Words Mean Things: How Museum Workers' Discursive Practices Position the Diverse Communities They Seek to Engage

Krystal Villanosa, Northwestern University, kvillanosa@u.northwestern.edu
Michael Horn, Northwestern University, michael-horn@northwestern.edu

Abstract: How do museum workers, particularly those in science and technology centers and museums, conceptualize racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity? What might the language they use (e.g. "low-income," "non-English speaking families") to describe racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse communities reveal about how museum workers position persons and groups from these communities? In this paper, we present our preliminary findings from an interview study with science museum workers regarding their beliefs about diversity. In doing so, we offer insights about the racialized narratives embedded in discourses about diversity and diverse communities and discuss the potential implications of their use for learning.

Keywords: Positioning, Discourse, Diversity, Equity, Museums

Introduction and background

Calls for reform in museum education emphasize the need for museums to diversify their audiences (Smithsonian Institution, 2001; Fred & Farrell, 2008). Typically, these appeals for audience diversification are focused on the cultural, ethnic, and racial identities of museum visitors, directly addressing the underrepresentation of African Americans/Blacks, Latinos/Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans who comprise only 9% of core museum visitors in the United States (Farrell & Medvedeva, 2010). In order to attract visitors from underrepresented groups, museums have employed a wide variety of marketing, exhibition, and educational programming strategies. Despite these efforts, participation from communities of color remains low. Common questions asked by museum researchers and practitioners include: How can museums foster museum-going habits among underrepresented groups (Falk, 1995)? How can museums connect diverse communities with social networks that value museums over other forms of leisure (Ostrower, 2005)? How can museums provide these communities with the specialized knowledge necessary to understand and appreciate their resources (Schwarzer, 2006)? While these questions may seem innocuous, the site of change museums seek tends to be external to their institutions and located within communities of color.

Scholarly criticism of museums suggests that the change that needs to take place is within museums themselves (Sandell, 2003; Janes, 2009). Increasing attention is being given to re-examining the fundamentals of museum practice, particularly the pedagogical frameworks that underpin the design of their exhibitions and education programs (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999; Dawson, 2014). Recommendations for re(de)fining museum practice across the domains of anthropology, sociology, and education have largely converged around the need for museums to design experiences that take into account cross-cultural differences in meaning-making. These recommendations often call for designing experiences in collaboration with the communities museums seek to engage (Wali, 2006). Yet, despite the growing evidence that indicates communities of color feel unwelcome and alienated in museums (Melber, 2006; Dawson, 2014), museums struggle to meaningfully acknowledge, validate and advance the multiple epistemologies that exist across communities of color.

There exists a dearth of research on why it has proven so difficult for museums to design inclusive, culturally relevant experiences that attract and meaningfully engage racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse communities. Some posit that the historical origins of museums make it difficult for them to design for inclusion because they have been complicit in the construction of physical and cultural hierarchies that promote inequities and negative conceptions of underrepresented groups (Lynch & Alberti, 2010). Others have cited the bureaucratic nature of museums and their tendency to operate by consensus as another obstacle to developing experiences for diverse publics (Conaty & Carter, 2005). Several have speculated that museums perceive themselves as already engaged in diversity work by preserving and interpreting materials that provide the mainstream public access to the cultural lives of diverse communities (Karp & Lavine, 1991). While this prior work contributes to our understanding of some of the institutional barriers that are present in museum settings, we seek to shift the normative framing of museums from the organizational level to thinking about museums as having intentional actors—curators, exhibition developers, museum educators—whose suite of work is focused on designing and facilitating educational experiences for existing and potential publics. This shift is consequential because design decisions are not made in isolation and are deeply influenced by 1) the beliefs of museum workers; 2) their interpretations of the cultural and intellectual values and practices of their potential

audience(s); and 3) their understanding of the beliefs and values of their institution, which may be counter to their own. It is here where we wish to locate our work as we seek to interrogate museum workers' beliefs about racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity as well as their beliefs about persons and groups who come from communities museums have labeled "diverse." We do this by examining how museum workers position themselves discursively in relation to the communities of color they seek to engage.

Conceptual framework

We use positioning theory, a framework developed within discursive social psychology, as an analytic lens for our work. While positioning theory is typically associated with examinations of interpersonal encounters, it has also been applied to textual analyses as well as interview data (Harré & Slocum, 2003; Konaev & Moghaddam, 2010). Our paper is a case of applying positioning theory to interviews with museum workers. Positioning requires that we engage in a close analysis of the sociolinguistic cues that museum workers use to position themselves and others. In this paper, sociolinguistic analyses based on positioning theory reveal how museum workers' discourses position and instantiate self (and institution) in relation to the communities they wish to engage as well as to the larger, and often ambiguous, concepts of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity. These analyses also explicitly attend to the narratives people use to ascribe themselves and others rights and duties—in other words, what do they owe and what do others owe them. By studying the way "rights and duties are taken up and laid down, ascribed and appropriated, refused and defended," positioning theory adds a novel dimension to examinations of cognitive processes—beliefs and practices related to individuals' moral commitments or conceptions of their moral qualities (Harré & Moghaddam, 2011, p. 132). While rights and duties are not the focus of our preliminary findings below, we foreshadow future work detailing the ways that museum workers appear to position themselves as having the right to teach and communities of color as having a duty to learn.

We place emphasis on understanding museum workers' discourse(s) because "language not only transmits, it creates or constitutes knowledge or 'reality'" (Bruner, 1986, p. 132). We also follow the Vygostskian notion that the meaning and structure of all discourse (public or private) is shaped by and stems from particular cultural contexts and needs to be examined in relation to the larger normative system(s) in which people live (Vygotsky, 1980). Given that one of the ultimate goals of the learning sciences is to shape, direct, or improve practice in some way, perhaps if we can understand the reality museum workers construct with their language, we can intervene in ways that help them consciously re-construct (and sustain) norms and narratives that advance the ends they (and more importantly their desired publics) seek.

Methods

We used snowball sampling to recruit 26 science museum workers from 14 institutions across 12 states to participate in our study. For this paper, we focus on 10 museum workers, all of whom work in their museum's education department in a variety of roles including vice president, director, manager, and coordinator. We focus on museum education workers due to the perception that they perform the majority of their institution's diversity work (a theme that emerged from our broader interview data). Of our 10 participants, two identify as African American/Black, one as mixed race, one as Latino/Hispanic, and six as Caucasian/White. Three identify as male, seven as female. Note that "science museum" includes a range of settings including natural history museums, museums of science and industry, nature and science museums, and science and technology centers. Last, the museum workers we interviewed work in museums located in major urban areas in the United States.

We conducted semi-structured phone interviews, all of which were audio recorded and transcribed. Interviews were between 60 to 90 minutes. Examples of questions we asked included: How does your museum consider the racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds of visitors when developing exhibitions and/or education programs? How does racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity influence learning in your museum? What role do people's racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds play in how they make sense of your museum's exhibitions and/or education programs? For this paper, we focus on responses given to the following question: Are there any groups of people or communities that your museum is trying to reach that do not typically visit?

We analyzed what museum workers said by open coding interview transcripts, honing in on the phrases, terms, and labels they use to describe the communities they seek to engage to better understand how they characterize these communities. We generated codes using a modification of Strauss and Corbin's (1998) open coding strategy, analyzing turns of talk (rather than a line-by-line analysis), which allowed us to develop themes and identify data that aligned with those themes (Charmaz, 2001). Using Strauss and Corbin's process of conceptualizing and labeling events, we brought focus to the data that made itself known as meaningful—more explicitly, labeling both micro- and macro-events within the data allowed us to see emerging patterns. Last, we viewed our museum workers as "deep" or "key" informants (Weiss, 1994), whose knowledge was used to refute or confirm our findings as well as broaden any themes or categories that made themselves known in the data.

Preliminary findings

When asked "Are there any groups of people or communities that your museum is trying to reach that do not typically visit?," we find that museum workers rarely or never explicitly name the communities they seek to engage. Instead, they foreground economic labels and terms such as "low-income," "lower-socioeconomic," "families in public housing," "families who rely on food stamps," "families at or below the poverty line," "families below a living income," and "families who live in [XYZ] neighborhoods or zipcodes" with XYZ meaning a neighborhood or zipcode known for having communities of color as their primary residents and/or for struggling with the realities of economic disparity. Our analysis also uncovered museum workers' secondary tendency to describe communities by their citizenship status or by the language(s) they speak rather than by the racial or ethnic group to which they belong. Terms and phrases used by museum workers include "bilingual," "first-generation," "immigrant communities," "non-English speaking families," and "Spanish-speaking families." When further pressed to name the groups or communities their museums are trying to reach, all 10 museum workers identified African Americans/Blacks and Hispanics/Latinos as the communities that are underrepresented in their visitorship and that they (or their institutions) wish to reach. Only 1 museum worker in our sample mentioned Asian communities and that same museum worker also identified indigenous native communities as a group that they would like to see visit with more frequency. We note that neither the economic labels we detailed above nor any descriptors that speak to these communities' citizenship status or spoken language(s) accompanied the single mention of both Asian and indigenous native communities.

Discussion

There are multiple layers to the responses we received from museum workers, some of which we are still unpacking. That said, we first put forward that museum workers' discursive practices position themselves, or their museums, as having a role to play in the educational lives of those experiencing some forms of social, economic, and/or political precarity. The labels and terms they use to describe the communities they are hoping to reach make clear a desire to engage families who may be facing food or housing insecurity, families for whom the United States may not be their country of birth, and/or families for whom English is not spoken as the primary, or sole, language. The details of the role museum workers feel their institutions can play in the lives of families experiencing such pressures will be uncovered in future analyses.

We also bring focus to museum workers' hesitation to explicitly name communities by their race or ethnicity, instead heavily relying on the economic labels and terms we detailed above. While phrases like "low-income" or "lower-socioeconomic" might seem like benign references, museum workers' confirmation that they are indexing African Americans/Blacks and Latinos/Hispanics with these terms signals the need to interpret these phrases as racially coded (and pejoratively classist) language. Furthermore, museum workers' use of these racially coded descriptors positions African American/Black and Latino/Hispanic communities as economically monolithic groups, completely comprised of families living in poverty. This positioning seems to leave little room for recognizing that there is a diversity of diverse experiences among communities of color as well as a need to historically situate (or cite the social, political, and economic reasons) why and how "low-income" neighborhoods with minority residents came to be. We also ask, what does it mean that museum workers do not identify or discuss Caucasians/Whites as a group to engage (thus far), particularly lower-socioeconomic Caucasian/White groups given their use of similar economic labels to describe communities of color? And what does it mean that museum workers also rarely mention Asian or indigenous native communities?

We see important potential implications from these findings. We speculate that museum workers' use of coded, economic, and racialized descriptors are constraining their ability 1) to see these communities through the lens of racial, ethnic, and cultural heterogeneity; and 2) to assess the cultural and intellectual values and practices of the communities they seek to engage. These constraints may be limiting museum workers in their efforts to develop culturally relevant exhibitions and programs that meaningfully engage communities of color. We also suspect that positioning communities of color through a primarily economic lens is influencing the ways museum workers are positioning solutions to the "problem" of audience diversity, which tend to be economic in nature. Solutions museum workers cite to engage African Americans/Blacks and Hispanics/Latinos include discounted or free museum admission, scholarships for education programs, and busing, the latter of which is troublingly similar to desegregation busing practices, wherein students of color are transported to predominantly white schools to remedy racial segregation. Foregrounding issues of citizenship and language also seem to lead to certain solutions including one-day cultural festivals, foreign language translations of exhibitions, and the development of programs or resources that communicate the value of the museum. We note that the interventions museum workers employ reveal that they seek participation from underrepresented groups in insubstantial ways and often only when it is culturally congruent. This positions communities of color as a niche audience rather than as valued stakeholders whose histories, narratives, and patronage are honored and

seen as critical components of the system of values museums hold. We must acknowledge that the choices museum workers make are often constrained by their institutional context. However, it is clear that museums need to take into full account the multiple epistemologies that exist across communities of color in order to better position themselves to design the culturally relevant experiences these (our) communities require to see museums as meaningful spaces for engagement.

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