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## ***The Ethics of Evaluation in Museums***

Joe E. Heimlich

Reader Guide by:

Brooke DiGiovanni Evans, Heather Johnson, and Carole Krucoff

With contributions by:

Susan B. Spero and the MER Editorial Team

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### ***The Ethics of Evaluation in Museums***

by Joe E. Heimlich

Evaluation of museum programming is essential to measuring and improving the quality of these learning experiences. When implementing evaluation studies, it is necessary to consider the ethics of collecting information and opinions from participants, though this aspect of the task is often overlooked.

The discussion questions posed in this Reader Guide have been developed in collaboration with the author and are intended to foster conversations and dialogue among colleagues about ethical considerations in evaluation research. We divided the questions into three thematic areas. Grab a cup of coffee with a fellow educator or museum colleague and focus on one set of questions or discuss all three areas. It's up to you!

#### **Personal Reflection:**

1. Before considering ethics, take a minute to reflect on evaluation in your institution. How have educators at your museum involved visitors or others in providing you with their response to an exhibit, program, or educational experience? What methods did you use to gather those responses (e.g. written surveys, interviews, observation, group discussions, or other ways) and what was your reasoning for determining that method?
2. What data about yourself would you be willing to share with a museum? How does your answer inform your approach to accessing information, especially from specific audiences you are trying to build?
3. The author feels that direct benefits to visitors who participate in a study are key aspects for ethical evaluation and that conducting a study in ways that make the experience interesting and unique is an essential benefit—for example, making a prototype study at a science center a fun interactive experience for participants. In what ways might evaluation studies be made interesting and uniquely fitting for your museum? How might you alert visitors to how their participation benefits the museum?

#### **Practical Applications:**

4. How might the ethical concerns discussed in the article affect evaluation methods such as:
  - Tracking visitor behavior in exhibits
  - Photographing visitor behavior in exhibits
  - Comments from visitors on social media

What might you do about it? How have you thought about the overt and covert ways you collect data about visitor behavior from an ethical standpoint?

5. The author feels that ethical behavior requires that we only gather data that is essential to the study and resulting analysis. For instance, most studies collect demographic data that isn't necessary for the study. In what ways might gathering such data be essential and actionable and what might the data help you to change? What would you do differently knowing this information?
6. Museums are starting to catch up to businesses in their desire to collect "big data" on our visitor's preferences through admissions and program ticketing. What type of ongoing visitor data does your museum collect? Does it follow the ethical guidelines outlined in this article?
7. All museums that receive federal grants are required to work with an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to set or review policy regarding informed consent and other privacy aspects if the grant includes involving visitors in evaluating aspects of the museum. IRB requires the following information be provided to visitors to understand and give consent to:
  - The study's purpose
  - The time and effort involved for participants
  - Formal consent, including parental consent for children
  - Any risks involved
  - How information from them will be reported
  - Confidentiality of access to their information

Think about an evaluation you are considering, how would you answer these IRB questions and get formal consent from visitors about your study? How would you incorporate responses into your overall evaluation method?

**Philosophical Focus:**

8. In the article the author quotes Vesilind's definition of ethics which notes that ethics is not "how people treat each other, but how they ought to treat each other." Consider how ethics plays a role in your work. If it's not a part of your work, where could you start? Who could you work with at your institution?
9. How has the information in this article changed your thinking about evaluation in your museum?

# The Ethics of Evaluation in Museums

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Joe E. Heimlich

**Abstract** Ethics in research and evaluation has a long standing history, one steeped with legal and moral implications. This article addresses the technicalities of ethics in evaluation as well as highlights the importance for museum educators to prioritize adopting such practices. While understanding the myriad of ethical concerns and best practices can be overwhelming, it is museum educators' duty to have their visitors' best interest in mind.

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Museums have long focused on ethics. Many of the older cultural institutions in the U.S. were founded on reformist ideals, later reflected in the Museum Workers Code of Ethics, which states the roles of all museum personnel are in service to the visitor.<sup>1</sup> In 1991, the American Association of Museums confirmed the foundation of museums as ethical service in a revised code of ethics.<sup>2</sup>

Such a service focus raises continual ethical questions for museum practice. Ethics relates “not to how people treat each other, but how they ought to treat each other.”<sup>3</sup> There is no set of rules about what we should or must do, and regardless, rules/laws do not necessarily result in ethical behavior. Even with the best of intentions, ethical lapses can — and do — happen to most of us.<sup>4</sup>

Research and evaluation in museums may at first seem rather distant from ethics. After all, we only want to get information from people, right? Yet, if we critically look at our practice, we want to know who these people are, why they are here, what they want, what they do, what they think and feel and believe, when they come to us, and what we can get from them. In essence, we want to understand them. And because what we want is not necessarily what they came to our museum for puts our work squarely into the realm

where ethical issues such as risk, privacy, informed consent, respect, beneficence, and justice, arise in research.<sup>5</sup>

In museum research and evaluation, there are things we are required to do, or rules that we follow in doing research and evaluation, but more importantly, there are things we ought to do, regardless of whether we are required to do them or not. There are three key aspects to ethics: the agent, or the one performing the act; the act itself; and the consequences of the act. In research and evaluation, the actor is the researcher/evaluator, and the act is the research/evaluation itself. That leaves ethical questions about the consequences to those from whom we gather data. The remainder of this article focuses first on understanding ethics in research, and then on how the consequences of our work draws ethical considerations into account.

## **Accountability**

Ethics in research is grounded in normative ethics — the consideration of what makes actions right or wrong. Museums are held accountable to ethical norms defined and interpreted by public law, the museum’s own regulations, and peer community standards.<sup>6</sup>

In the U.S., the Belmont Report<sup>7</sup> led to a mandatory review of all research by several Federal agencies. In the report, what is called “practice” refers to activities intended to enhance a person’s well-being and that have a reasonable expectation of success, such as front-end and most formative evaluation studies. Research is distinguished by contributing to generalizable knowledge (or theory) and for any research, review is necessary. An Institutional Review Board (IRB) is the body an organization creates or uses to provide the external, critical review of research.

These laws were adopted to protect human subjects/volunteers, ensure the understanding of benefits and risks of potential subjects associated with their participation in a study, and provide subjects with all information needed to decide whether or not to participate in a study. Any research on projects funded by agencies requiring external review of research, such as the National Science Foundation, must comply with these statutes. Universities must comply with ethical practices and many have established IRBs to assure compliance, and often require the IRB in all situations regardless of funding source.

Federal standards suggest that many of our evaluation studies about a specific exhibit or experience when data are only used internally for improvement purposes do not fall under the definition of research. However, if we

intend to, or do publish or share findings because there is insight from the work that we see as of value to others regardless of whether it is considered research or evaluation, we have shifted into a “gray” area where the definitions are blurred.

Much of our work is in this blurry zone where critical, external consideration of risk and benefit may not legally be required, and is ignored and reduced to the simple statement “it’s just evaluation,” even when the findings are shared at conferences, in papers, and in external discussions. In these cases, it is important that a museum have its own internal regulations that provide clear guidance on how ethics are considered in the conduct of evaluation and research, regardless of public law.

The peer standards are also changing. Increasingly, we are coming to expect that museum research and evaluation should be critically considered in terms of ethical practice. For all evaluations, it is only appropriate that the same subject needs for research are met: people should be told at a minimum about (1) the purpose of the study; (2) what participation requires in terms of time and effort; (3) any possible risks in participation; (4) how any information tied to them will be reported; and (5) the confidentiality regarding access to the results of the evaluation.

## **Ethics in Research and Evaluation**

In training (like graduate school), most evaluators/researchers are guided in the processes and methods of research by an advisor and a committee. For many in the field, mentorship is often on the job and is comprised of email responses or online guidelines about conducting evaluation. Ethical considerations are often not included in developing evaluation protocols.

Research and evaluation ethics are guided by:

- **Respect for persons.** People are seen as unique individuals and there is a necessity to (a) acknowledge their autonomy and (b) protect those with diminished autonomy (including children);
- **Beneficence.** We are to avoid or minimize things that might cause harm to someone, and at the same time, try to maximize the possible benefits; and
- **Justice.** Each person should have an equal share of benefits; each person should receive benefits according to individual need; each person should receive benefits according to how much effort they give; each person

should receive benefits according to societal distribution; and each person should receive benefits they merit.<sup>8</sup>

## Ethical Conditions

Most people look at things, including research and evaluation in museums, as right or wrong, which in ethics is called a normative approach. We examine the consequences of the research or evaluation on the visitor and ask if, across museums and conditions, that behavior is ethical. We can look at four broad areas of potential consequence from the visitor's perspective: expectations, time, use of data, and ability to give consent.

## Visit Expectations

Visitors rarely come to a museum intending to engage in a research or evaluation study. Their visit is most often motivated by a social need.<sup>9</sup> Further, expectations around the visit tie closely to visitors' understanding of what the particular museum is about. Thus, the means by which we engage them in the study should be designed to meet their expectations of their visit. In some settings such as science centers, the experience should be interactive and engaging. In others, perhaps an art museum, the experience could be reflective and a chance to react to the affective experience. In many cases, the data gathering must engage the social aspects of the experience and the methods employed should build on the social interactions of those being engaged.

## Visitor Time

Visitors often function within a "time budget" they have mentally constructed for the visit. Asking them to take time from their visit to engage in a study, or to complete a feedback form or join in an interview is a negative consequence to their participation and should be seen as such. How do we shift the experience from a negative consequence to a positive experience? Sometimes it is through interest and commitment to the topic, though not nearly as often as we'd like. More often, it is through careful planning to make the experience of giving us data an interesting and unique experience. Through practice, many evaluators have learned that people desire to give feedback — but they want to do so in a way they feel is authentic and productive.

## Use of Data

The American Evaluation Association (AEA) has enumerated standards for evaluation practice among its members. One of the standards, utility, includes a perspective of value to this discussion: we only gather data which we will use. And by use, AEA does not mean a quick look at a pile of feedback forms, but rather a critical analysis of all data obtained.

Many people feel obligated to ask about sex, age, or educational level on a questionnaire or feedback form. And yet, they often do nothing at all with these data or perhaps, simply give a percentage of each in some report. To be critical, demographics of this nature would be used to explore differences or, at least, compare the study population against census or other demographic standard. Gathering data that “might be interesting” is not an ethical use of data.

Another challenge to utility is gathering data and not critically analyzing it in order to affect change in the program or experience. Demonstrating that a program “works” or is “great” or “people love it” is not ethical evaluation. Rather, it would be appropriate to find out what ways a program works, what people think about it, and how that might inform future experiences.

## Consent

A consistent ethical question in museums is the age of consent. A child cannot give legal consent to engage under any condition; participation in research and evaluation is no exception. Of course, there are many situations in which gathering data from children is not an ethical concern, but if the study is for more than internal use, it is important to consider ethical implications.

Another area in which ethical issues are being discussed is social media and the potential for collecting data in these public forums. Although legal, the ethics are not always so clear. Although primarily focused on youth, there are implications across ages and audiences related to mining public/private conversations. The use of web and electronic tracking<sup>10</sup> raises lots of questions — a major area of this work is around the ethics of using tracking on individuals with dementia. Likewise, the use of electronics for tracking visitors is exciting for researchers and evaluators, but could have potential for violating individuals’ perceived rights.<sup>11</sup>

Many types of research/evaluation activities can be justified as “public behavior” which dramatically changes potential consequences of the work. Even so, there are potential harms from challenging what is or thought to be private. In many cases, the simple act of posting signs and verbally alerting



visitors by telling them at the box office or at entry to an exhibit that taping or tracking is occurring is sufficient to satisfy the ethical need to respect visitors' rights for privacy. In other cases, especially those in which the tracking is capturing characteristics of the individual and not just what they did, there is an ethical stand and consent should be obtained regardless of the setting.

These four ideas require ethical considerations in order for an individual to make an informed decision to consent to participate in the research study.

Where do we go to make sense of all this? Ethical practice should be a given. One of the characteristics of strong research and evaluation is external review prior to conducting the study. The Institutional Review Board required by federal agencies and most universities requires the researcher/evaluator to explicitly work through the methods with a view toward possible consequences from every connection to and with a human subject. When required, there are private IRBs that can be used. Even when not required, the real point is to ask critically about these rights of an individual, and to ensure respect, beneficence, and justice. Having someone else who knows evaluation/research ethics look at your plan is always good practice.

## So What Does This Mean?

Our practice of gathering data from visitors is bound with mandates from the Museum Code of Ethics to be ethical. This means we respect the individual, demonstrate beneficence, and strive for justice in our research and evaluation work. It also means that we subscribe to the standards for the research community and, when appropriate we seek external review that requires a demonstration of meeting these standards.

Many individuals ignore the underlying reasons for conducting research ethically, and instead focus on the challenges faced when required to conduct an IRB application or is questioned about appropriateness of the methodology. Ultimately, good museum research and evaluation enhances the visitor experience. I believe most of us want to be ethical in our practice — often, the challenge is not in the process of review, but in the time required to critically examine the impact (or risk) our need for data places on our guests.

### Notes

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### About the Author

Joe E. Heimlich, Ph.D. is a principal researcher with the Lifelong Learning Group of COSI (Columbus) where he works on an array of projects focusing on informal learning and capacity building for zoos, nature centers, science centers, and other museums. He is also Professor Emeritus with Ohio State University where he was an Extension Specialist in museum and organizational capacity building, and held appointments in the School of Environment and Natural Resources, the Environmental Science Graduate Program, and the College of Education and Human Ecology.



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