

What is IPOP?

IPOP is the name for a model of experience preference that originated in the Office of Policy and Analysis at the Smithsonian. The model developed out of many years of surveys, observations, and interviews in Smithsonian museums. It identifies four key dimensions of experience – **Ideas** (conceptual, abstract thinking), **People** (emotional connections), **Objects** (visual language and aesthetics), and **Physical** experiences (somatic sensations). The model maintains that individuals have preferences among these; they are drawn to these four dimensions to different degrees.

Initially this idea of experience preference was offered as a way to re-frame audience diversity, to help exhibition makers reflect on their own preferences, and to encourage staff in general to appreciate how their own preferences influence the decisions they make on behalf of visitors in exhibition-making and program development. The benefit of this approach has been documented in various articles in *Curator: The Museum Journal*, a peer-reviewed journal of museum studies.¹

In 2012, in collaboration with Professor James B. Schreiber, Duquesne University, this concept of experience preference was developed into a scientific model on the basis of empirical research. Questions about self-identification and engagement with leisure activities outside of museums are used to calculate scores in each of these four dimensions. These scores describe the degree to which individuals are drawn to those dimensions, in comparison with all others in the database. Currently the full database includes over 15,000 cases. Studies conducted initially at the National Museum of Natural History and subsequently at other locations have supported the central tenets of the IPOP model – that experience differences influence what visitors expect, what they do, and how they respond in a museum.²

The entire purpose of IPOP research is to discover new ways to improve the experience of visitors in museums. Its usefulness is being explored not just in exhibitions, but also in visitor services,³ mobile apps, and social media.

The next steps are:

- 1) to make the IPOP model more widely known, so that it can be used to create exhibitions and services that are more responsive to the diversity of visitors. To this end IPOP workshops have been conducted at the National Museum of Natural History (visitor services), Philadelphia Museum of Art (visitor services), the Canadian Museum of History (exhibitions), the National Portrait Gallery (exhibitions), and the Freer and Sackler Galleries (exhibitions), at the National Museum of American History (visitor services),⁴ and the Canadian Museum Association (exhibition development).
- 2) to conduct research experiments that will enable more detailed understanding of how best to take advantage of IPOP insights.⁵

For more on IPOP see the Webinar by Andrew Pekarik, *Experience Preference Theory as a New Way to Understand and Respond to Diversity* archived at <http://adaconferences.org/ArtsnRec/Archives> and filed under December 10, 2013.

Endnotes

¹ Pekarik, Andrew J., and B. Mogel. 2010. Ideas, Objects, or People? A Smithsonian Exhibition Team views visitors anew. *Curator: The Museum Journal* 53(4): 465-482.

Leger, Jean-Francois. 2014. Shaping a richer visitors' experience: The IPO interpretive approach in a Canadian museum. *Curator: The Museum Journal* 57(1): 29-44.

² Schreiber, J.B., A. Pekarik, N. Hanemann, Z.D. Doering, and A-J Lee. 2013 Understanding visitor behavior and engagement. *The Journal of Educational Research* 106(6): 462-468.

Schreiber, James B., and A. Pekarik. 2014. Technical Note: Using Latent Class Analysis versus K-means or Hierarchical Clustering to Understand Museum Visitors. *Curator: The Museum Journal* 57(1): 45-60.

Pekarik, Andrew J., J.B. Schreiber, N. Hanemann, K. Richmond, and B. Mogel. 2014. IPOP: A Theory of Experience Preference. *Curator: The Museum Journal* 57(1). 5-27

Beghetto, Ronald. The Exhibit as Planned Versus the Exhibit as Experienced. *Curator: The Museum Journal* 57(1): 1-4.

³ IPOP has been used to train those who engage with visitors to be more responsive to diverse experience needs. For an example documenting the program and results at the National Museum of Natural History, see the 2013 OP&A report *How Do You Improve the Experience of Museum Visitors? An Experiment at the National Museum of Natural History*. At <http://www.si.edu/content/opanda/docs/Rpts2013/13.01.NMNHConcierge.Final.pdf>

⁴ Training for visitor services specialists is typically conducted over a period of months and aims to produce a program that can be self-sustaining. In the area of exhibition development, IPOP workshops have been one- or two-day events that describe the theory, present research results from exhibitions, and teach staff how to apply its principles in practice.

⁵ Experimental IPOP research is currently underway in connection with the augmented reality app, *Skin & Bones*, that was developed as an IPOP app for the Osteology Hall at the National Museum of Natural History.