

Relationship of Childhood Leisure Preferences to Adult Museum Participation

Marilyn G. Hood, Ph.D.
Hood Associates
Columbus, Ohio

Introduction

The issue of how adults' leisure choices are influenced by their socialization during childhood has been investigated by several researchers, primarily in the leisure science field. In 1973, Yoesting and Burkhead urged that future studies on ascertaining the persistence of childhood activities into adulthood include a measure of "intensity of involvement" in those activities. They indicated that merely determining that a person had carried over a leisure activity or set of activities from childhood to adulthood did not adequately measure how intensely involved the person was in each of these stages of life.

In other words, just asking museum visitors whether they went to museums in childhood as well as in adulthood, a question that can be answered with "yes" or "no" is inadequate in explaining their level of involvement. Having gone to a museum *once* on a school trip may qualify for having visited during childhood, which could give a totally erroneous slant to the answer because it does not reveal frequency of involvement.

In a later study (1978), Yoesting and Christensen found that the level of participation and the number of outdoor activities that respondents engaged in as children indicated their continued involvement as adults in outdoor activities generally. These factors, however, did not predict carryover of specific activities from childhood to adulthood. That is, they found that a person who was interested in water sports as a child might continue this avocation as an adult, but the researchers could not identify a carryover specifically for swimming, fishing, or canoeing.

In my research since 1980, (Hood, 1981; 1983) I have endeavored not only to measure carryover of a cluster of leisure interests but to assess continued involvement in specific activities within those clusters. This specificity provides much richer information about the types of persons who are likely to be involved regularly with museums and their preferences for certain programming or events.

In my research I introduced a measure of intensity to answer the question: How can we determine how childhood socialization in leisure activities influenced choices of and participation in adult leisure events? For instance, if persons are exposed to museum-going as children, will that automatically lead to their adult involvement in museums?

Museum educators often prophesy that once children are exposed to museums, they will develop lifelong visitation habits, and museum directors proclaim that "if I can get them in here once, they will be seduced into returning". Is this actually the case? If it is – or if it is not – how will that affect museum programming, exhibits, labels, tours, publications, classes, community outreach, audience development, and a host of other decisions?

In my research, a multi-attribute model provided a useful framework for studying the question of potential influence of childhood socialization on adult leisure choices. Marketing and social psychology research tells us that any choice, leisure or otherwise, begins with participant's own criteria about his or her options. For museum planning, we need to know: What is important to that individual when deciding to select or not select an event, place, or activity? The multi-attribute model was useful because it employed the criteria of the potential participants in leisure events, including museum-going.

The model tests the proposition that if a person's attitudes toward a particular leisure event or place are more favorable, in comparison with that person's attitudes toward an alternative event or place, then the individual is likely to intend to be involved with the favored event or place.

The model assumes that an event, activity, or place will be evaluated on several attributes or criteria (hence the name "multi-attribute model"). It presumes that consumer or visitor judgments are based on two dimensions: the consumer's evaluation of the importance of each of several attributes in satisfying that person's needs, and the consumer's beliefs as to whether or not an event, activity, or place actually possesses the attribute being considered.

For example, in my research I regularly ask adult respondents how important it is for them to share a leisure experience with other people. If they decide that this attribute of leisure life is extremely important to them, the next step is for them to evaluate whether a leisure place like a museum offers this valued attribute.

Conversely, if this social interaction attribute is minimally important to them, or if they do not perceive it to be present in museums, does the museum appear to be a more or less inviting place? Might its attraction be that it is more enjoyable when one is not with other people? Knowing the answers to these questions helps us refine our planning, programming, and decision making.

The significance of any attribute as it relates to an adult's perception of its presence in museums is often the result of carryover of childhood socialization to adulthood. It is, therefore, eminently important for researchers to investigate how childhood socialization affects adults' choices of leisure places like museums.

Methodology

I'll describe briefly the methodology I developed to measure the influence of childhood socialization on adult leisure choices.

From a content analysis of three decades of leisure and museology literature, I derived nearly 300 statements about leisure values. I categorized these statements into six major Concepts that can be applied to leisure experiences generally: opportunity to learn, to share the experience with other people, to have a challenge of new experiences, to participate actively, to feel comfortable and at ease in one's surroundings, and to feel that one is doing something worthwhile in leisure time.

This scale of Important Concepts represented one dimension of the multi-attribute model, as it measured the consumer's evaluation of the degree of importance of these Concepts, or attributes, in making leisure choices.

Leisure Time Preferences, which represented the other dimension of the multi-attribute model, assessed the degree to which a leisure event, activity, or place was perceived to possess the Important Concepts. For each Concept, four Likert-type statements were developed to elaborate the Concept into a more indirect Preference statement. As an example, from the Important Concept of "sharing the experience with other people" came the Leisure Time Preference statement, "I prefer an activity or place where I can get to know other people who have interests similar to mine".

Persistence of childhood activities into adulthood also had two dimensions. The first, Socialization, was based on 22 popular leisure activities, including museum-going, which respondents rated on the basis of their participation, both as children and as adults. Intensity of involvement in these leisure activities was measured by assessing frequency of participation in each activity: "frequent" participation was defined as at least three times a year, "occasional" as once or twice a year, and "hardly ever" as less than once a year or never.

The second dimension of persistence of childhood activities into adulthood, labeled Carryover, appraised respondents' continued involvement in each of four clusters of activities: cultural, which included attendance at museums, historical sites, nature centers, and zoos; entertainment, active participation, and social interaction.

This comparison of childhood and adult patterns was expressed in terms of three relationships: equal participation at both stages of life, greater participation as a child than as an adult, and lesser participation as a child than as an adult.

In the original research, the Socialization and Carryover variables fulfilled the recommendation of Yoesting and Burkhead that "intensity of involvement" be measured. The intensity factor in the Socialization variable measured the strength of participation (frequent, occasional, hardly

ever) at each of two life stages. It investigated a depth of involvement that is not possible when participation is measured on only a "yes/no" basis.

The intensity factor of the Carryover variable indicated the degree of influence of childhood socialization on adult participation. In the original research, therefore, it was possible to determine that the greatest amount of persistence from childhood to adulthood was in the activity clusters comprised of entertainment and active participation events, not in the cultural cluster. In other words, the carryover factor for cultural activities like museum-going was less potent than for entertainment and active participation events.

Social interaction, or being with other people in a leisure experience, was the one Carryover element that persisted overall, from childhood to adulthood. This meant that the social factor was extremely important in all types of leisure activities.

Value of the Research for Museums

The value of using the multi-attribute model was that it aided in detecting how respondents reached decisions about involving themselves in certain leisure places and activities. If an Important Concept was valued by a respondent, and that Concept was present in a leisure event to a substantial degree, that individual was likely to value the leisure event enough to pursue it. In addition, the model evaluated the Important Concepts independently through the Leisure Time Preferences scale, which probed underlying values in a more indirect manner.

In applying these methods in my ongoing research, the results have consistently verified that frequent, occasional, and hardly ever museum visitors evaluate museum-going and museums as institutions in quite different ways, based on how they feel about the Important Concepts and Leisure Time Preference statements.

For instance, though both occasional and frequent participants recognize that museums offer opportunity to learn, they value this concept distinctly differently. For frequent visitors, it is an enticement, because they regularly seek learning opportunities and challenge of new experiences in their leisure life. Since a museum meets these valued criteria most of the time, they return again and again.

Furthermore, the research has repeatedly shown that frequent visitors were socialized into a variety of cultural activities, including museum-going, during childhood. Assuming they had pleasant experiences in a variety of museum settings, museums became familiar and satisfying places for them. As adults, they have had enough positive experiences over a long period of time for them to feel that museums provide them with the leisure attributes they most value.

Though frequent visitors were usually socialized as children to a wide acquaintance with cultural activities, as adults they often decided to continue

a relationship with only a few of the activities or places that they knew as a child. For example, if a child or youth took music lessons, played in the school orchestra or band, and sang in the church choir, he or she as an adult may no longer be actively producing music but may demonstrate continued interest in music by being a devoted supporter of the community symphony.

Similarly, if a child had satisfying experiences in a wide variety of museum-type places — art, history, natural history, and science indoor museums; outdoor living history settings, zoos aquariums, botanical gardens, nature centers, arboretums, science-technology centers, planetariums, historic houses, ships, and battlefields — he or she may choose to concentrate on the subject matter of one or two, to travel to those sites, and to collect related objects or books, as an adult.

Occasional visitors to museums, on the other hand, generally have had different socialization experiences during childhood. Rather than having been introduced to a wide variety of cultural activities, research shows they were more often oriented toward active participation, entertainment, and social interaction activities. These were usually sports, home-centered events that involved the extended family, neighborhood, or friendship group, and what we might call "browsing" activities such as shopping and television.

Since they lack extensive familiarity and experience with a variety of museums, the occasional adult visitors frequently do not feel at home in those settings. Museums are less-known territory to them and thereby seem foreign, even formidable and difficult to cope with. Because they've had little acquaintance with these settings through their childhood and youth, they perceive fewer relationships between the collections and their daily lives than do frequent visitors.

Also, because research shows that occasional visitors are likely to be less highly educated than the frequent guests, they do not generally choose to engage in learning experiences in leisure. That type of venture sounds structured and demanding, not pleasant and enjoyable. Consequently, in contrast to the frequent visitors, they do not highly value learning opportunities in the museum.

Occasional visitors prefer the Important Concepts of active participation and social interaction in their leisure activities, including their museum experiences. When a museum does not appear to offer these preferred leisure attributes, occasional guests find little reason to visit or to return.

Another socialization factor affecting choice of adult leisure activities is length or residence in a community. Research repeatedly has shown that for longtime residents who are very involved with well-established family and friendship networks, leisure attributes like "opportunity to learn" and "active participation" are less important to them. Their leisure needs are met within the complex socially interactive lives they lead.

For newer residents in a community, establishing social networks is often more important than the attraction of a leisure activity itself. When newcomers select leisure activities, they are most likely to choose those that offer a compatible social circle because people tend to engage in activities that provide social support. Thus, the activity becomes the vehicle by which to make friends and establish oneself within a social group.

Also, when a potential leisure place or event presents several desirable attributes, a person informally weighs the relative importance of each in deciding which is more beneficial at that moment.

For example, should an activity such as tennis offer an avid player the very important attribute of "active participation" but little in the way of "social interaction," the person may still choose to play because the participation element is of greater immediate importance. In other circumstances, such as a date, the social interaction aspect of a game of tennis may outweigh the active participation value for the same person.

Playing card games with one's children offers different rewards than does playing cards competitively with one's peers in a tournament. The same person may choose to do both, at different times, because each offers distinct leisure attributes he/she values.

These evaluations of choices of leisure activities and attributes are made in an informal, rather than deliberative, manner, in both childhood and adulthood.

Implementing the Process

Knowing which of your current and potential visitors value which of these leisure criteria can be extremely useful in your planning and decision making. When you are querying visitors about their leisure participation, list five or six activities that are related to your type of museum, to your collections, or to museums in general. For instance, when I directed a study for a history museum, some of the history-related leisure activities we asked about were: participating in historic preservation or historical societies, searching for and acquiring collectibles, and visiting historical sites or history museums.

Then add a couple activities that everyone can engage in, such as picnicking, participating in club or church activities, or visiting city or county parks.

Measure the intensity of involvement in each by asking visitors to identify if they engage in these activities at least three times a year (frequently), once or twice a year (occasionally), or less than once a year or never (hardly ever). Ask them to rate these activities for both current participation and when they were children.

Then, by computer, cross-tabulate these data to ascertain the extent of carryover of participation from childhood to adulthood. When you cross-tabulate this participation information with your psychographic and

demographic data and the visitors' frequency of attendance currently at your museum, you acquire rich profiles of the persons most likely to respond to specific programs, exhibits, tours, classes, publications, etc. You also recognize that you must treat occasional visitors differently from frequent guests because they have different expectations of the museum.

As a result of your study, you are much more knowledgeable about your visitors' socialization patterns, their adult leisure preferences, and their likelihood of engaging with your museum and its offerings. Such information gives you the edge in making decisions and planning for the benefit of your institution and the audience you serve.

References

- Hood, M. (1981). Adult attitudes toward leisure choices in relation to museum participation. Ph.D. Dissertation, The Ohio State University.
- Hood, M. (1983). Staying away: Why people choose not to visit museums. *Museum News* 61 (4): 50-57.
- Yoesting, D. and D. Burkhead (1973). Significance of childhood recreation experience on adult leisure behavior: An exploratory analysis. *Journal of Leisure Research* 5: 25-36.
- Yoesting, D. and J. Christensen (1978). Reexamining the significance of childhood recreation patterns on adult leisure behavior. *Leisure Sciences* 1 (3): 219-229.