

# VISITOR MEANINGS OF PLACE: USING COMPUTER CONTENT ANALYSIS TO EXAMINE VISITOR MEANINGS AT THREE NATIONAL CAPITOL SITES

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**Abstract:** A mix method study designed to explore the meanings, interest, and connections visitors ascribe to three National Park Service sites: National Capital Parks—Central, Rock Creek Park, and George Washington Memorial Parkway's Great Falls Park. The researchers employed the focus group interview technique and asked visitors prior to and then after an interpretive encounter what the resource and the place meant to them. Both hand-coding and the Minnesota Contextual Content Analysis (MCCA) software program were used in the analysis process. Selected findings suggested audiences' understanding and appreciation of the park resource.

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## Introduction

Recent studies have explored and documented the relationships among recreation resources, visitor meanings and perspectives of place, and the likelihood of participating in resource stewardship. Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, and Watson (1992) suggest to incorporate the concept of "sense of place" to better understand recreation. Sense of place concerns people's *meanings* associated with places, which are formed through personal experience (Tuan, 1974, 1977; Relph, 1976). Various studies suggest applying the sense of place concept in resource management and interpretation (Appleyard, 1979; Roggenbuck, Williams & Bobonski, 1992; Brandenburg & Carroll, 1995; Masberg, 1996; William & Stewart, 1998; Galliano & Loeffler, 1999).

Every year, visitors from the U.S. and other countries flock to national parks to understand the places and to be inspired. Visitors attach significant personal meanings to national park sites such as the Lincoln Memorial and Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Goldman, Chen, & Larsen, in press). Quality interpretation requires an effort to integrate knowledge of the resource, knowledge of the audience, and appropriate techniques to yield desired interpretive outcomes (NPS, 1997; 2000a; 2000b). Understanding visitors' meanings of place can increase interpreters' knowledge of their audience and regenerate interpreters' passion toward both the resource and the visitors (Goldman et al., in press). Interpretive managers and front-line interpreters need a more comprehensive understanding of the meanings that visitors bring to sites as well as the ability to apply that understanding to the development of interpretive programs. Understanding and interpretation are closely related, and most sociologists now recognize that some interpretation is involved in the acts of understanding (Marshall, 1994). To help interpreters achieve desired interpretive outcomes of facilitated intellectual and emotional connections with the resource and therefore a sense of stewardship, this study explored the meanings that visitors attach to the resources at three National Park Service (NPS) administered sites: National Capital Parks—Central, Rock Creek Park, and Great Falls Park.

## Literature Review

### Meanings, Places & Resource Stewardship

Meaning is the most fundamental unit to understand people and their perceptions (Blumer, 1969; Marshall, 1994). Dutch hermeneutic phenomenologist Van Manen (1990) believes that the whole human science research "is concerned with meanings—to be human is to be concerned with meaning, to desire meaning" (p. 79). Meanwhile, The concepts of "place" and "meanings" have archived prominence in the fields of geography, landscape architecture, public administration, historic preservation, natural resource management, education, counseling, and cognitive and social psychology. Place is a powerful concept that enables researchers to understand people's attitudes, values, motivations and behavior more holistically (Williams & Stewart, 1998). Specifically, place-based research explores the psychological engagement that transforms space into place (Tuan, 1977). Participation in resource stewardship increases when visitors connect to resource/place meanings (Roggenbuck et al., 1992).

### Meaning—The Fundamental Element

It would be difficult to imagine any sociological study did not look at how people think about the social world and social relationships—in other words, the *meanings* that the society has for individuals and groups. Osgood (1952) defines meanings as "a bundle of components including experiences, images, and feelings in addition to information." Indeed, some schools of thought (mainly the Chicago School) argue that meaning emerges through interaction (Blumer, 1969). For Blumer, whom later being

considered as the leader of symbolic interactionism, meanings are organic and can "grow" through the interacting and interlinking between one and another. He illustrated this point as followed:

Human group life consists of the fitting to each other of the lines of action of the participants indicating to one another what to do and in turn interpreting such indications made by the others. People are prepared to act toward their objects on the basis of the meaning these objects have for them. Human beings face their world as organisms with selves, thus allowing each to make indications to [oneself]. Human action is constructed by the actor on the basis of what [one] notes, interprets, and assesses. And the interlinking of such ongoing action constitutes organizations, institutions, and vast complexes of interdependent relations. (Blumer, 1969)

Researchers have been closely associated the concept of meaningful action with Max Weber, who distinguishes it from behavior (Marshall, 1994). Weber distinguishes meaningful actions from merely behavioral movement of which the actor does not attach a meaning (for example breathing). Meaningful social action, by contrast, is the action directed towards others and to which we can attach a subjective meaning. In addition, sociologists and linguists are interested in social actions because they draw from a socially constructed and acceptable language. Giddens (1984) addresses the significance of peoples' meanings of place; he suggests that places are both enabling and embedding. Physical locations affect people and people in turn affect those locations, constructing social meanings and determining their significance.

#### Meanings of Place & National Park Service's Interpretive Philosophy

Phillips (1997) links three components in his conceptualization of the meaning-making process: individual ascription, social consensus, and specific attributes of the object, event or place. The National Park Service's Interpretive Development Program (IDP) adopts a similar approach to understanding meanings. The IDP views meanings as inherent in the resource (i.e., "the resource possesses meanings and has relevance") due to social consensus and specific attributes of the resource (Larsen, 1997). The IDP also recognizes that visitors ascribe personalized meanings to the resource (NPS, 2000a). Thus, a resource represents layers of meanings, and meanwhile, humans bring various perspectives to the site. The IDP also emphasizes the importance of incorporating universal concepts into interpretation. A universal concept, as defined by the National Park Service, is any intangible meaning (e.g., idea, concept, system, process) that is relevant to almost everyone but that does not mean the same thing to any two people (NPS, 2000a). Universal concepts can be any broadly relevant concept including, for example, beauty, family, love, death, justice, change, survival, power and freedom. They can be applied to human relationships, cultural resources or the natural environment. Ham (1992) refers to these concepts as

"highly personal things" including, "ourselves, our families, our health, our well-being, our quality of life, our deepest values, principles, beliefs and convictions" (p. 13). Ham urges interpreters to incorporate these concepts into interpretation and connect them to the inner circle of their lives. Universal concepts can be used to tap into the memories, values and experiences that many visitors share (Silverman, 1997; Wager, 1975).

#### Meanings of DC Parks—National Icons & Urban Wildland

As the national capital, Washington, DC is the home for several world-renowned heritage sites, which represent the spirit of America. Frequently, people consider these sites as the "national icons." Take the Triangle for example, the Lincoln Memorial, the Korean War Veterans Memorial, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial constitute a triangle area which is one of the most visited sites in Washington, DC. The Lincoln Memorial is a tribute to President Lincoln and the Union he sought to preserve. The memorial records Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Second Inaugural Address. The steps, plaza and reflecting pool in front of the Lincoln Memorial have functioned as a place of protest and a forum for discussing issues such as race, civil rights, war and peace, and AIDS. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial has drawn millions of visitors from all over the country over the years. The site commemorates the sacrifice of American military personnel during one of the nation's least popular wars (NPS, 1998b). A journalist from the New York Times described the memorial as "a hallowed site" with a "spiritual dimension that transforms it into something like a sacred shrine, where pilgrims come and devotions are paid" (Niebuhr, 1994, November 11th). The Korean War Veterans Memorial is dedicated to all those who served during the Korean War (1950-1954), the first major conflict of the Cold War. The returning veterans were the first Americans not to receive a heroes welcome in recognition of the hardships they endured in their fight for freedom (NPS, 1998a). Taken together, the three study sites at NCP—Central represent diverse meanings related to war and peace, freedom and slavery, civil rights and patriotic duty, national leaders and common heroes, and the fundamental ideals upon which our nation was founded.

Meanwhile, Washington, DC is not just about memorials. "Urban" parks—parks that are located in urban areas but large enough to provide a sense of wildness are favourites for Washingtonians (e.g., Great Falls Park and Rock Creek Park). Rock Creek Park holds its uniqueness for which it contains both of a city park's connivance and a wilderness' pristine and diversity. The picturesque valley of Rock Creek has earned its fame especially during the spring by the visitors. But the 1,754 acres of forest, meadows, groves, paths, trails, and heritage landscapes within 5 miles of the White House, offers "a quiet respite from the bustle of urban life all year long for both Washingtonians and visitors to the Nation's Capital" (NPS, 2000c). The extensive system of trails and paths gradually leads the urban explorers from the street corners to a world of foodchains and ecosystems. In addition, Rock Creek Park has been recognized by city planners as a model of an urban "preserve," for which the park is "penetrate deeply

into the city” and with “easy access to nature” (Duany, Plater-Zybek, & Speck, 2000, pp. 143-4). This unique characteristic is highly appreciated by landscape architects and urban residents. In addition, it serves as a boundary to restrain urban sprawl and unregulated rapid growth. Urban parks such as Rock Creek Park that cover large geographic areas may not be considered as “true” wilderness in the ecological sense, however, these parks provide “a close approximation of a wilderness experience” for many urban dwellers (Rust, 1994; Hester, 1999).

Unique challenges and opportunities present themselves as one tries to interpret resources like the memorials in our nation’s capital that reflect such diverse meanings as war and peace, freedom and slavery, civil rights and an obligation to serve (Martinez, 1988; Machlis, 1992; Bennett, 1998). An expanded understanding of the meanings of the resource, a sense of connecting with significant places, and spiritual experiences sound like worthwhile goals, but is this what visitors want? Visitors come to sites with a range of pre-existing meanings, but often it is unclear what meanings they bring. How does on-site experience influence the meanings visitors attach to these sites? Do visitors really care about relating to park sites in a way that transcends their sense of self and provides meaning at a deeper than intellectual level (Schroeder, 1990)? When interpretive rangers are overwhelmed with daily responsibilities and visitors’ “ludicrous questions” (Tilden, 1977, p. 46), they can easily overlook the extent to which these dynamics might be in play. Therefore, this study was undertaken to better understand the meanings visitors ascribe to three significant places on the national landscape: Great Falls Park, National Capital Parks—Central, and Rock Creek Park to foster the excellence of interpretation and a sense of stewardship.

### Study Objectives

This study did not intend to measure visitor attitude and then predict their behavior. Instead, the researchers propose to better understand the meanings that visitor have toward the three National Park Service sites at the greater Washington, D.C. area and provided suggestions for resource management and interpretive program development. The four study objectives include:

- To identify the meanings visitors attach to three NPS sites: Great Falls Park, NCP—Central (the Lincoln Memorial, the Korean War Veterans Memorial, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial), and Rock Creek Park.
- To identify visitor interests related to interpretive programs.
- To identify the type and frequency of connections between the meanings of the resource and the interests of the visitor that occur among participants who have attended interpretive programs.
- To provide recommendations to improve interpretive training and on-site interpretive programming through expanded interpreter knowledge of the audience.

### Methods

The study incorporated a mixed method design. Methods include purposeful sampling for visitor interview participants, quasi-experimental pre-test/post-test design, focus group interview, and both quantitative and qualitative data analysis. During the summer of 1998, researchers conducted 89 focus group interviews and interviewed a total of 527 visitors. The study recorded participant responses to open-ended questions. The study used both hand coding and the Minnesota Contextual Content Analysis (MCCA) computer program to analyze the differences and similarities in visitor meanings between visitors who attended an on-site ranger-led interpretive program and those who did not.

#### Sample Interview Questions

Focus group interviews were ideal for this study because “...the intent of focus groups is not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, not to make statements about a population but to provide insights about how people perceive a situation” (Krueger, 1994, p. 87). Focus group data also have high face validity because of the believability of participant comments (Krueger, 1994). During the focus group interview, researchers sought to elicit participant responses to open-ended questions about visitor meanings, interests and connections. Sample interview questions include the following:

- What drew you to the site today?
- What do these sites teach us?
- When you look at the statue of Lincoln, what thoughts go through your mind?
- What would you tell the younger generations about this place?
- When you are here, do you have a sense of interacting with history? How so?
- If you were a ranger, what would you tell your audience?
- *(For those who had attended an interpretive program)* Did the ranger’s talk help you think about this place in a new way?

Focus group interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim.

#### Computer-aided Content Analysis Software

MCCA was chosen for its ability to help users to compare a large number of complex texts. MCCA has been used to disambiguate and categorize word meanings of a wide variety of general social science concepts (Pierskalla & Anderson, 2000). The analysis procedures are standardized and extremely reliable for texts  $\geq 500$  words (McTavish & Pirro, 1990). MCCA calculates two normed score profile for each text segment: institutional or social context scores (c-scores) and concept emphasis scores (e-scores). First, *emphasis scores* or *e-scores* are computed for 116 idea/word categories and are measures of the overemphasis

or underemphasis of visitor ideas compared to usual English usage. Examples of E-score categories include: cognition, sanction, enjoy-like, virtue, future, community, deviance, and self-expression. Secondly, *contextual* or *c-scores* are computed for four social perspectives (traditional, practical, emotional, and analytical) and are measured of the overemphasis or underemphasis of a social perspective of a text.

## Selected Findings

### Participant Demographics

Focus group interview participants (N=527) were approximately half male (46%) and half female (54%). They came from various geographic regions. Participants from the United States represented more than 30 states and the District of Columbia. International participants came from England, Canada, Israel, Mexico, China, France, Nigeria, Germany, Russia, and the Netherlands. Results of the participants geographic regions indicated that the three study sites have different visitor compositions. For the National Capitol Parks—Central, only 1.1% were from nearby area and states (Washington DC, Virginia and Maryland) and 10.9% were international visitors. For Great Falls Par, 51.3% were local visitors and 6% were from other foreign countries. While for Rock Creek Park, the majority of the participants were from local (96.4%) and less than 1 % were international visitors. Participants were drawn from a wide range of age groups: 17% were under 13 years of age; 7% were 13-18 years old; 9% were 13-25 years old; 28% were 26-40 years old; 24% were 41-55 years old; and 15% were 56 years of age or older. The majority of participants were first time visitors to the site (41%) and 30% had visited the site five or more times. Not a question directly asked in the questionnaire, the researchers noted that most participants were of Anglo descent, although participants of African, Hispanic and Asian descent did engage in the interview process.

In terms of participant representation, the 182 participants interviewed at the National Capitol Parks—Central in this

study closely mirrored participants in a much larger visitor study (N=2,720) conducted at the same park during summer 1998 (Littlejohn & Hoffman, 1999). One notable difference between the two study populations is that the present study included more participants who had visited the site five or more times (17%) compared to Littlejohn & Hoffman who found that 8% of their sample had visited the site five or more times. Similarly, 44% of participants in the present study were first-time visitors to the site, compared to 56% first-time visitors in the Littlejohn & Hoffman study. Although the relative proportions still hold, these differences suggest that repeat visitors may have been more inclined to participate in an on-site focus group interview, and first-time visitors may have been less inclined to do so. However, the close demographic correlation between the two studies across all information categories suggests that the present study obtained a fairly representative sample of on-site visitors.

### Emphasis Scores (E-Scores)

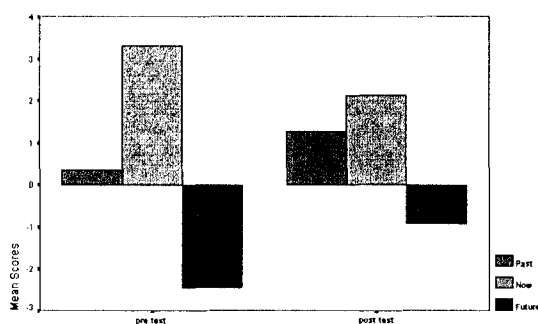
The MCCA computes the overemphasis or underemphasis of context ideas compared to standard English usage. These emphasize ideas are categorized into 116 idea/word categories with nominal scores (E-Scores) (McTavish & Pirro, 1990). The results of the computer-aided content analysis indicated the ideas emphasized by study participants. In Table 1, visitors as a whole emphasized several idea categories including (listed by frequency ranking: tender, cognition, object, location, move-in-space, if, reasoning, implication, humor-expression, and happy). These top-ten idea categories were identical for Rock Creek Park and Great Falls Park but in different orders. The results for the National Capital Parks—Central were distinguished from the other two parks. The highest score in the top ten list was the "object" rather than the "tender" category. Visitors of the National Capital Parks—Central highlighted different idea categories including "study," "we," and "being." Meanwhile, three idea categories that were excluded from the overall top-ten idea category list. These three idea categories were reasoning, happy and humor-expression.

Table 1. Overemphasized Idea Categories

|        | All Three Parks  | Great Falls Park | Rock Creek Park  | National Capitol Parks—Central |
|--------|------------------|------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|
| Rank 1 | Tender           | Tender           | Tender           | Object                         |
| 2      | Cognition        | Location         | Cognition        | Tender                         |
| 3      | Object           | Move-In-Space    | Move-In-Space    | Location                       |
| 4      | Location         | Cognition        | Object           | Cognition                      |
| 5      | Move-In-Space    | Object           | If               | Study*                         |
| 6      | If               | Reasoning        | Reasoning        | Implication                    |
| 7      | Reasoning        | If               | Location         | If                             |
| 8      | Implication      | Humor-Expression | Implication      | We*                            |
| 9      | Humor-Expression | Implication      | Happy            | Being*                         |
| 10     | Happy            | Happy            | Humor-Expression | Move-In-Space                  |

\* Indicated idea categories that were not in overall the top-ten list.

The study results indicated the differences between visitors who had attended interpretive programs and those who had not. The researchers choose three emphasis scores which may have the implication on a concern for the parks' future: the *past*, *now*, and *future* idea categories. Figure 1 shows the relative shift of emphasis on these three categories for all there park sites. The three bars on the left indicate the e-scores of the three categories for the people who did not attend an interpretive program. The three bars on the right show the e-scores for the people who had attended a program. For the three categories, there was an increased overemphasis of the *past* idea for the after interpretation group interviews, a decrease of overemphasis on the *now* category, and an increase of the underemphasis on the *future* category.



**Figure 1. Emphasis Scores of Pre and Post Groups on All Three Sites**

## Discussion

The study intended to identify visitor meanings and interests of park resources. The study also intended to measure the intellectual and emotional connections that visitors made through interpretation with the meanings of the park. Study results suggested that visitors actively engaged in various park experiences. The top ten e-scores suggested that visitor did ascribe meanings to park resources when responding to interview questions. The results of the three focused e-scores "past, now, and future" suggested the shifts of emphasis between people who were exposed to interpretation and those who were not.

Heuristic e-scores suggest the overall character of ideas that are emphasized in the text (McTavish & Pirro, 1990; Garwick, Detzner, & Boss, 1994). The top ten e-scores suggested visitor meanings and their on-site experiences. Through thematic analysis, it was better understood the phenomenon of visitors experienced park settings physically by moving through the site and viewing it from all angles (move-in-space). They were strongly oriented to the physical space where their experience occurred (location and object). They thought about the meanings of site resources (reasoning, cognition, implication, if, study). They cared about site resources (tender). They enjoyed

themselves while on site (happy, humor-expression). They fully immersed themselves in the on-site experience (being), and in some cases that experience was group oriented (we) and a concern of the society as a whole.

The three focused e-scores measured the differences between visitors who *have* and *have not* attended interpretive programs in terms of their relative emphasis on meanings and connections. The scores implied interpreters' ability in facilitating connections with the past and future as this participant expressed a sense of willingness to act as a citizen in the future for the whole society:

[This place teaches us that] however big the problem, and however diverse the people involved, if you all have a common goal you can get together and do it. All races, all religions, they have experienced what these [sites] memorialize. And we've all [overcome the problems] in the U.S. together. (Post 1, pp. 4-5)

Van Manen (1990) raises a philosophical discussion on the idea of time that people experienced in the lived world. We act our lives of time. As van Manen examines, "the temporal dimensions of past, present, and future constitute the horizons of a person's temporal landscape" (p. 104). For the park managers who seek to foster a sense of stewardship with the park resource, a connection with the past and, mostly, an increased connection with the future may imply a success on caring about the park resource in the future. Study results not only help researcher to better understand the phenomenon of visitor meanings, interest, and connection, they also help interpretive trainers to strategize the sequence and contents of interpretive training and development.

The MCCA e-score profiles function like an "idea spectrograph" or a park "fingerprint." Over time, the researchers may become well experienced in analyzing park "MCCA fingerprints." Future research may be able to compare fingerprints across various types of parks/resource settings, predict which concepts will be most likely to be emphasized, identify "surprises" in terms of categories emphasized, and better articulate what it means that visitors emphasized category X.

## Conclusion

The Minnesota Contextual Content Analysis program's e-score profiles can help qualitative researchers zero in on visitor quotes that contain frequently emphasized concepts, serving as a "check" on the representativeness of the quote. Other visitors may not have expressed ideas so eloquently, but if a quote contains commonly emphasized idea categories, it's probably not too "unlike" other quotes in the transcripts. The ultimate goal may be to develop software that can pick up more of the nuances that we are interested in for interpretive training and recreation/natural resource management.

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