

Methods for studying family visitors in art museums: A cross-disciplinary review of current research

Pat Sterry*, Ela Beaumont

School of Art and Design, University of Salford, Centenary Building, Peru Street, Salford M3 6EQ, UK

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Abstract

This paper examines current trends in family studies research, details the methodological and topical perspectives that are emerging, and reflects on how these findings could be integrated to provide a more coherent approach to researching the leisure, learning and recreational aspects of family visitors to art museums. Research findings from disciplines such as sociology, ethnography, education, design and marketing are of interest to the field of visitor studies, and this paper contributes to the wider research agenda by providing an overview of family research methods from a range of other disciplines, as well as those used within visitor studies.

Over the last decade, there has been a growth of research in family learning in science museums, leading to an emerging disciplinary matrix, whilst many aspects of family visits to art museums remain relatively unexplored. The paper discusses the problems of gathering meaningful data from adults and children in family groups, and concludes by suggesting that a challenge for art museums is to learn from what is happening in other areas of cultural research into families, and to develop a framework for research which builds on the methodological strengths and practical experience of robust studies.

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1. Introduction

This paper examines current trends in family studies research, details the methodological and topical perspectives that are emerging, and reflects on how these findings could

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 161 295 2628.

E-mail addresses: p.sterry@salford.ac.uk (P. Sterry), e.beaumont@salford.ac.uk (E. Beaumont).

be integrated to provide a more coherent approach to researching the leisure, learning and recreational aspects of family visitors to art museums.

The study of families is complex and a thorough, but not exhaustive, list of topics that are of current interest in terms of family research includes: cultural and situational diversity, family values and priorities, cultural, situational and normative factors, family formation and dissolution, parenting, childcare, time use, roles, childhood, adolescence, intergenerational relationships, employment, tourism, leisure, education and learning, social exchange, social networks, and social policy (Commuri & Gentry, 2000). We must also include media, management and design, including the robust research on families currently underway (Sterry & Beaumont, 2005), that will feed into the design process and which ultimately will aid the planning and design of the overall museum experience for family groups.

Research findings from each of these areas are of interest to the field of visitor studies for a number of reasons. It is clear that the political context is in many ways driving the research agenda in museums, in that they are regarded as “central to networks of knowledge, engaging with people locally, nationally and internationally... supporting leaning and skills, community identity and cohesion and the economy and opening up worlds of creativity and new experience for all” (Morris, 2003). Over the past decade there has been great pressure for publicly funded institutions to be accountable. Not only is it crucial to get the product right, but also to understand the attitude, motivation, learning, perception, culture and background of the audience or visitor. Millions are spent on design and new visitor attractions, and research and evaluation are a significant part of the process of accountability.

Several recent bibliographic projects (Hooper-Greenhill & Moussouri, 2001 in the UK, Ellenbogen, Luke, & Dierking, 2004; Museum Learning Collaborative, 2001; Rounds, 2001, in the US) have established that, globally, a core literature of family visitor studies research exists, forming an emerging body of discipline-specific knowledge. Furthermore, evidence suggests that the discipline is in a dynamic phase, with recent publications quickly leading to further research, a pattern consistent with other dynamic social sciences (Rounds, 2001). Research and evaluation originating from the US is widely and systematically disseminated in publications and at international conferences. Family visitor research is increasingly undertaken in Europe and the UK, often modelled on US studies, in part because European and UK researchers and practitioners make a point of attending visitor studies conferences and following developments in family visitor studies research in the United States, where the field is more highly developed.

Compared to the number of studies carried out in science museums, there are fewer research studies carried out in art museums, and very few into family group visitors to art museums. Like studies of families in science museums, a prevalent feature of research into families in art museums is the focus on learning.

2. Research into family learning in science museums

Researchers in the field of family learning in science museums have frequently adapted methods created for investigation in other disciplines, and the study of family activity in museums relies upon measures developed in fields outside visitor studies. These circumstances present methodological challenges to the researcher within the field of visitor studies, as there is no widely accepted methodological strategy or set of methods for

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