

In recent years the presentation of revised and complex history in museums has drawn serious debate among scholars, journalists, museum professionals, and members of the general public (Goldberg, 1999; Harris, 1995; Rubenstein, 2000). Large-scale exhibitions created by the Smithsonian Institution such as *Enola Gay*, *The West As America*, and *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* have attracted national media attention and generated controversy about the perspectives presented in these exhibits. While much has been written about these national exhibitions (e.g., Corken, 2004; Goldberg, 1995; Rubenstein, 2000), there is little scholarship that addresses the presentation of complex and revisionist history in smaller, local institutions. My research topic will address this issue by asking, “How can local museums and heritage sites best present complex and revisionist history?” This paper will discuss the concepts and questions that surround my research, identify my methodological paradigm and potential biases, and propose some initial research methods.

There are several concepts related to telling complex histories at local museums and heritage sites. To connect these concepts I will begin by asking, “How does the general public learn history?” and “Is this cumulative knowledge of history incomplete?” To answer these questions I will first need to define the terms “general public” and “history” as they relate to my research. I can then examine how different sources and environments contribute to the broad understanding of history. This will include investigating how formal learning environments such as schools and churches; media sources like television, movies, and books; individual experiences including career, level of education, and geographic setting; and cultural institutions such as museums, theatres, and arts centers influence our cumulative knowledge of history (see Appendix). With

this data, I can then suggest a gap between scholarly and general understanding of history. Next, I will have to provide evidence that suggests that most or many local museums do not exhibit accurate and complete histories. Gathering data that supports these assumptions and defines relationships among these concepts provides the groundwork for determining how cumulative understanding of history can be reformed and expanded through museums.

To identify specific methods that would enhance the ability of museums to tell complex history I will examine and suggest a series of presentation techniques. This will incorporate research in different learning styles and theories of information design and presentation. I will also need to identify the role of scholars and topic specialists and define their relationship to the presentation process. Presentation recommendations will be based on their ability to engage audiences and deliver the best possible scholarship on the topic.

The goal of successfully presenting revised and complex histories in museums is to provide the general public with information that will help them identify a connection between historical events and trends and those that are contemporary. This outcome may occur in two forms. First it may generate dialogue surrounding contemporary issues using historical context as a method for forming opinions and making decisions. Second it may create a sense of shared experience among groups and individuals who identify the experiences of people or groups in history with their own contemporary experience. While measuring these outcomes is beyond the scope of this research project, I hope to provide evidence supporting these general trends.

The social action goals of this project and the descriptive nature of my study suggest that I will be working dominantly from the Interpretivist Constructivist methodological paradigm. With this perspective I understand history and historical knowledge to be socially constructed by the people who define it and not a reality that can be explained in absolute terms. I am interested in the ways in which people construct historical meaning, not simply in the meaning itself, and how everyday life influences historical understanding.

My research design will reflect my interpretive perspective as I use information gathered from participants to drive questions and provide detailed descriptions of the methods that museums may use to enhance the accuracy and inclusivity of the histories they present. Drawing from qualitative research techniques, I will use case studies to examine museums that successfully present complex histories as well as those which attempt to connect history to current events. I also expect to use historical-comparative research to support the claim that revisionist history provides a more accurate understanding of history. Existing statistics research will also be a valuable method for investigating learning styles and presentation techniques as well as supporting my claim that scholarly and public understanding of history is widely divergent.

While the Interpretivist Constructivist perspective will primarily drive my research design and interpretation of data, some aspects of my research are also tied to the Critical Inquiry paradigm. From this perspective I understand the presentation of history to be constructed by a dominant culture, which has led to the unequal representation of voices and stories in history. Furthermore, the purpose of my research, to affect social change, is strongly identified with Critical Inquiry. While the limited

scope of this project will not provide the time and tools by which to measure social change, certainly these underlying beliefs are a bias in my research.

I anticipate additional questions, concepts, and research methods to arise as I begin to gather data. Conceptualization and operationalization will continue to develop as I identify my assumptions and connect the concepts that outline my research.