

Assignment 1

Participant Observation at the Morris Museum

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Assessment and Evaluation

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Observational Notes

Observational data was gathered at the Morris Museum on Saturday, September 13, 2014, at 12:00 PM – one hour after opening to the public. The museum is located in the historic section of Morristown, New Jersey. The facility was clean and well lit. It was not crowded. The purpose of the visit was to examine how patrons interacted with one another – and with the exhibits – during a weekend afternoon.

Just a few people were observed browsing the newly opened *Dog Show* exhibition, which had opened two days prior. It featured paintings and sculptures of canines. Signs explained that the collection was on loan from a New York gallery. The few patrons in this wing appeared older in age. Each person or couple moved about the room, from piece to piece, at a steady pace. The works were viewed in complete silence. No children were present. Browsing the section gave a feeling of solitude; the researcher, who was also a participant, did not feel rushed to view the displays.

The researcher next ascended the stairs to the second floor. Sounds of children's voices echoed in the central hallway. This floor was the most crowded part of the museum. Collections on display upstairs included: Native American art, model train sets, and dinosaur fossils. Rather than steadily browsing – like the adults in the *Dog Show* collection – families lingered longer in front of the exhibits. Children had more time to explore and interact with hands-on exhibits, in which displays had more interactive elements. For example, there were cutout holes in some of the plastic display boxes. Signs encouraged touching items, like fossilized dinosaur eggs. Parents were heard commenting out loud about details of the child-friendly pieces. Remarks at the model train exhibit included, “Look at all of the blinking lights.” The statements resulted in

inquisitive responses from the accompanying children. The captions adorned on each museum piece were also read orally to children.

At 12:30 PM, several groups of parents and young children were observed arriving together, each carrying gift bags. Most of the adults were dressed in casual attire; children wore clean, neat clothes. Shortly after the group's arrival, a man was observed near the front hallway carrying several boxes of pizza. He was later seen joining the large party, empty handed; he stood near a woman, presumably his wife. The large group of adults and children had a private museum guide. She had brown hair and was the only attendant observed leading an assemblage of visitors.

The large group eventually settled in the dinosaur section. The tour guide spoke in age appropriate language, demonstrating expertise about prehistoric New Jersey. Children were not given much time to freely explore and were instructed to raise their hands to ask questions. The tour guide asked questions designed to pique children's interest about fossils. If this was not on a Saturday afternoon – and if there were no gift bags or parents present – the group could have easily been presumed to be on a class trip.

The parents were not observed taking photographs of their children or the exhibits (patrons not on the private tour were taking cell phone pictures of the displays). Adults sat together on benches behind children, but hardly spoke. Several scrolled through their smartphones screens, while their children interacted with tour guide. It is not determined if the guide took the group to other exhibits that were not typically appealing to children.

Participants

Observed visitors were typically parents with young children (presumably early elementary) or senior citizens with or without a spouse. There were no observed visitors

speaking in languages other than English. The majority of participants were white, dressed in casual attire. The observer wore khaki pants and a collared shirt. The objective was to seamlessly blend in with the participants. There was not a lot of attending staff present.

Methodology

Data was collected using the Observer as Participant model, in which the researcher interacts with the people who are being observed (Kawulich, 2005). In an attempt to blend in with the setting, the researcher browsed the museum's collections. The researcher received a student discount for admission. Observations occurred as the investigator passed through exhibits. This was deemed a necessity due to the fact that permission to take notes on patron behavior was not secured prior to visitation.

It should be noted that a cultural bias could exist in the reported data (Kawulich, 2005). The researcher has attended children's birthday parties; past experiences aided the researcher in recognizing how people group together. Furthermore, the observer is not a regular museum patron and may have been too drawn in to the experience to present notes in an unbiased fashion. No direct interactions were made and no interviews were conducted. It is undetermined whether guests had previously attended museum functions. Those who silently viewed exhibits may have been on a return visit.

Analysis

The Morris Museum attracted two different crowds on that particular Saturday: senior citizens and parents with young children. Some of the facility's wings were completely devoid of visitors. Older patrons tended to browse the painting and

ethnographic collections. These exhibits were not hands-on; they lacked interactive elements that would engage children.

The second floor was more child-friendly. The sections designed to interest younger children. Families spent more time stopping and looking; individuals or those with no children moved about more. The dinosaur wing was easy to find because it was in an open space. The exhibits geared to interest children visitors to engage with the exhibits. Richer content was on display in those sections (e.g., the model train set had intricate moving parts).

There was literature at the museum's front desk that indicated that the facility hosts birthday parties for young children. The observer's checked the museum's website on an Internet-enabled device, confirming that the facility hosts private parties ("Morris Museum," 2014). It might, therefore, be presumed that the large group was at the museum to celebrate a child's birthday.

The private party's tour guide's structured explanations stifled the children's desire to freely explore the space. Nevertheless, she did help put exhibits into context and perspective. Private tours seemed appealing to the invited parents. This could, in turn, lead to subsequent children's parties at the museum. It should be noted that parents seemed disengaged while the guide spoke; many were looking at their smartphones.

The facility's collections were aligned for students, teachers, and others in education. Brochures indicated that the facility hosts teacher professional development, which attracts other demographics to different collections. The mineral wing – which was empty on Saturday – may be more crowded on other days. The museum allowed photography of most works, but did not offer open wi-fi to share images.

References

- Kawulich, Barbara B. (2005). Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method [81 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(2), Art. 43. Retrieved September 20, 2014, from <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0502430>.
- Morris Museum. (2014). Retrieved September 13, 2014, from <http://www.morrismuseum.org>