

# Re-Introducing Visitors: Thoughts and Discussion on John Falk's Notion of Visitors' Identity-Related Visit Motivations

Dimitra Christidou  
UCL Institute of Archaeology

Until today museums have tried to identify and segment their audiences based on their demographics. After years of conducting research in the US, John Falk in 2009 introduced a descriptive and predictive framework for identifying visitors on the basis of their motivations, as related to identity. This article summarises Falk's innovative framework as described in his book *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (2009), in addition to his presentation at the Visitor Studies Conference at the Victoria and Albert Museum in January 2010. In addition the article draws on the author's related research case studies from the Courtauld Gallery, the Horniman Museum and the Wellcome Collection in the UK.

## Keywords

Identity, visitor studies, motivations, segmentation

## Introduction

Trying to capture and interpret a museum visit is not quantum physics, but none the less is not an easy task to do. Museums are complex physical and social environments where different groups of people interact with each other in multiple and, sometimes, surprisingly unexpected ways. Research undertaken in cultural institutions worldwide has shown that the majority of visitors come as part of a social group (Hood 1983; Falk and Dierking 2000; Allen 2002), indicating that social and collaborative learning are important to them.

Until today visitor research has mainly been based on demographics but given the complexity of the museum experience, one can easily understand that there are more than simple categories and boxes to check. There have been a few exceptions to this 'rule,' where studies have attempted to categorise visitors on the basis of the frequency of their visits or on visiting groups' social arrangements. Falk (2009) has stressed the limitations of seeing our visitors through the above-mentioned lenses and suggests another more predictive and descriptive way, that of identity-related visit motivations.

Falk's suggestions and framework are reinforced through my own qualitative research at three museums in London, which argues that as collaborative learning occurs through processes of shared meaning-making, a museum experience should be approached by considering both the dynamics of these processes, as well as the practices used for performing these processes in the context of a joint activity.

### Perceiving identity

According to Falk (2006; 2009) each visitor, and every single human being, creates a branch of multiple identities according to the circumstances. Identity is considered as situational and responsive as well as sensitive to the social and physical context of each action and interaction. This perspective on identity was not introduced by Falk but earlier by others, most influential of whom was Goffman.

Goffman (1959) argued that identity is a sense of self that is built through interaction, and a person is thus equipped with a ‘multiplicity of selves.’ Bruner (1996) expanded this argument as he argued that identity is negotiated through interaction with others and with institutions. In addition to this, Goffman refers to three stages where a person can enact their different identities, these being the back stage, the front stage and the outside stage. The most private of those is considered to be the back stage where a person can truly be his or her self.

Goffman’s perspective has in turn influenced recent museum literature (Falk 2006, 2009; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Kelly 2007). Identity has been acknowledged as something influenced by the museum experience through collections, research and public programmes and events. Places where visitors confirm their identities are perceived as relaxing and welcoming places, in comparison to those that may challenge deep-seated beliefs and perceptions (Doering 2002).

In 2002 Fienberg and Leinhardt contrasted the common conception of identity as a set of demographic characteristics with one that treats identity as ‘the kinds of knowledge and patterns of experience people have that are relevant to a particular activity’ (Fienberg and Leinhardt, 2002: 168). Identity according to the latter definition is treated as ‘part of a social context where the prominence of any given feature varies depending on which aspects of the social context are most salient at any given time’ (*ibid.*). Expanding this definition of identity, Leinhardt and Knutson (2004: 75) concluded that identity can be better measured ‘by the details of how the groups were enacting a particular visit, specifically by their level of interest, motivation and curiosity, and by their appreciative and experiential knowledge.’

This experience has been described by Sellars (2009) who on visiting a museum said that ‘that’s the amazing thing about museums; you never thought of having secret lives but you discover them when encountering exhibits.’ He argues that visiting a museum brings you closer to what is already part of you, your undiscovered identity, drawing his ideas from Plato who argued that our life is a way to remember who we are.

Falk (2006; 2009) argues that every visit to a museum is a unique, ephemeral experience defined by that person, their needs and agendas on that day, in that place, in that time. There are multiple identities, internal and external, personal and group, big and small, reflecting how we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived by others. A ‘big’

Identity is seen as static, such as gender, age or ethnic group, while a ‘small’ identity is more flexible, referring to our interests, motivations, and so forth.

### **Identity-related visit motivations**

After years of research in science centres, zoos and aquariums, Falk (2006; 2009) acknowledged that throughout his research he had not paid enough attention to one of the basic threads in understanding the museum experience, that of identity. Falk and Storksdieck (2005) attempted to approach and understand the interconnection of identity, learning and the museum motivations. They carried out post-exhibition interviews with visitors who agreed to be contacted again after nearly two years time, in order to discover how these participants made the meaning of the exhibition and what could be recalled after such a period of time.

They identified five museum-specific identities reflecting visitor motivations: explorer, facilitator, professional/hobbyist, experience seeker and spiritual pilgrim, later renamed recharger, by Falk (2009).

Each identity reflects different motivations for visiting the museum. Specifically:

1. Explorers are driven by their personal curiosity, their urge to discover new things.
2. Facilitators visit the museum on behalf of others’ special interests in the exhibition or the subject-matter of the museum.
3. Experience seekers are these visitors who desire to see and experience a place, such as tourists.
4. Professional hobbyists are those with specific knowledge in the subject matter of an exhibition and specific goals in mind.
5. Rechargers seek a contemplative or restorative experience, often to let some steam out of their systems.

It should be noted that visitor social grouping types do not imply one specific identity at all cases. The most common misconception, as Falk notes (2009), involves the family. Coming to the museum as a family does not mean that members of this group, and especially the parents, carers, or adults in charge of the group, belong to the Facilitator category. They may for example quickly disperse, with each of the members becoming an explorer addressing their personal fancies, rejoining the group only at the end of the visit. Shifting identities can also occur while paying a visit and hence one can be a facilitator as well as an explorer and so forth (Falk 2009).

In his presentation at the Visitor Studies conference at the V&A museum in January 2010, Falk described what happens in the museum as a mixture of the effects of a range of factors including the individual’s personal agenda meaning his or her prior knowledge, experience and interest, any social interactions that take place during a visit, and the

exhibits, objects and labels encountered. He also suggested that the success of attention hooks for visitors is identity-related, i.e. what a visitor finds interesting depends on the identity he/she carries on the day. Falk gave an example from the California Science Center in LA, where the most common identity was facilitator with 41%, followed by Explorer with 34%.

Falk concluded his presentation by outlining the implications that his visitor identity motivation model has for museum design. He argued that shifting focus from demographics to identity motivation does not mean museums have to design many different activities or exhibits, but they should see themselves not as presenting only one museum experience but a range of different experiences. By better understanding their audience's expectations and how they perceive the institution, they can take these into consideration to better serve them.

Falk encourages us to stop taking for granted the use of the museum exhibitions, as they are not fixed and predetermined entities but instead 'intellectual resources capable of being experienced and used in different ways for multiple, and equally valid purposes' (Falk 2009: 35). We should also stop treating visitors as a fixed demographic category with a few variations, but in contrast as active meaning-makers who make a range of choices based on a variety of reasons and motivations.

Other significant studies in this area include Theano Moussouri's doctoral research on family meaning-making in museums, and Doering and Pekarik's work (1996) at the Exploratorium. Moussouri (1997) described six categories of visitor motivations while conducting her research at three different institutions, these being education, entertainment, social event, life cycle, place and practical issues. At the Exploratorium in San Francisco, Doering and Pekarik (1996) coined the term 'entry narrative' to refer to visitors' prior experiences and knowledge, which Falk and Dierking (1992; 2000) also refer to as the personal context. Doering and Pekarik suggested four categories of entry narratives: object, cognitive, introspective and social experiences. They suggest that these entry narratives direct both what will be learnt and the behaviour arising during the visit as entry narratives link to visitors' perceptions and expectations.

In addition to this, Smith and Wolf (1996) suggest three main factors shaping the museum visit, which are the exhibits, the presentation and exhibit interpretation, and the visitors themselves. They also argue that place influences the visit, an argument pursued further by Babon (2006) who contends that the 'place expectations' visitors have before entering a museum shape their evaluations of what they encounter in there. Again reflecting Goffman's work (1959; 1963), these 'place expectations' are explained as behaviours learnt through interaction with others in specific contexts. These learnt behaviours and roles form the basis for any future assessment or evaluation in the same context. Expanding this argument further, reception and evaluation are treated as socially constructed processes, where encounters with exhibits are at the same time an ongoing spontaneous reception of the object, internalized 'place expectations' and the social circumstances at hand.

### **UK Case Studies**

My own research at the Horniman Museum and Gardens, the Courtauld Gallery and the Wellcome Collection focuses on visitor performance. Performance is a term borrowed from Goffman (1959) with which I refer to visitors' conduct and interaction, and their responsive and situated verbal and non-verbal behaviours within specific contexts. By studying the unfolding nature of performances in different museum contexts, I focus on, gather and compare possible ways in which exhibits gain meaning for each member and for the group as a unit. Looking closer at the ways performances are produced, recognised and shared during the visit, the importance of joint attention and reference becomes salient.

In order to capture visitor performances, audio and video recordings along with non-participant observation have been carried out since March 2010. Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis provide the methodological resources through which the situated, social and moment-by-moment production of performance is unveiled. Audio and video recordings, coupled with field observation, provide the means for the detailed capture of the 'naturally occurring' performances from the perspective of those who act, see and experience (Miles and Huberman 1994).

My main argument is that in the museum space, a public and social place, visitors connect to each other through the content. For anchoring attention on an exhibit, 'a series of interrelated actions through which the visitor makes relevant, and gives significance to, particular features of the exhibit' (vom Lehn 2002: 61) should be performed. This is where the upper half of the body comes in, directing others' attention to some feature or to the exhibit in general. In addition visitors with no previous history meet in this social space and share their personal interests by rendering public, either verbally or non-verbally, intentionally or unintentionally, their personal fancies.

Goffman uses the term performance to refer to the activities of an individual before a set of observers, or audience, which in addition reflect a sense of the individual's identity, where as described earlier, identity is for Goffman a notion developed through social interaction. In addition to Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, Gee (2005) uses the term 'discourse' to refer to language-in-use, contrasting it to 'Discourse' which includes all the extra-linguistic modes that contribute in the shaping of our identities. For Gee multiple situated identities can be involved in an unfolding Discourse as interacting people shift among different identities in different contexts and activities. This argument is reflected and reinforced through my own observations and research, which argues that through visitors' performances (Discourse in Gee's words) an aspect of their personal and group identity becomes salient and subsequently shapes the museum experience for them, as individuals as well as collaboratively. I also argue that performance is driven by identity and that one can capture quite different performances even among members of the same group when they interact with each other. It is thus possible to make a fair assessment of visitors' identities by observing their performances.

In order to test these ideas and arguments, visitor performances in front of specific exhibits at the three participant museums have been filmed and then specific events have been transcribed and analysed in order to identify the practices that visitors use for sharing the context of the exhibitions with their companions. In this article attention has been focused on identifying reflections of visitors' identities through their performances.

As Conversation Analysis and Ethnomethodology form the methodological framework of this research, the responsive and situated nature of identity within interaction is being underlined. What counts as context for the moment-by-moment construction of identity are the actors' loci of orientation, or what they actively demonstrate as relevant. Context and identity are not stable notions but instead momentarily constructed ones (Heritage 2005). Once again the shifting between different selves becomes salient as the sequential environment of discourse changes and unfolds.

Four excerpts are presented in this article, two each one of the most often for the most common identities; the Facilitating Parents and the Facilitating Socializer (after Falk 2009). For an explanation of the transcript symbols, please see table 1 in the appendix.

At the Horniman Museum, the Courtauld Gallery and the Wellcome Collection one can see and hear adults performing in almost the same way when visiting with their children. The first excerpt is from the Courtauld Gallery's Room 4 where Post-Impressionist paintings are exhibited, and the exhibit under investigation is Seurat's painting *Woman Powdering Herself*. In the first excerpt we have 2 female adults and 1 female child.

***Excerpt 1:***

*D: I like this one!*

((Points at Seurat's painting))

*W1: Which one do you prefer?*

*D: That one! That one!*

((Points at Seurat's painting; points again))

W1 walks closer to the painting. W2 is standing slightly far away as she is holding the pram.

*W1: Look! Pictures that were made with dots!! When you get close to it (.) is whole made with dots! (0.2) ....different dots!*

*D: - WOW!*

*W1: - Can you see? (.) What you think she's doing?*

*D: Making something with THAT*

((lifts her left hand and points at the painting))

*W1: Good question. Is a powdering brush*

((Starts making a powdering gesture))

W1 steps forward and points at the painting. While standing:

*W1: In front of here, in the centre (.) and she's doing THIS to the mirror to make her =*

((Pointing)) ((With her left hand imitates the subject's powdering gesture))

= skin look (-)

W1 faces D.

*W1: People don't do that much anymore! Do they?*

((Turns and faces W2))

*D: Why::??*

*W1: Well, I think they just put on a make-up*

((They move on together to room 3))

The second excerpt is from the Horniman Museum and the Gardens. The exhibit under investigation is a glass case that contains objects relevant to death practices in Kemet or Ancient Egypt. In this excerpt we join a male adult with two female children.

***Excerpt 2:***

*M: When they die, they put these beautiful objects. They bury these lovely things with them!*

((Points at the glass case)) ((M moves towards the glass case; D1 and D2 attend his performance & approach the glass case, standing next to him, looking into the glass case))

*M: And they place them in the tomb, it could be built on the ground or under the ground, & they put all these different things in there and then some special presents, some gifts.*

((Pointing at the glass case))

These adults are Facilitating Parents, making an actual and observable attempt to help their children to build their "islands of expertise" (Crowley and Jacobs, 2002). In these two excerpts adults prompt conversation and engagement with the exhibits by asking questions, narrating stories and indicating specific features or aspects of the exhibits. Diamond (1986) argues that parents at science museums use both 'showing' and 'telling' behaviours to direct their children towards specific exhibits and engage them with these. By 'showing' Diamond means non-verbal behaviour such as pointing, pulling someone over, touching an exhibit and so forth. My fieldwork observations at

these three museums concur with those made by Diamond (1986) and Crowley and Jacobs (2002). In most of the cases of families, defined as groups with at least one adult and one child, one can see the adult enacting the facilitator identity throughout their performance in the museum space.

There are also adults paying visits in dyads (pairs). In most cases these visitors demonstrate the social facilitator identity, going to a museum for their own and their companion's sake. The third and fourth excerpts are from the Wellcome Collection's Medicine Man gallery. The exhibit under investigation is a painting with the title "Daniel Lambert, weighing almost 40 stone". Each painting in this gallery is identified by a number, where this is number 3. Printed leaflets, placed in wooden cases at each side of the section, left and right, provide more information on the artwork.

In excerpt 3 we have two women whose attention has been shifted towards the painting section following one's gestural indication.

**Excerpt 3:**

*W1: Weighing almost 40 stone*

*W2: I think he looks kinda stupid*

*W1: Yeah! Look! (Laughs) Despite claiming to only drink water and eat in moderation, his head looks like double*

*W2: So was he (.) So was he lying or him actually only drinking water is irrelevant?*

*W1: I don't know (0.4) Maybe he is having some kind of condition*

W1 turns a page (0.2) W1 lifts her head and looks closer at the painting next to Daniel Lambert.

**Excerpt 4:**

While gazing at painting 3,

*W1: Oh my God! Look at this man!*

((W2 is still standing in front of and looking at painting 6, something that W1 acknowledges; W2 is not responding to W1's request to look at the painting 3))

*W1: He claimed only to drink water and eat in moderations (laughs)*

*W1: He (.) he (.) He claimed only to drink water and eat in moderation*

((Points at Painting3)) ((W2 approaches W1))

*W2: Oh my god!*

*W1: and he exhibited himself around England trying to get a shilling for people to see him*

*W2: Oh my god! What weight was he?*

*W1: ((reads the leaflet)) 40 stone!?! (.)*

*((W2 approaches and shares the same leaflet))*

*W2: 50 stone! W1: - 40 stone!*

*W2: 50 stone!*

*W1: This is similar.*

*W2: Number 7. The Black Madonna*

Bruder and Ucock (2000) suggest that viewing art is a social process through and within which viewers do not question each other's knowledge but instead value each other's points of view, judgements and comments while interacting with one another. In these two examples shared attention on the painting 3 has been achieved through one member's performance. In both of these cases one of the members of the group anchors her attention on painting 3, which is further encouraged by the interpretation text. The curiosity aroused prompts these visitors to make further attempts at sharing the exhibit with their companion through 'showing' and 'telling' behaviours. Their discourse though is not as strongly monopolised by a didactic tone as in the case of families. It is obvious by listening to their conversations that adults in dyads are in most cases paying a visit in order to have fun and enjoyment, something expressed by their frequent laughs and jokes in between shifting from one exhibit to another. As Bruder and Ucock (2000) argue, viewing art is more about 'What do you think?' rather than 'What do you know?', something that the above mentioned examples also suggest.

It has also been observed that the same identity that brings visitors to the museum often actually drives them away. My non-participant observation research has shown that the average time for a group staying in the African Worlds gallery at the Horniman Museum and Gardens for example, ranges from only one minute to thirty-two minutes. This may reveal a lot to a statistician, but to me does not tell the whole truth, and would be more meaningful when related to the identity that drove that particular group to that particular museum on that particular day.

### **Conclusions**

Until today demographics have been seemingly the soundest way to segment museum audiences. Demographics can also be analysed quantitatively and thus provide numbers that can tell a story about the visitors. But Falk (2006; 2009; 2010) argues that this is just one side of the story.

Institutions such as the British Museum in London, and the Dallas Museum of Art in Texas, are just two great examples that choose to segment their audiences not on the basis of demographics but go beyond and shape more descriptive categories. The Dallas Museum of Art for example divides them into observers, participants, independents and enthusiasts.

The methodology that Falk (2006; 2009; 2010) and the above-mentioned museums have chosen to segment their audiences are quite different. Prior or post-exhibition interviews, questionnaires and web-based surveys are some of the methodological tools used for bringing forth more descriptive clusters of visitors. In my case, fragments of the visitors' enabled identities become salient within the flow of their actual visit. These spontaneously performed fragments are captured in real time by using a camcorder, coupled with non-participant observations.

From these momentarily occurring performances we can gain an idea of the emergent, situated and moment-by-moment constructed identities of our visitors. From the four performances described in this paper two visitors' identities have been reflected, those of Facilitating Parents and Social Facilitators. While carrying out their performances members of these groups use the same means in different degrees of frequency, for example 'showing' and 'telling' behaviours, narration, asking questions and expressing likeness or intrigue. The underlying reason for this variation in the usage of these means can be best understood when visiting a museum is approached as a shared meaning-making process where specific fragments of visitors' identities are enabled for that specific day, time and group. By observing the visitors you can have a better idea of what they do, say and how they say it and identify the weak or strong entry points of the interpretation. Once you recognise your most often identity related group, you can in turn be the facilitator and address their needs in a more efficient way than before.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to I.K.Y. (Greek State Scholarships Foundation) for their financial support throughout the last two years. I would also like to thank the three museums for accepting me and my project, the staff members of these museums for their support and ideas, and my friends and colleagues for reviewing prior versions of this article.

### References

- Allen, S. 2002. Looking for Learning in Visitor Talk: A Methodological Exploration. In Leinhardt, G., Crowley, K. & Knutson, K. (eds.) *Learning Conversations in Museums*. Mahwah, N.J.; London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 259- 303.
- Babon, K. 2006. Composition, coherence, and attachment: The critical role of context in reception. *Poetics* 34(3), 151-179, doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2006.01.003.
- Bruder, K. and Ucock, O. 2000. Interactive Art Interpretation: How Viewers Make Sense of Paintings in Conversation. *Symbolic Interaction* 23(4), 337- 358, doi: 10.1525/si.2000.23.4.337.
- Bruner, J. 1996. *The culture of education*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Crowley, K. and Jacobs, M. 2002. Building Islands of Expertise in Everyday Family Activity. In: Leinhardt, G., Crowley, K. & Knutson, K. (eds.) *Learning conversations in museums*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 333-356.
- Diamond, J. 1986. The Behavior of Family Groups in Science Museums. *Curator* 29(2), 139- 154.

- Doering, Z. D. and Pekarik, A. Z. 1996. Questioning the entrance narrative. *Journal of Museum Education* 21(3), 20-25.
- Falk, J. 2006. An Identity-Centered Approach to Understanding Museum Learning. *Curator* 46(2), 151-66, doi: 10.1111/j.2151-6952.2006.tb00209.x.
- Falk, J. 2009. *Identity and the museum visitor experience*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Falk, J. 2010. *Situated Identities and the Museum Visitor Experience*. VSG AGM and Conference, [<http://www.visitors.org.uk/node/372>] (accessed 28th October 210).
- Falk, J. and Dierking, L. 1992. *The museum experience*. Washington DC: Whalesback Books.
- Falk, J. and Dierking, L. 2000. *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Falk, J. and Storksdieck, M. 2005. Using the Contextual Model of Learning to understand visitor learning from a science center exhibition. *Science Education* 89, 744-778, doi:10.1002/sce.20078.
- Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.
- Goffman, E. 1963. *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings*. New York: The Free Press.
- Heritage, J. 2005. Conversation analysis and institutional talk. In: Fitch, K. L. and Sanders, R. E. (eds.) *Handbook of language and social interaction*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 103-47
- Hood, M. G. 1983. Staying Away: Why People Choose not to Visit Museums. *Museum News* 61(4), 50-57.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. 2000. *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Kelly, L. 2007. Visitors and Learning: Adult museum visitors' learning identities. In: Knell, S., Macleod, S. & Watson, S. (eds.) *Museum revolutions: how museums and change and are changed*. Abingdon: Routledge, 276- 290.
- Leinhardt, G. and Knutson, K. 2004. *Listening in on Museum Conversations*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Miles, M. and Huberman, M. 1994. *Qualitative Data Analysis; an Expanded Sourcebook*. 2nd edition. London: SAGE Publications
- Moussouri, T. 1997. *Family Agendas and Family Learning in Hands-On Museums*, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Leicester.
- Sellars, P. 2009. Cultural Dimensions: Museums, Educators, and Social Action. Museum Educators of Southern California, [<http://www.mesconline.org/resources/resources.asp>] (accessed 28th October 2010).
- Smith, J. K. and Wolf, L. 1996. Museum Visitor Preferences and Intentions in Constructing Aesthetic Experience, *Poetics* 24, 219-238, doi:10.1016/0304-422X(95)00006-6.
- vom Lehn, D. 2002. *Exhibiting Interaction: Conduct and Participation in Museums and Galleries*. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, King's College, University of London.

**Appendix**

UPPER CASE	for indicating emphasis
(laughs)	for indicating laughing
(( ))	for describing simultaneously nonverbal behaviours. The opening double parentheses are placed below the relevant verbal utterance to indicate the simultaneous occurring of verbal and nonverbal behaviours.
(.)	for indicating a pause less than a second
(0.5)	for indicating a pause of 5 seconds. Numbers in parentheses indicate elapsed time in silence in seconds
[	indicates overlapping talk
=	when utterances are one after the other with no interval between them
(-)	indicating non audible words
M	for male participant
W	for female participant
D	for female child (up to 18 years old)
S	for male child (up to 18 years old)

**Table 1.** Transcript Symbols