

Doing Identity Work in Museums



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ABSTRACT

Museum visitors typically look at only about a third of the elements of an exhibition, and often give only limited attention to those. Can visitors really be getting something worthwhile from such partial usage of an exhibition? This article explores how visitors use exhibitions for “identity work,” the processes through which we construct, maintain, and adapt our sense of personal identity, and persuade other people to believe in that identity. Museums offer powerful opportunities for doing identity work, but the visitor does not need to engage with exhibition content deeply or systematically in order to gain the benefits that museum experiences offer for identity work.

DEFINING IDENTITY

In other living creatures, ignorance of self is nature; in man it is vice.—Boethius.

By virtue of being human, all people must deal with issues of identity. Some of the time, some people choose to do identity work in museums. This article explores why they choose to do so, and what it is about museums that can make them congenial environments for doing identity work.

“Identity” is a very elastic word, covering everything from what is documented by a birth certificate to “the particular being any person is, whatever it is about each of us that distinguishes you or me from others, draws the parts of our existence together, persists through changes, or opens the way to becoming who we might or should be” (Seigel 2005, 3). My interest here is in the deeper forms of identity, those through which each of us defines our own understanding of the proper way to live our life. However, I will have little to say about the specifics of anyone’s actual identity. My focus instead is on “identity work,” by which I mean the processes through which we construct, maintain, and adapt our sense of personal identity, and persuade other people to believe in that identity.¹ As expressed by Anthony Giddens:

Self-identity cannot refer merely to its persistence over time in the way philosophers might speak of the “identity” of objects or things. The “identity” of the self, in contrast to the self as a generic phenomenon, presumes reflexive awareness. It is what the

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individual is conscious “of” in the term “self-conscious.” Self-identity, in other words, is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual’s action-system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual (1991, 52).

In current museum literature, identity is sometimes used as a variable for helping to predict whether individuals will visit museums, or what they will do there once they arrive (see Leinhardt and Knutson 2004; Falk, in this issue). Other studies describe identity as something that a visitor can “discover” in a museum (see Paris and Mercer 2004). By contrast, this article explores how visitors use the museum in the “reflexive activities” through which they create and sustain identity.

IDENTITY AND LEARNING

Leona Schauble and her collaborators described the “general challenge of museum learning” as being that “visitors tend to wander from place to place, interacting with each exhibit for only a few moments. This kind of browsing is fun and sometimes sparks new interests, but it does not necessarily lead visitors beyond entry-level awareness of a topic or the acquisition of a few facts” (2002, 427). In response to this problem, they observed,

Many museums are seeking to develop a range of opportunities that encourage visitors to step beyond the “browse mode” that they typically adopt in museums. Accomplishing this goal involves inventing and testing approaches to get visitors to process information more deeply, reflect about prior conceptions on the basis of new information, and engage in systematic study or exploration (2002, 425–426).

A large body of empirical research supports the claim that “browsing” is the typical pattern of museum visitation (see Serrell 1998). Schauble and her colleagues interpret this as suboptimal use of the museum—as an indicator that something is wrong with either the exhibits or the visitors (or both) and needs to be fixed.

I have been exploring an alternative interpretation of the same data. Visitors come to museums for their own reasons, and those reasons are not necessarily congruent with the goals of the museum. No doubt their browsing through exhibits is suboptimal when compared against the museum’s goal that visitors “engage in systematic study or exploration.” But the same behavior may prove to be an intelligent response to the situation when measured against the goals of the visitors themselves. In other words, it is possible that visitors are in fact doing a good job of using the exhibits, but that the job they are doing is something other than “systematic study” of some domain of knowledge. Rather than starting from the question “How can we get visitors to do a better job of learning?” I start by asking, “Why do visitors spend so much time learning things that they don’t really need to know? What might they be up to for which browsing would be an intelligent strategy?”

This concept was explored in an analysis of “curiosity-driven museum visitation” (Rounds 2004). That article used analytical approaches adapted from optimal foraging theory, which was developed by ecologists to make sense of the way that animals make “partial use” of their feeding territories. The curiosity-driven museum visitor, I argued, seeks to maximize the “Total Interest Value” of her visit, rather than maximizing mastery

of a domain of knowledge. For that purpose, the “browse mode” turned out to be an effective strategy for exploiting the museum environment, and to have (at least potentially) long-term adaptive value for the individual.

This article adds another layer of interpretation to curiosity-driven museum visitation. Human action—including visiting museums—is always multidimensional. A single action will have both instrumental and symbolic import; will operate simultaneously in social, cultural and psychological dimensions; and will be driven by both manifest and latent functions. I have chosen to focus on identity work as a latent psychological function of curiosity-driven museum visitation. Identity work, I will show, can thrive on the same partial use of exhibits that serves so well for the satisfaction of curiosity.

DOING IDENTITY WORK

From “identity” to “identity work”—Jerrold Seigel observed that “the nature and meaning of selfhood have been recurring questions, implicitly or explicitly, in practically every known human time and place” (2005, 3). His claim is supported by such other recent surveys as those by Appiah (2005), Giddens (1991) and Taylor (1989). Dealing with questions of identity seems to be an inevitable concomitant of having a mind, and of living in society with other people who think that they have minds, too.

“Dealing with identity” involves the problems of how to get an identity in the first place; how to hold onto one once you’ve got it; how to live with it while you’ve got it; and how to stop living with it when its time is up. Identity has to be constructed by each of us. It is not issued to us at birth, nor is it hiding somewhere, fully formed, waiting to be discovered. We make it up, and we have to keep working at it our entire lives, because identity is not something we *are* so much as something we *do* (Giddens 1991, 52). Erving Goffman, in his classic study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, said that the bundle of characteristics that we now call “identity” “is not a material thing to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated” (1959, 65). Rather than a concrete and stable “thing” that can be defined, identity is more realistically understood as a process unfolding in time.

When we switch our perspective to identity as process, we become less concerned about what a visitor’s identity *is*, and more concerned about what the visitor is *doing* about the problem of identity. By switching the analytical perspective from “identity” to “identity work,” we eliminate the need to measure, name, and categorize the identities visitors are presumed to bring into the museum. We then can turn our attention to how the visitor uses the museum in his or her lifelong work of identity construction, maintenance, and change.

THE DYNAMICS OF IDENTITY WORK

Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards.

— Søren Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard’s formulation sums up a fundamental reason why it is so hard to talk about identity in terms of causes and effects, or of independent and dependent variables. Iden-

tity work is both “understanding backwards” and “living forwards.” Start with living forwards: Among all the things that you might do in a given situation, how do you choose which of those things to do? In some circumstances, you might conduct a cost/benefit analysis, and choose the option that seems most likely to achieve your goal at an affordable price. But first you must have a goal, and the goal you have will depend in part upon the kind of person you are—which is to say, the pattern of what you do and don’t value, and the way you set priorities among conflicting values. Thus, taking action seems to imply the pre-existence of identity. If you don’t know who you are, you can’t know what to do.

Now consider “understanding backwards.” You come to your understanding of who you are—your identity—largely through post hoc interpretation of what you did. We understand backwards by looking at what we did, and considering how we felt about doing it, and asking what sort of person it is who acts and feels that way. We explain ourselves to ourselves, using our actions as evidence. You can’t know who you are until you see what you do (Weick 1979).

Thus, identity work involves the paradox expressed by Kierkegaard. You can’t understand backwards until you have lived forwards, but you can’t know how to live forwards without the understanding that only comes from looking backwards. Where, in this paradoxical loop, is the “real identity” of the self? As William Butler Yeats put it, “How can we know the dancer from the dance?”

Mary Parker Follett, in an early statement of the usefulness of process models, explained that:

There is no result *of* process but only a moment *in* process. . . . On the social level, cause and effect are ways of describing certain moments in the situation when we look at those moments apart from the total process (1924, 60–61; cited by Weick and Westley 1996, 448).

Research methods that use identity as a variable to be measured and categorized, as a “cause” of museum visitation and learning outcomes, thus capture a limited aspect of the underlying reality. They show us only the “living forward” aspect of Kierkegaard’s paradox. This article attempts to capture a more complex picture of identity work as a process unfolding in time.

Agency and structure—Bhavnani and Phoenix describe identity as “the site where structure and agency collide” (1994, 6). This “collision” is a central dynamic of identity work. We experience our “self” as an agent who formulates intentions, and who chooses and initiates actions. But agency, by itself, is like an actor with no script, no stage, and no audience—and, for that matter, without even a concept of what it means to be an actor and to play a role. You need the external world to provide structure—a place to act, a way to act, and a reason to act. Loosely defined, “structure” is the set of all the constraints and opportunities that we experience as coming from the external world (of which the museum is a part), including physical, social, and cultural forces. “Agency” is the awareness of our self as an actor who makes choices about what to do—including both choices among alternatives within existing structures, and choices to challenge the existing structures and to create new ones.

Identity thus emerges from “a dialectic between internal identification and external ascription” (Howard 2000, 375). It is the mediating function between what’s inside and what’s outside, between the agent who chooses to act and the structures that provide the opportunities for acting, alternatives among which actions may be chosen, and the consequences of acting. Agency and structure are like the two blades of a pair of scissors that need to work together to do their job. An agent confronts a world—sometimes by visiting a museum—and out of the interaction constructs an image of what kind of person she wants to be, and how she should live her life. Our identity work, the generator of our individuality, “is not so much a state to be achieved as a mode of life to be pursued” (Appiah 2005, 5).

The dynamics of identity work are thus created by the tension between the self-conscious mind that seeks the meaning of one’s life, and the necessity of acting in the external world in order to be able to live at all. An identity is a vision of the proper way to live one’s life, not only for oneself, but also for other people, other creatures and whatever else exists in the external world to which that identity defines a duty. In a distinction made by Ronald Dworkin, it involves both ethics, “convictions about which kinds of lives are good or bad for a person to lead,” and morality, “principles about how a person should treat other people” (cited in Appiah 2005, xiii).

Because identity is concerned with the proper way to live, identity work necessarily strives toward consistency. For ourselves, ethics demands that our actions be plausibly consistent with our identity. We want to believe that there is some essence in our being, and some set of core values, that persist across the span of our lives and that add up to something meaningful, a life well lived. For our relationships with others, morality demands that we advertise truthfully what kind of person we are, so that people can reliably know what to expect us to do. Orderly social life is possible only when we can predict reasonably well how other people will behave, and we must depend in large part on our understanding of a person’s identity to make those predictions. Thus, we construct a kind of master narrative of identity to tie the threads of our lives together, and we signal that identity to other people in a variety of ways. As we will see, visiting a museum can simultaneously serve both construction and signaling of identity.

However, consistency is more apparent in our narratives of identity than it is in our actual behavior. The world is just too complex, and conflicting demands (from both within and without) are too common, to always be the same person. Everyday life requires a great deal of improvisation. Not even professional philosophers have been able to devise a unitary concept of identity that can provide a useful guide for behavior in every contingency. So we “live forwards” as we must, and in the process of “understanding backwards” we tidy up whatever compromises life has necessitated. In Giddens’ formulation, “Identity. . . presumes continuity across time and space: but self-identity is such continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent” (1991, 53). The job of our master narrative of self is precisely to impose an order on our sense of identity that is not readily apparent in so much of our actual behavior.

Agency as anti-structure—The drive to structure and maintain a stable and consistent identity is only part of the story. Identity work also involves an anti-structural tendency

that is in constant conflict with all the things we do to stabilize identity. This source of anti-structure derives from the imperatives of agency. Every identity is a choice not to be something else, or not to be everything else that you might have chosen instead. Identity is both an enabler and a constrainer, and sometimes we resent the constraints identity can enforce on our actions. We value the structure and predictability provided by a clear sense of who we are and how we should lead our lives, but we also value our independence of those structures. Using different terms, but making the same point, Ivan Karp said that “The person [structure] and the individual [agency] are always simultaneously cooperating and at war with each other” (1992, 21).²

Sally Falk Moore described how this plays out as agents interact with the external world:

People try to control their situations by struggling against indeterminacy, by trying to fix social reality, to harden it, to give it form and order and predictability. These are the kinds of processes that produce “conscious models,” that produce rules and organizations and customs and symbols and rituals and categories and seek to make them durable (1975, 234).

At the same time, Moore argued,

They use whatever areas there are of inconsistency, contradiction, conflict, ambiguity, or open areas that are normatively indeterminate to achieve immediate situational ends. These strategies continuously reinject elements of indeterminacy into social negotiations, making active use of them and making absolute ordering the more impossible (1975, 234–235).

Thus, there is always a deep ambivalence in our attitudes toward our own identities. Identity work includes both the ways that we strive to establish identity as part of something larger than ourselves—to meld ourselves into some form of structure offered by our socio-cultural environment—and the ways in which we assert agency and try to escape from the constraints of those same structures. It’s good to be somebody, but every now and then it’s even better to be somebody else. The museum offers opportunities both to confirm our existing identity, and to safely explore alternatives.

IDENTITY WORK AND MUSEUM BEHAVIOR

No one comes to a museum as a blank slate, as a raw beginner at identity work. But neither does anyone come with his or her identity work completed for all time. Everyone is always in the process of doing maintenance work on existing identities while simultaneously laying the groundwork for future changes in identity. To capture some of this complexity, I will deal first with the ways that museum visitors work at stabilizing existing identities, and then with the ways that they use the museum in protecting their sense of agency and their capacity for future change.

Two disclaimers are necessary. First, this is intended as an exploratory reinterpretation of existing studies of how visitors behave in museums. My assertions are that the fol-

lowing description of identity work is consistent with what visitors actually do in museums, and with my earlier description of curiosity-driven visitation; that visitors' behavior makes a great deal more sense when we interpret it in this light; and that the interpretation is consistent with certain trends in broader social theory. As such, the analysis frames possibilities for future empirical research, but makes no claim to offer definitive "proof" of what is happening in the minds of visitors.

Second, the analysis describes ways in which a skilled and motivated identity worker might make use of the affordances offered by the museum. Not all visitors will do so (or will do so on the same level) on any given visit. As with the other things we do, we generally aspire to do our identity work well; but—as with other things—we often compromise that aspiration in the name of expediency.

Visitors exploit certain characteristics of the museum that make it a good tool for identity work. Here I will consider three of those characteristics: the museum's intensification of order, its performative character, and its presentation of the exotic.

Order and ontological security—Identity defines your particular way of being in the world, your sense of the proper way to live your life. For that identity to be persuasive and compelling, one must be able to trust not only in the reality, order and continuity of one's own existence, but also in that of the surrounding world. One cannot construct and maintain a stable sense of personal identity if everything else is chaos. Thus, the foundation level of identity work is ontological security, "[a] stable mental state derived from a sense of continuity and order in events" (Bilton et al. 1996, 665). R.D. Laing said:

A man may have a sense of his presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person. As such, he can live out into the world and meet others: a world and others experienced as equally real, alive, whole, and continuous. Such a basically ontologically secure person will encounter all the hazards of life. . . from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people's reality and identity (1960, 39).

Ontological security is constructed first and foremost in everyday life, through our personal routines and disciplines, and through our carefully structured interactions with others (Bourdieu 1977; Goffman 1969; Wrong 1994). But the regularities encountered in everyday life never seem to be quite enough. Certain pockets of life are highly structured and predictable, but when we step outside those pockets, "psychic entropy" sets in and "our personal identity fades and goes out of focus" (Csikszentmihalyi 1973, 22). Even within the pockets of structure, order may seem fragile and precarious: "On the other side of what might appear to be quite trivial aspects of day-to-day action and discourse, chaos lurks. And this chaos is not just disorganization, but the loss of a sense of the very reality of things and of other persons" (Giddens 1991, 36).

So we humans seem to need opportunities for reinforcing ontological security through experiences of order that are more explicit and intense than what is offered in the flow of everyday life. We create mechanisms for stepping back from the trees sometimes, to a vantage point from which we can look at the forest, where all these details add up to something coherent and meaningful. Such cultural mechanisms provide us with

assurance that life makes sense, that things happen according to some meaningful principle, that there are reasons why things happen the way they do.

Museums are in that line of business. They take the stuff of the world, and they present it arranged by some principle of order. They provide vantage points from which the order that's invisible in quotidian life becomes intensified and visible in the space of an exhibition. Outside is the blooming, buzzing confusion of everyday life, an endless flow of one thing after another. Inside the museum, the visitor finds a world laid out in order, in which everything has its proper place in a meaningful system, in which everything is neatly labeled. The museum shows us a world that makes sense, and that is a world in which we can believe that our lives make sense.

To take an unfashionable example, think of the classic natural history bird hall, where you've got case after case of birds lined up in a three-dimensional expression of taxonomy. In everyday life you see a bird, and then another bird, or a flock of birds of a feather, but you can't see how each bird is related to all other birds. You can see it, however, in the bird hall, where the entire pattern of order is made manifest.

As another example, consider the great *Mathematica* exhibition, designed by Charles and Ray Eames. That exhibition introduced such now-familiar devices as the probability machine and the gravity well. In the former, hundreds of little balls are poured into the top of a case, and go ricocheting off pins as they fall to the bottom. Nothing could look more wildly random, but the balls reliably end up piled in a neat bell-shaped curve. *Mathematica* is filled with such demonstrations of phenomena that look like they ought to be chaotic, but that end up being very orderly.

Almost all museum exhibits share this characteristic to some degree. Use of some ordering principle is precisely what distinguishes an exhibit from a bunch of stuff in a room. For the identity worker, a museum is like a convenience store where ontological security is neatly packaged up, ready to serve. This effect, it should be noted, comes not so much from statements about order made explicitly in the exhibition text, as it does from experiencing the order displayed. The visitor can experience that order without necessarily being able to articulate the principle, just as you experience counterpoint when listening to Bach, even if you don't know the word and can't explain it. In the case of the probability machine, words seem superfluous; the visitor sees order happening, and that is all he needs. In fact, the non-verbal nature of the experience may enhance its ability to reinforce ontological security, since we tend to be more suspicious of words than we are of experiences that we perceive as unmediated. "What is essential goes without saying, because it comes without saying" (Bourdieu 1977, 167).

The orderliness of the museum rests in the way it displays relationships among objects. Individual objects, as well, can contribute to stabilizing identity. In some cases, "something in the object. . . sparks memories, self-discoveries, and prior experiences that are personally meaningful" (Paris and Mercer 2002, 403). Beyond that important level of personal resonance, objects can contribute to ontological security in a more fundamental way, through their ability to "create order in consciousness" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, 16). Hannah Arendt said, "The things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that. . . men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table" (1958, 137).

Of course, we encounter objects everywhere in our lives, and many of the objects we encounter outside museums are more intimately connected to our lives than are those inside the museum. So why seek out the ones in museums? The difference seems to lie in the way that museum display intensifies the significance of objects. The exhibition dramatizes the object in a manner that, in Clifford Geertz's formulation, "renders ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced (or, if your prefer, raised) to the level of sheer appearances, where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived" (1973, 443).

The simple survival of an object—especially a human-made object, and especially one from the deep past—testifies to a continuity of meaning that extends far beyond the span of an individual life. Encountering such an object in the intensified setting of the museum can contribute significantly to the visitor's ontological security.

ENACTMENT

All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify.—Erving Goffman.

Identity work also involves action. Indeed, a major point of cultivating an identity is to know how to act, ethically and morally—to know how to lead a proper life. Seigel noted that:

If we had no stable way of being the persons we are then we could neither plan for the future nor engage in social relations, since we would have little or no reason to expect that the notions about ourselves or others we relied on yesterday or an hour ago can provide guidance now or tomorrow (2005, 8).

But this form of "living forwards" simultaneously implies the necessity of "understanding backwards." Our stability as "the persons we are" is in large part sustained by those very actions that it makes possible. An identity is "enacted" by acting in terms of it. A thought is just a thought, abstract and ethereal. But when we act in terms of a thought, we turn it into something concrete, something real. So identity has to be performed, and in a context where its significance is apparent. Identity is not so much an essence, or a state of being, as it is a pattern of behavior rendered meaningful through interpretation.

In a famous passage in *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre described a man who was enacting the role of a waiter:

His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes towards the patrons with a step a little too quick. . . his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer (1948).

The man was not pretending to be a waiter, in the sense of either a cynical impersonation or an entertaining masquerade. His business was serious, according to Sartre: "The waiter in the café plays with his condition in order to realize it" (1943). He cannot talk himself into being a waiter; rather, he must play the role of waiter until it ceases to be

a role, until playing becomes being. It is hard to imagine that he could achieve this transformation by practicing at home. He needs the stage of the café itself, where the setting gives the performance consequences, and where an audience—the customers—can validate the identity being performed. His emerging mastery convinces him of “the person he is,” and continued successful performances create the stability of identity through which the performances make sense. The waiter lives forward, in order that he may understand backwards, and vice versa.

Erving Goffman emphasized this performative character of identity, arguing that it serves not only psychological necessity, but also provides the essential framework of social interactions. We need to be able to rely on the predictability of other people in order to go about our business, and performances such as that of Sartre’s waiter signal to others that one is prepared to play the game according to common rules. Such performances, Goffman wrote, depend upon “dramatically inflated actions” to do their work (1959, 62)—a point echoed by Clifford Geertz in his celebrated analysis of the Balinese cock fight (1973, chapter 15). Enactments are a little bit larger than life, to spotlight the meanings that are hard to see in the flow of routine life. They feature the same kind of intensification that museums convey upon objects.

The museum thus offers a perfect setting for public performance of identity. It is a space designed for the display and performance of meaning. Visitors take advantage of that character to enact their own identities, borrowing for those identities a bit of the aura of special importance held by the objects on display.

Some people, perhaps, are so secure in their identities that their inner resources alone will suffice to maintain their conviction of its reality. For most people, though, some external validation is required. “A competent agent is one routinely seen to be so by other agents” (Giddens 1991, 56). Even the bully, whose identity is essentially anti-social, relies on seeing other people’s fear in his presence. He can sustain a firm sense of how “good” a bully he is only by measuring his place in the pecking order of those who beat, and those who get beaten.

For the person whose identity includes such elements as “a refined aesthetic sensibility,” it is inherently more difficult to make such an evaluation. The line between connoisseurship and pretension is thin, and it seems easier to fool oneself on the matter than to fool other people.

When visiting a museum, we place ourselves in the company of a jury of our presumed peers—that is, the sort of people that we imagine ourselves to be, or want to be ourselves. In the gallery, we observe another visitor skillfully enacting the role. As with other forms of enactment, museum behavior that serves identity work is slightly more formal and stylized than that adopted in most activities—just enough to signal its special significance, while striving to avoid the appearance of artifice. In Kenneth Burke’s charming phrase, the visitor is “dancing an attitude” (1957, 9). She moves with careful formality, strikes a contemplative pose (stylized, perhaps a bit more rapt than is strictly necessary to focus one’s attention fully on the painting—but not so much as to appear to be posing). Other patrons respond in kind, moving as if in response to an invisible choreographer, avoiding intrusions between patron and painting, signaling respect for the aesthetic experience in progress. Their dance is not merely a courtesy; it is a mutual conspiracy, in which

each validates the authenticity of the identities being enacted by the others. I construct and maintain my own identity through such performances, and can believe in it because the other visitors act in ways that convey their approval of my performance, their acceptance of my authenticity, my status as a member of the club. I do the same for them. If we are annoyed by others in the gallery who dance to a different drummer, our resentment is not simply that their rudeness blocks our view, or that their loud talk interferes with our concentration; they are, more importantly, threatening the mutual reinforcement central to the enactment of identity.

But what, exactly, is being enacted? John Falk, in this issue, emphasizes the specificity of identity, arguing that visitors take on a special “museum identity” during their visit, shedding it for another as they go out the door. I agree that there is a special form of behavior associated with the museum (at least some of the time, for some visitors), but I do not equate that behavior with identity. I see it rather as one of the mechanisms of identity work. The visitor takes on a role—a set of stylized actions—that belongs to the setting rather than to the individual. The role is a part of the structure afforded by the museum, as much, or even more than, the content of the exhibition.

By adopting the role while inside the museum, the visitor is enacting an identity, not the role itself. That is, I perform a role not because I am that role, but because that is the sort of thing that is done by the kind of person I am. Identity is always broader than what can be expressed through any one role. Identity functions as the anchor of continuity that links the various roles we play, that assures us that we remain the same person across the many stages on which we strut and speak our different pieces.

Why not, then, just say who we are, and not take all this trouble? It’s not so easy to say who you are, to sum yourself up in a simple definition. When we struggle to do so, we sound at best vague and trivial, something of little consequence, something that satisfies ourselves least of all. At worst, we sound pompous and pretentious, full of ourselves—and whatever that is, it does not sound to others like a good thing to be full of.

But the role is concrete, and we trust actions in a way that we do not trust words. The competent performance of the role makes a statement that cannot be otherwise expressed, and it is rewarded by the reciprocal validation of other identity workers. What is danced is inter-subjectivity, a mutual declaration that “I know who you are because I can recognize the significance and authenticity of what I see you do.”

IDENTITY EXPLORATION

As seen in the preceding sections, much of identity work revolves around constructing a narrative that enables us to perceive our identity as stable and enduring. But change is also a part of identity work. A sudden, unexpected change in our social or financial circumstances; a serious illness or injury; important shifts in the society around us; a tipping point in the gradual process of aging; an extraordinary personal epiphany; religious conversion; a really good book or a really bad “morning after,” or many other changes may necessitate a change in our identity, to adjust to the new realities. Change is as important a part of identity work as is maintenance of our existing identity, even though relatively infrequent.

The infrequency of significant changes in our narrative of identity raises some problems, particularly in understanding identity work in the context of museum visiting. Paris and Mercer argue that “transformative experiences” brought about by museum experiences will be exceedingly rare. During a museum visit, they say,

. . . learning about one’s self may be occasional, incidental, or fleeting. There may be one object out of hundreds or one conversation during the entire visit that strikes a personal chord, resonates with a deeper meaning about self, and elicits feelings that underlie reflections about “who I am and how I got here and what I believe” (2002, 402).

Since “larger, transformative experiences with objects” are likely to occur only when “visitors have many of these reactions during visits,” Paris and Mercer suggest that it will be only in very exceptional circumstances that a museum visit might lead to alteration of personal identity. “This might be expected, for example, in special museums and exhibitions that focus on significant social and historical events such as the Holocaust, the African diaspora, Ellis Island immigration, internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, and similar collections” (2002, 402).

I agree that dramatic transformations of identity during museum visits will be extremely rare. They don’t happen anywhere very often, so it would be surprising if they did in museums. As Doering and Pekarik have argued, most visitors seek to have their “entrance narratives” confirmed, not challenged (1996).

However, I don’t think that sudden, dramatic transformations are what we should be looking for. From the process perspective of the identity work model, the visitor may be seen instead to be using the museum experience as a way of building capacity for transformations that may or may not happen at some time in the future.

I have chosen to label this “identity exploration,” to emphasize the point that it involves searching for things as yet unknown. As argued earlier, identity is the site of constant negotiation between structure and agency. When we use museum experiences to do identity maintenance, we seek out structures (both cognitive contents and behavioral roles) that are consistent with our current narrative of identity, and so confirm and strengthen that identity. By contrast, when we use the museum for identity exploration, we cultivate the independence of our sense of personal agency by adopting roles and exploring contents that are *inconsistent* with the structures that define our current identity.

We need the structures of the external world to be able to engage in meaningful action—but we also try to avoid being trapped within the identities that we adopt. We want to be a member of a team, because otherwise we don’t get to play the game. But we also want to remain a free agent and not have to run the risk of being stuck on a losing team for the rest of our career.

Identity exploration can thus be seen as a response to a particular manifestation of a classic dilemma: How do we make the most of today, while simultaneously preparing for tomorrow? In managing our personal finances, we must decide whether to spend money today, to meet present needs and desires, or to save money for a “rainy day,” when needs may arise that we cannot anticipate today. Similarly, corporations have to choose whether to focus on short-term returns by increasing the efficiency with which they do what they now do, or whether to incur some inefficiencies today to fund research and development

that might lead to doing something very different in the future. And, as we are all aware, today's needs, which are known and pressing, are more likely to receive attention and resources.

The problem is that what we do to promote stability in our identities today directly undercuts our ability to change tomorrow; and what we do today to prepare for change in the future is likely to undercut our ability to convince ourselves that today's identity is fixed and will be enduring. So if visitors are using museum experiences to elaborate and maintain identity, they should avoid undercutting that work by simultaneously exploring changes in their identity.

How does the identity worker cope with this conflict? If visitors use museums primarily to confirm their entrance narratives, can museum experiences ever support changes in identity? There is a useful analogy in population genetics. We've all become aware of the importance of maintaining diversity in the gene pool of any species. We know that a species may do very well in the present environment without having any diversity in its gene pool. The problem comes when the environment changes in ways that reduce the viability of the species's existing adaptation, so that the species needs to evolve a new adaptation. It might rely on new genetic mutations that arise just when they're needed, but that's a high-risk strategy. When the environment is changing rapidly, there may not be time to wait for new mutations before the species is wiped out. To be prepared, the species needs to have a stock of mutations already in hand. The bigger and more diverse that stock is, the more likely that there will be some that prove to have adaptive value under the new environmental conditions.

At the same time, the species has to be a species. It can't store diversity by having individuals so different that they are no longer recognizable as members of the same species. The basic solution to this problem is that much of the diversity is stored in the underlying genotype of the species, but is not expressed in the visible phenotype. Hidden beneath the relatively uniform surface, the mutations wait quietly and invisibly for their day to come.

Analogously, identity work can cultivate future adaptability by storing variations that are not expressed in the present, or at least are not expressed in a way that would challenge the stability of present identity. This requires a certain sleight of mind. We do it in part by cultivating a taste for "useless" knowledge. Knowledge that we recognize as "useful" at any given time is, by definition, that for which we have a known use. In identity work, this will be knowledge that we perceive as supporting our current understanding of our identity. Building upon existing interest and knowledge is a source of continuity, rather than of change.

Knowledge that is "useless" is that for which we have no known need. We all spend a great deal of time acquiring useless information. In particular, the great majority of museum visiting appears to be oriented toward acquiring useless knowledge. Certainly, visitors sometimes come to a museum seeking specific information for which they have a known need, but most visitation is dominated by browsing for knowledge that is "interesting" regardless of whether it seems useful. Curiosity provides the motivation to engage in such learning, in the absence of motivation derived from the desire to fulfill a known need (Rounds 2004).

All knowledge gained adds to our stock of knowledge, but knowledge gained from curiosity-driven learning has the advantage that it can slip into our long-term memory without leaving much of a wake that might disturb our current identity. Because we see it as interesting but inconsequential, we usually don't bother to follow its trail to implications that might challenge identity. But there it sits, like that mutation in the gene pool, waiting for its day to come. All else being equal, we are better prepared to adapt to new circumstances the more we have invested in acquiring a large stock of knowledge that we did not need at the time we acquired it.

We also maintain our adaptability by cultivating our tolerance for alternative ways of being. Before change can occur, it is necessary to reach a state in which one can imagine the possibility that things might be different from the way we believe them to be now. However, to the degree that our identity work has succeeded in naturalizing our current identity, such a possibility seems unthinkable. It would be a violation of our basic nature.

Many museum experiences offer opportunities to learn about alternative ways of living, and of making sense of the world, without the risks that might be involved in actual immersion in those alternatives. The visitor can maintain the present boundaries that define his or her personal identity, while becoming familiar with the fact that other people see things very differently. The museum visitor can act as an "objective" observer, without risking being tainted by participation. This is a first step toward imagining the possibility that you might be different.

A further step takes place when the visitor uses the exhibit experience as a way of vicariously trying on a different identity, to see how it feels. Viewing an exhibition of an earlier time, or a different cultural setting, the visitor wonders, "What would I have been like if I had lived there and/or then?" Like dressing up in old clothes, we play at being someone else, and test how we feel about it; but because it is "only play," it does not have to be taken seriously, and so does not threaten current identity.

The museum offers a low risk environment in which to have these encounters. In the modern world, of course, we can hardly avoid bumping up against contrasting ways of life in our everyday activities. But such encounters must be carefully managed, to avoid threats to our existing identity. Otherness is tolerated rather than embraced, and even tolerated only within certain limits. True immersion in the actual environment of another culture entails the risk of "going native." At the very least, encountering otherness on its own ground involves some level of intrusiveness, and the fear that you might give offense by treating people's lives as a spectacle performed for your edification. Your presence might even interfere with the identity work of those you are observing. In the museum we can encounter another culture in a way that supports our own identity work, without the inconveniences involved in having to directly encounter the people attached to the culture.

In sum, the museum offers the visitor a whole smorgasbord of exotic ways of perceiving the world, and of living in the world. Museum experiences allow us to flirt with alternative ways of being without undermining our ability to keep faith with our declared identity. In reality, though, our promiscuous browsing through the museum's riches allows us to explore the possibility that we might become interested in things that are not consistent with our current identity, or that couldn't be predicted from our life trajectory

so far. It allows us the guilty pleasures of vicariously living someone else's exotic life for a moment, and to find out how it feels, and how we respond. And all that helps keep open the possibility that someday we might become someone new and unexpected.

IDENTITY WORK AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the beginning of this article is the quoted statement that many museums are working "to get visitors to process information more deeply, reflect about prior conceptions on the basis of new information, and engage in systematic study or exploration" (Schauble et al. 2002, 426). I have argued elsewhere that such in-depth learning of subject is of the greatest importance for certain purposes (such as preparing for one's career), but that it may not be valuable for the curiosity-driven museum visitor (Rounds 2004). Curiosity is better served by breadth of exploration, rather than by depth of learning.

Identity work also can make effective use of museum experiences without the kind of deep and systematic study of exhibition content that Schauble endorsed. Echoing Schauble, a recent article complained that science center exhibits "do not serve to communicate mathematics in a comprehensive way" (Reardon and Long 2005, 13). By broad consensus, *Mathematica* is one of the most successful science exhibitions ever created, and it is surely at the top of the heap for exhibitions explicitly concerned with math. But nobody learns math comprehensively in *Mathematica*. Instead, the visitor observes patterns of order in a surprising range of phenomena that at first appear chaotic. Those patterns can be described mathematically, but you don't need to learn the math to get that point, and you don't even need to learn much of anything about the pattern itself. You just need to know that it's there.

The same applies to the bird hall. Of course, that type of exhibit is out of fashion, in part because people seemed to use it so incompletely. They would take a quick glance and move on, or at best would try to find their favorite bird. They wouldn't invest the time to look at the content in the systematic and detailed way it takes to really understand the taxonomy. They were not learning the system.

But for the purposes of identity work, the visitor doesn't really need to learn the details of taxonomy. She just needs to know that it exists—that all those birds, lined up in all those cases, all fit into a neat system of order. It's possible to grasp that point very quickly. It doesn't require looking at every bird, and it doesn't require looking at some number of birds systematically. And it doesn't even require being able to articulate the principle. What identity work requires is seeing that, yes, there's another part of the world that's nice and orderly. For the purpose of identity maintenance, the visitor is seeking reassurance, rather than knowledge.

Learning a discipline deeply, comprehensively, and systematically will provide a powerful demonstration of order; but such learning is costly, and unnecessary for the purpose of identity work. (Obviously, a given visitor may have other good reasons for needing in-depth knowledge.) Since the identity worker is seeking a generalized sense of an orderly world, the more general the evidence the better. For this specific purpose, more can be achieved by "shallow" experiences of orderliness displayed in a wide range of

exhibits (and other sources) than can be achieved by concentrated, in-depth learning of the content of any one exhibit (Rounds 2004).

This analysis has shown that visitors can use the museum effectively for purposes of identity work without necessarily learning the content of the exhibition in detail. By exercising cognitive frugality, visitors are able to satisfy their curiosity and advance their identity work with relatively modest investments of attention to exhibit contents. They seek out exhibit elements that have immediate personal resonances, and ignore those elements that do not. They absorb the orderliness of the museum environment without feeling obligated to plumb the depths of the systems of order presented. They take advantage of the heightened intensity of the environment to enact identities, through performances in which the exhibit's explicit contents are a supporting cast, rather than a protagonist. And they sample a wide variety of experiences, learning only a little of each, as a kind of cognitive hedge fund to build their capacity for rapid adaptation in an unforeseeable future. The exhibit, and all it has to show and tell, are used as tools for identity construction, maintenance and exploration.

Of course, identity work will never be the only thing going on in the complexly overdetermined phenomenon of museum visitation. Indeed, it would be difficult to prove that it is going on at all, since so much of it is conducted below the level of conscious intention. But we can at least say that the visitor behavior we actually observe is consistent with the identity work model in a way that a model of optimal content learning is not.

We may choose to regard this as a problem to be solved, and to continue pushing visitors to learn exhibit content more deeply and systematically; and we may achieve some modest successes in that line. But we also need to take seriously the possibility that visitors are making wise choices when they exercise cognitive frugality in their use of the museum. In the final analysis, there is very little in the factual contents of museum exhibitions that visitors really need to know; but in supporting the visitor's identity work, the museum serves a fundamental necessity that helps make life not only possible, but worth all the trouble.

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NOTES

1. The term "identity work" appears to have been coined by Judith A. Howard (2000).
2. Karp explains his terminology as "the distinction that is commonly made between the person (the socially defined aspect of the self) and the individual (the uniquely experienced side of the self)" (1992, 21).

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