary group. Otherwise, the experience is too unsettling and fraught with hazards. For persons unfamiliar with the museum setting and its norms of participation

(such as not touching, not talking loudly, not feeding the zoo animals, not walking on the grass at the botanical garden), the museum can seem intimidating, puzzling, even depressing.

My research on museum audiences shows that it's the people of lesser socioeconomic status, with lower education and occupations, who greatly desire to be in what I define as "an old familiar place or activity that holds few surprises or risks." Also, they want to be in places that bring them approval and recognition from other people – that is, from the people who count with *them*, not from the museum staff. If they don't perceive the museum to be this kind of place, or one that their peer group regards as this kind of place, they are not likely to be tempted to visit it. Generally, a museum visit simply demands too much from them and offers too few rewards. If museums don't take the initiative to involve secondary groups, so these folks can come with their support system, they will never perceive the museum to be their turf.

Symbolic Interactionism (Aveni)

If the curator and designer don't always agree on the same approach to an exhibit, how much more difficult it is to find a commonality with people who are not from a similar educational and cultural background and who don't share the socialization experienced by the museum staff! There is often very little agreement between the occasional visitor and the curator on the perception of an object, especially if it has been ripped from its normal context and has to be interpreted through the "museum code" (the system of object, language, and symbols). It is the museum's responsibility to make the objects understandable to those less acquainted with the museum code, to negotiate the meaning with them, to identify the common ground.

Sometimes, even when we feel we know another person intimately, meanings still have to be negotiated. When I've conducted interviews in museums, and a spouse or fiancé has listened in, the listener has occasionally said afterwards – with some astonishment – "I've learned more about your tastes and preferences in these 20 minutes than I've known about you over the past two or three years."

How many more barriers and misinterpretations possibly exist between us on the inside looking out and those on the outside looking in? To successfully negotiate with the outsiders requires our being doubly aware of who the audience is, where they're coming from, what kinds of experiences they're used to, what expectations they bring, and how easily we can be misinterpreted because they and we don't share the same symbols, the same language, and the same objects.

Predictions of Group Behavior (Aveni):

People often adopt behaviors that they perceive to be appropriate to the social level they aspire to reach. Those who hope to move to a social level above their current status often emulate the behavior of the group they aspire to enter, and take up the leisure activities that their "model" exemplifies.

When I started doing telephone interviews in 1980, the only persons who mentioned horseshoes as a frequent leisure activity were gentlemen in their 80s who had been pitching horseshoes since childhood. Suddenly, horseshoes is out of the closet, now that we have a President making it a prestigious pasttime. It is already a featured activity at community festivals and fairs, and sporting goods stores have reported increased sales of this equipment.

In another instance, new employees of a major company overnight became symphony subscribers because the president was an avid supporter and the company made sizable contributions to the orchestra. Those who had never gone to concerts in their adult lives became regular attenders, not because they had developed an interest in music, but because it was advantageous to be seen at the concert and to talk about it the next day.

When museums have used this prestige factor to lure people into attendance, they have usually attracted more of the same type of people they normally encounter. However, we need to think beyond them, to consider how we can make museum-going an "aspired activity" for those who don't share the same symbols or the peer group approval system we espouse.

Four Concepts of the Anthropological Perspective (Bonner)

Maintaining an unbiased point of view is critical to museums' success in making connections with those who don't think the way we do. As Dr. Bonner pointed out, different points of view are not bad or wrong or misdirected.

In my consulting, museum trustees have asked me, "Don't you think that the purpose of this museum is to elevate the level of appreciation in this community?" Especially when this is said in a patronizing tone of voice, it implies that we have a set of values and goals and standards that other people *should* adopt, and there is something wrong with them if they don't. Trustees and staff members have frequently sneeringly referred to nonvisitors as "boobs," "Yahoos," "couch potatoes," and other disparaging epithets.

This perception of people who are not like us has stood in the way of museums making connections with the factory worker, the welder, the bus driver, the grocery checker. By emphasizing cultural relativity, we can recognize that none of the visitors are wrong, just different, and that helping

them to enjoy the museum should not be primarily an attempt to impose our value system on them. When nonvisitors have been interviewed over the telephone about leisure participation, and have not known that the research sponsor was a museum, they have stated that they were aware of being patronized by museum people who felt their main responsibility was to elevate the appreciation level of these "slobs," as one interviewee phrased it.

As a result, they do not become frequent museum-goers partly because they recognize this insensitivity to them and their values. Why would anyone voluntarily go into a situation where they believed they were going to be put down?

Three Learning Contexts (Bonner):

Learning in the museum should be voluntary, informal, and self-directed. But, many museum professionals don't want to let visitors be self-directed. Instead, they ask me, "How can I make people start at the beginning of the exhibit and work their way through in chronological order?" They complain, "I don't want them to start in the middle because it ruins my entire concept, or design."

A museum is not a place in which you can order people (unless they're on a school trip). Visitors don't come to the museum expecting to learn something in a structured, didactic manner. For many, that very possibility destroys the whole notion of an enjoyable, relaxed, rewarding experience. People prefer to hop, skip, and jump among the exhibits, fixing their attention on what especially appeals to them – not what is most important to the designer, educator, or curator.

One way we can help mesh what the museum wants to convey with what the occasional visitor wants to absorb is to have them participate in formative evaluation. Invite them to assist the museum in building in highlights or focus points that will grab and hold their attention, and in identifying the transitions that are meaningful in making the exhibits relevant to their daily lives.

One of the findings of my research has been that people who had not been to a museum in decades usually attributed their absence to the wretched experience they had on a school trip. On that occasion, the children were marched in, stood in front of an exhibit, lectured to, and marched on to the next station, where the process was repeated. In the meantime, their minds were wandering – and wondering, "What is this whole place about?" They missed discovering the essence of a museum, and it was not their fault.

Research has shown that when we merely transport the classroom from the school to the museum, the children never understand "what is different about this place, what is distinctive about a museum?" If a miserable class trip is all they know of a museum, they never venture back, because they do not choose to subject themselves to similar treatment in their adult leisure

life. Instead, they seek their leisure satisfactions in other places and activities, because the museum does not appear to be a place where they could find enjoyment and delight, approval and recognition, psychological and physical comfort.

Museums as Agents of Change (Bonner):

The primary criticism of museums in both the United States and Canada is that they "always remain the same" – stable, unchanging, preserved as well as preserving. That's partly because they *are* places of preservation and conservation that house the evidences of the past, the testimony of a people, the heritage of a culture.

When museums demonstrate broadly how the heritage can be related to today's daily life, they have a better chance of making connections with people who are not frequent visitors. Museums can use the past to demonstrate relevancy to current concerns, to raise issues on the "discussion agenda," while presenting viewpoints that reflect their roles as agents of change.

For example, this perspective provides an excellent opportunity to capitalize on environmental issues in explorations such as:

What do science-technology museums say about fossil fuels and alternative fuels? Many of these centers in the 1970s presented exhibits that were completely positive about nuclear power. We have learned since that nuclear power is not without hazards, and perhaps the science-technology center is the place that ought to present more than one side of a controversial issue.

What do arboretums and botanical gardens have to say about dealing with mundane subjects such as getting rid of yard waste and diminishing the use of pesticides – as well as raising our consciousness about saving remote rain forests in South America?

What do natural history museums have to say about ecological perils from acid rain and toxic waste dumping, and their effects on the natural environment? What flora and fauna are being damaged, and to what extent? What are the various views of levels of government, producers of the toxic wastes, coal miners, and environmental groups like the Sierra Club?

What do history museums have to say about how we got to the current condition of high energy use and low conservation? Can they help explain how the situation developed, and what the consequences are? Are there ethical and moral issues that deserve examination in a reasoned way?

Finale

Though museology literature on visitors goes back nearly 90 years, much of it has been based on unstructured observation or studies lacking controls.

Unlike sociology and anthropology, which have standard investigative procedures and tested methodologies that have proved themselves over time, museology lacks a rigorous research foundation. Until synthesis articles are written, coordinating the relevant findings from all the fields that impact museums – sociology, anthropology, psychology, leisure science, communications, education, marketing – we will be handicapped in understanding how and why potential visitors differ from current visitors, and how we can reach and serve them.

As one of the session participants suggested, we need to develop a two- or three-dimensional matrix in which we could enter the substantive information we already have. That would reveal where the gaps lie and the resources are, to guide visitor studies researchers in identifying where we've been and where we should go next in order to make significant advances. Then museum professionals would be able to apply the findings from all related fields to the enhancement of visitor experiences in museums.