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# Looking Within: An Examination Of African American Mental Models Of Museums

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**Abstract:** Little is known about African Americans' mental models of museums. This dearth of knowledge limits adult education scholars' understanding of the educational needs and wants of African Americans in museum contexts. To address this gap, we conducted an interpretive qualitative study examining eight African Americans' mental models of museums. Three themes emerged from the data. Implications and recommendations for scholars and museums are discussed.

## Introduction

The failure of U.S. museums to draw ethnically diverse audiences is an often discussed, but far from resolved dilemma that has beleaguered museums for decades (Falk, 1993). One frequently mentioned explanation for the dilemma is museums' inability to respect the comprehensive nature of the American experience without Eurocentric condescension or paternalism (Gaither, 1992). In comparison to the research on traditional museum visitors (TMVs) (i.e., well-educated, privileged individuals of European descent) (Barr, 2004), scant information exists regarding the mental models of non-traditional museum visitor populations, like African Americans. In the last twenty years, only two empirical studies investigating African American conceptions of museums could be located (see Falk, 1993; Hood, 1993), and both add to our understanding in limited and a-theoretical ways. Without a body of theoretically-based and empirically-tested research to guide programmatic decisions, our conceptual and theoretical understanding of museums as places of adult learning--for all adults--can not grow. Given these concerns, an interpretive qualitative study (Merriam & Associates, 2002) was undertaken to investigate African Americans' mental models of museums.

The conceptual framework for our study was constructed from three diverse, yet complimentary fields of research. First, research on mental models provided a basis for understanding the impact that mental models can have on participation in learning opportunities, like those offered in museums. Second, Knowles' (1980) concept of andragogy provided an understanding of how characteristics of adult learners' and the learning context may further influence visitors' conceptions of museums. And lastly, Critical Race Theory (CRT) allowed us to examine how museum philosophies, policies, and practices have influenced African Americans' mental models of museums. This paper presents part of a larger study of African Americans' mental models of museums and their visitation decisions, and addresses the question: What are African American mental models of museums?

## Methods

Our interpretive qualitative study focused on eight participants living in the Washington, D.C. metro area. Participants were located using the snowballing method (Babbie, 1995), based on purposeful (i.e., self-identified as Black or African American, born in U.S., and spent majority of life in U.S.) and representational (i.e., age, gender and education level) selection (see Table 1 for demographic breakdown). Data were collected in three ways: modified Twenty Statements Tests (TSTs) (Kuhn & McParland, 1954), 2 one-on-one semi-structured interviews, and concept mapping. Participants completed three TSTs at the beginning of the first interview. The TSTs required participants to develop 20 responses each to three sentence stems (Museums are...; I would go to a museum...; and I would not go to a museum...), and once participants finished, the first interview was conducted. During the second interview, participants engaged in a think aloud styled interview and were asked to use their TSTs written on small Post-It notes in the construction of two concept maps (i.e., I would go to a museum; I would not

go to a museum). All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed to insure accuracy, thus facilitating the data interpretation and analysis stages (Patton, 2002)

Participants' interview transcripts, TSTs and concept maps were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This method required us to compare "a particular incident" (i.e., interviews, TSTs, and/or concept maps) with another incident from the data for the purpose of forming tentative categories that were then compared to each other and to other incidents (Merriam, 1998, p. 159). The benefit being, "[a]s events are constantly compared with previous events, new topological dimensions, as well as new relationships, may be discovered" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981, p. 58). In this way, comparisons occur both within and between incidences until themes were formed (Merriam, 1998).

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Last level of education completed</b>	<b>Current residence</b>
Alec	M	25	High School	Maryland
Dionne	F	41	BA	District of Columbia (DC)
Keenan	M	57	High School	Maryland
Raymond	M	53	Graduate	DC
Shawn	M	55	High School	Maryland
Vivian	F	50	Graduate	Maryland
Will	M	30	AA	Maryland
Zoe	F	44	BA	DC

**Findings**

Analysis revealed three themes in participants' mental models of museums. First, museums are conceived as worthwhile places of learning and education. Second, museums are conceived as offering narrow representations of African Americans that perpetuate African American stereotypes. Lastly, museums are at times conceived of as not wanting and not accepting African American visitors.

*Museums are conceived as worthwhile places of learning and education.*

All participants' mental models incorporated notions of museums as valuable institutions for learning and education. Learning was described as a way to gain knowledge and insights into new or previously experienced subject areas.

For example, Dionne described the types of museums she believe could offer her valuable educational experiences. She stated, "I'd go [to a museum] if there was something I wanted to learn about, but I can't think of anything..." She then quickly added, "Wait, if they had one for him [Obama], Oh My God! I'd go to that every weekend just to stare at him and his family and to learn how he made it through! Or...oh, I love Sex and the City. If they had a museum about the life and times of single women. I'd go to pickup all kinds of info. My girlfriends, we'd love that. That'd be a hot museum!"

Vivian recalled her excitement at visiting an exhibit on jewelry making: "I love to make jewelry...I didn't go thinking I'd learn much about jewelry making, but...It gave me ideas...for designs and techniques. Like things I could do. I learned so much. I still have the brochure...10 years later." More broadly, Will envisioned museums as, "teach[ing] you about your culture and your place in history...." He recalled his experiences visiting a Rastafarian exhibit saying, "I went because...I have dreads, because I wanted to know more about growing them. You shouldn't walk around with something that you don't know about...Now that I've been; now I understand...My dreads mean more to me now."

Like Will, Shawn recounted a meaningful experience that summed up the learning and educational value he attributed to museums. He discussed his experience seeing the Tuskegee Airmen at a gallery lecture. He shared, "...they talked about what it was like to be discriminated against... told they didn't have the intelligence to fly.... how they were given inferior and down right dangerous equipment. But they still persevered. I learned so much about them and that time.... That experience was...life changing and educational." To sum up the comments of all the participants Raymond stated, "[Museums] help us understand ourselves and teach us about the world around us".

*Museums are conceived as offering narrow representations of African American culture and history that perpetuate African American stereotypes.*

While participants described museums as places of learning they also revealed that they conceived of museums as narrowly representing African American history and culture, as well as the concern that such representations served to perpetuate stereotypes about African Americans. When asked about the ways African American history, experiences and contributions are portrayed by museums, Vivian stated, "There needs to be more, or different stories told about us other than just slavery...more diverse African American stories. Like what happened after slavery, or even before, or beyond.... People think that's [slavery] [our] sole role in American history."

Moreover, participants such as Alec were frustrated by museums' narrow and stereotyped representations of African Americans,

...we are represented [in museums], but it's done in a segregated way sometimes and that just keeps making people think we're not important... . Stuff that sends a message to the people walking around. It makes them...keep thinking that this stuff, our (referring to African American art etc.) stuff is less than the stuff made by dead White guys. We aren't ever seen differently or like in another way, we are just less. It's the same old message on a loop.

Raymond argued museums were not addressing the complexity of Black life, stating "...our true presence isn't represented [in museums]...and I think it kind of creates an emotional log jam because you know what your seeing [is] myopic". This narrow representation was echoed by all the participants including Dionne who was adamant about the negative images of African Americans in museums: "It['s] just...bad and sad stuff. Nothing positive, just 'Oh those poor black people'. I mean come on! Talk about a stereotype. It was...a caricature. Give me a break! It['s] like watching 'Roots', but that's it. Nothing else is shown."

*Museums are at times conceived of as not wanting and not accepting African American visitors.*

All participants expressed that they felt, at one time or another, like a museum, its employees, or other visitors did not accept them. Raymond felt judged by White museum employees, "I don't know how to describe it. There's this...innate understanding when someone [White] looks at you...they'll smile kind of like, 'Oh man, you're here, good', but they don't really mean the good part." Similarly, Alec and Will reported feeling unaccepted and unwelcomed at museums and consciously try to combat that feeling. Alec stated that when he visits, "I gotta look well put together, so if I'm [not], I'm not going...you should go there looking the part...cause otherwise [White] people might be wondering if you're lost, or why you're [as a Black person] there...[White] people don't question why [Whites] are there, you know"(he laughs). Will too felt pressures associated with visiting museums stemming from his experiences with museum staff:

...some museums hassle you if you look a certain way, [like] a thug, if you aren't dressed a certain way. [T]he guards will watch you more, and people don't come near you...it's just too much. You just want to come as you are.... it's just clothes. This is how I, as a Black man, dress.

This sense of exclusion ran deeper than just feeling watched or out of place. Participants such as Keenan describe how museums fail to create a welcoming and psychologically safe place for learning and participation. He acknowledged that although he feels physically safe in museums, he questioned if museums want African American visitors in their galleries given the negative exhibits and images they sometimes present. He said:

I kind of feel exposed sometimes, like mentally unsafe, vulnerable. Like you can come around a corner and Boom! there's a picture of a Black man swing from a tree...I don't know why they want to show that stuff. I don't feel comfortable seeing it. They have to know that, so why show it. They don't want us to visit.

### **Discussion**

Participants conceived of museums as worthwhile places of learning and education, yet the value given to museums is conditional on life-display connections—a factor not previously recognized within the museum studies literature. The learning and educational value given to museums was conditional on participants' ability to make connections between their lives and the content displayed in the exhibit or programming—what we call, life-display connections. These connections may be consciously or unconsciously initiated by the visitor, and/or the museum through the purposeful design of the exhibit or program. By making connections between their lives and the information presented, African American visitors are able to identify with the content, and conceive of ways in which presented information may be beneficial, useful, or otherwise enrich their lives. Life-display connections like those made by Vivian at the jewelry making exhibit, Will at the Rastafarian exhibit, and Shawn at the Tuskegee Airmen talk, draw attention to the importance of connections in eliciting more than just a cursory glance at displays. Moreover, the ability of life-display connections to stimulate and facilitate learners' engagement with presented materials is explained, in part, by adults' readiness to learn those things that they need to know in order to cope effectively with real-life situations; and adults being life-centered in their orientation to learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005).

Without the presences of life-display connections, it may be more challenging for visitors to identify with the presented information/objects, and recognize how the presented information/objects can be employable and advantageous to their lives, thus limiting the educational value ascribed to museums. Hence, museums' worth or value as places of learning and education is, from the perspective of our participants, contingent on their ability to connect with what they see at a museum.

Additionally, although African Americans are confident in their ability to learn from museums, the racializing of museums as White Spaces may inhibit African Americans from fully embracing museums. Participants expressed confidence in their ability to successfully engage with and learn from museums. However, participants' willingness to engage with and learn from museums is sullied by experiences that have led them to conceive of museums as predominantly White Spaces. Similar to the way individuals are socially labeled as White, Black or Other, so too spaces are socially labeled by those individuals who occupy and claim them as their own (Martin, 2004; Carter, 2008). African Americans recognize museums as White, construing White ownership through such environmental aspects as content and programming choices, and presented interpretations.

One way that White Space manifests itself in educational contexts, like museums, is through the placement of Conditions of Safety (CS) (Leonardo & Porter, 2010) around displays and discussions of African American history and culture. CS refers to the limitations placed around discussions of race and racism in educational settings, so as to maintain White comfort zones (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). In our study we interpret the lack of robust representation of African American culture and history as an example of museums' implementation of CS around public discourses of race. By offering, what participants described as narrow representations of their race or culture, museums have minimized the point of views, experiences, and voices of African Americans. Whereas White and European histories and cultures are extensively displayed with a broad range of perspectives and experiences, African American and Black content tends to be, according to participants, frequently limited in scope and quantity. Both

the limited scope and quantity may serve as safety mechanisms that make such public displays of race “innocuous and inoffensive” enough for consumption by the White public.

The identification of museums as White Spaces and the placement of CS around African American content provide further support to Loukaitou-Sideris and Grodach’s (2004) criticisms that mainstream US museums struggle to recognize the underlying prejudicial assumptions and simplifications in their exhibit designs and programming choices. Museums’ tendencies toward Eurocentric-focused representations, fixations on the White histories and cultures, and unequal opportunities for minority artists, are all examples, they argue, of these struggles with stereotyped representations (Loukaitou-Sideris & Grodach, 2004). Moreover, we would add to these criticisms by questioning the ability of “White” institutions and “safe” exhibits/programming to create learning opportunities, or to impart any true race-related insights to visitors. By creating exhibits and programming imbued with CS, museums as White Spaces have placed White visitors’ need for comfort ahead of conveying any real anti-racism teachings (Thompson, 2003).

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Our study holds two implications for scholars. First, our study highlights the general utility of museums as research contexts for studying how adults learn best. Previous adult education research has argued that the field’s understanding of andragogy has been confounded by the use of inappropriate educational contexts (e.g., university courses, training sessions) (Rachal, 2002). In contrast, museums provide researchers with a learning and educational context for exploring andragogy that overcomes the limitations of other educational settings. For example, museums more often than not offer a context in which participation is truly voluntary--what Falk and Dierking (2000) term Free Choice Learning--objectives are collaboratively-determined between visitors and museums, and there are no concerns for grades, or pressures of external performance requirements (Rachel, 2002).

Second, scholars should consider the potential value of museums to serve as learning sites for examining issues of social justice and inclusion. Examination of under-represented populations’ conceptions of and reasons for engaging with museum content may serve to further inform discussions of how educational choices (of visitors) and programming practices (of museums) are influenced by unconscious and conscious assumptions about race and ethnicity. Furthermore, the notion of museums as White Spaces may offer adult education researchers: (a) another perspective with which to investigate educational barriers facing non-TMV groups in museum contexts, and (b) insights into why, despite concerted theoretical and empirical research efforts, museum audiences remain drastically less diverse than the American public.

Although our study informs understandings of African Americans’ mental models of museums and visitation, it is but one study and hence does so in limited ways. Additional research in a number of areas is required to explore African American visitors’ mental models of museums, particularly because African Americans are not a monolithic population. Like every other ethnic group there is much variation between members. As such, additional studies are needed to investigate if the themes and conclusions generated from our study can be generalized to other African Americans. Future studies of African Americans mental models are likely to reveal new conceptualizations undiscovered by our study, and thus expand our knowledge even further.

Furthermore, future studies are needed to investigate the benefits of a multiple methods approach to the elicitation of mental models in order to compare and contrast the approach to single elicitation studies. For example, although previous research hints at the potential of combining verbal (e.g., interviews) with graphical methods (e.g. concept mapping) of elicitation to overcome inherent weaknesses present in each separate method, no study has explicitly sought to test this suggestion (Dudzinska-Przesmitzki & Grenier, 2009). Only further studies can help to expand our understanding of the benefits behind a multi-method approach to mental models elicitation.

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