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**Reconsidering “The Love of Art”:  
Evaluating the Potential of Art Museum Outreach**

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### Abstract

Art museums have long been identified as bastions of social and cultural exclusion. This conclusion was best evidenced by the large-scale 1967 French study by Bourdieu and Darbel demonstrating the exclusionary nature of “The Love of Art.” However, in recent years there have been increasing efforts to reach out to a broader range of visitors beyond conventional audiences. The present study investigates the impacts of an outreach program at a UK art museum, which sought to engage socially excluded young mothers. This study employs ethnographic research methods on a longitudinal basis to develop qualitative insights about the program seeking to mitigate cultural exclusion. While the study’s findings uphold many longstanding critiques of art museums’ conventional approaches, the study also indicates that carefully designed outreach activities can overcome such limitations and enhance cultural engagement. Thus, art museums’ limited appeal is tied to problematic public engagement practices that can be changed.

*Keywords:* public engagement, impact, art museum, outreach, social exclusion, family

## **Reconsidering “The Love of Art”: Evaluating the Potential of Art Museum Outreach**

Art museums have long been identified as bastions of social and cultural exclusion. This empirical study investigates this long held view that has been developed in both empirical and theoretical social scientific literature in past decades. This particular case focuses on a group of socially excluded young mothers. It examines the experiences of these mothers using ethnographic data collection and open-ended questionnaire data. How do new and previously excluded visitors respond to an art museum outreach program? What impacts, if any, are evident in the encounter between such visitors and art museum staff and collections? What processes promote or delimit any impacts that emerge from this encounter? This research addresses these questions, casting empirical light on theoretical and policy arguments surrounding the investment of resources to extend public engagement with arts and culture into previously excluded communities.

The methodological goal of the present study was to test qualitative methods of evaluation research that might provide the empirically-derived hypotheses to underpin future visitor research capable of producing the “sort of evidence which can substantiate more general judgments about a series of projects or a wider programme or initiative” (Galloway & Stanley, 2004, p. 127) within the context of museum outreach. The most relevant prior study of community engagement impacts in the UK employed a one time cross-sectional survey with highly circumscribed response options to pre-formulated statements (Greenhill et al., 2007). In the present research, the aim was to widen the analytical lens to explore the perceived value of the family outreach visits from a visitor’s perspective. As such, open-ended qualitative methods were employed, and the research was conducted on a (limited) longitudinal basis over a 4-month period and two separate outreach visits at the museum.

A large-scale European study of art museum visitors conducted 40 years ago identified a number of barriers to inclusion, based primarily on class and education level (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1969/1991). Duncan (1995) draws on Bourdieu and Darbel's arguments and goes even further in arguing that art museums are "engines of ideology" (p. 3) designed to serve the interests of the state, city, consumerism, and patriarchy. Such negative conclusions about art museums are indicative of a persistent suspicion that museums are strongholds of exclusivity that reinforce class, gender, and other distinctions. This view of art museums is described by Duncan (1995) as the "political" theory of art museums' power to affect audiences. However, in recent years there have been increasing efforts to reach out beyond the conventional bourgeois audiences for fine art in order to bring in a broader range of visitors to art museums. Indeed, social inclusion is a key item on the UK government agenda to which it has been argued that museums and other cultural institutions can offer significant contributions (e.g., Lawley, 2003).

Yet, there are clear limitations to the successful implementation of a social inclusion agenda within museums. For example, a recently published UK government report on a major government-funded National/Regional Museum Partnership Programme pointed out that community inclusion work is new to most museums and that such outreach activities are "very resource-heavy, demanding staff with specialist skills and experience, and a commitment to opening up the museum to new ideas and new ways of working. Not all museums in the programme seemed able or ready to cope with that" (Greenhill et al., 2007, p. 43). This report found that "some museums...were failing to grasp what was needed" (p. 38) to widen access and community participation. Thus, for most cultural institutions authentic social inclusion work remains much more of an ideal than a reality. Beyond the relatively low prevalence of full-scale social inclusion work in UK museums, there is a significant evidence gap between the aspirations of those in the museum sector who believe in the potential

benefits of engagement with the arts and the existence of reliable and valid data demonstrating such benefits.

Nevertheless, the work museums have done to promote social inclusion over the last decade shows some promise. The aforementioned report published in 2007 purports to be the first study to conduct direct research with “community participants” engaged by museums (p. 39). Although this study only employed a very limited closed-ended survey method administered at the end of the visit (no pre-test or follow-up), it provides the best empirical evidence to date of the impact of engagement for community members. The survey of young people and adults engaged through the program’s “expansion of community provision” were asked to respond to a number of statements with three response options: *yes*, *no*, and *don’t know*. Responses to this survey were very positive (Greenhill et al., 2007, p. 40), with large majorities saying *yes* to the statements “I enjoyed today” (95%), “Working with the museum has been very inspiring for me” (82%), “I discovered some interesting things” (93%), “I feel I have a better understanding of the subject” (84%), “It was a good chance to pick up new skills” (77%), “Using the museum was a good chance to learn in new ways I had not considered before” (80%), “I could make sense of most of the things we saw and did” (85%), “I am now much more interested in the subject than when I started” (78%), and “I would like to do this again” (80%). One problem with these results is that the statements used did not arise from the respondents themselves; rather, they were imposed within a closed-response framework. These particular closed-ended questions may introduce a number of biases, including the introduction of demand characteristics that can cause respondents to adjust their responses in accordance with what they believe to be the researchers’ hypothesis or preferred result. In this case, the exclusively positive framing of the statements could cue respondents for such biased responses. Moreover, these uniformly positive statements may also introduce acquiescence bias, that is, respondents’ tendency to disproportionately agree (and not to

disagree) with statements. Given these concerns and other limitations in survey design, the validity of these results could be questioned. The questions are also vague and ambiguous, suggesting limitations in the reliability of the research.

### **Social Class and Exclusion**

The work of cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu demonstrates the relevance of social class “cultural capital” factor in people’s appropriation of culture. In their large-scale research on European art museums, Bourdieu and Darbel (1969/1991) concluded that social class was a paramount factor in both the enjoyment (or not) of art and in patterns of rejection of art museum visiting. On the basis of their research, they posit that “museums for all” is in fact “false generosity, since free entry is also optional entry, reserved for those who, equipped with the ability to appropriate the works of art [through their middle or upper class upbringing], have the privilege of making use of this freedom” (p. 113). This argument also follows from Bourdieu’s classic study *Distinction* (1984), which shows the role of “taste” in constructing cultural distinctions along class lines. Indeed, this study was recently recreated in the UK, with the results re-emphasising the intertwined nature of social class and culture (Bennett et al., 2009).

Social exclusion is a newer concept, which goes beyond the idea of social class. It involves the detachment of individuals and groups from institutions, resources, and social networks within society. This disengagement can be compelled by prejudices or sanctions administered by core groups or it can be self-generated as a means of maintaining a strong, cohesive in-group identity within the rigid boundaries of a closed social network. Whatever the causal explanation, social exclusion has been implicated in a range of negative outcomes, including restricted access to basic citizen rights, education, welfare provisions, or participation in the “key activities of the society in which he or she lives” (Burchardt, Le Grand, & Piachaud, 2002, p. 30). Amongst these key activities are the cultural offerings from

museums. In recent years, museums have become an increasing focus within the general goal of combating social exclusion in contemporary Britain. O'Neill (2002, p. 35) identifies the importance of ensuring that "confidence is built up among the excluded and the included are genuinely welcoming" in order to foster inclusivity in museums.

"Social exclusion is a multi-faceted and dynamic process that requires a range of policy interventions" (Walton, 2000, p. 59). It is also a key policy concern for the government due to its implications in terms of low average levels of educational attainment, employment participation, access to services, and civic or political engagement, and high rates of truancy, crime and morbidity. For example, based on a 1995 survey of educational attainment in secondary schools within deprived areas, the Social Exclusion Unit (1998, p. 123) reports "one in four children gained no GCSEs,<sup>1</sup> five times the national average, and truancy was four times the average." Social exclusion is consequential across generations, affecting children, adults, and pensioners. As such, interventions aimed at addressing social exclusion are most effective when they are intergenerational. The present case is one such example of an intergenerational intervention at a crucial juncture in the lives of both the young mothers and the young children.

### **The Case**

This exploratory study was designed to assess the positive or negative impacts of a recurring outreach activity that brings young and disadvantaged mothers into the museum with their children. The museum's aim for these family outreach visits is to introduce the mothers to the museum, enhance their engagement with the arts, and give them experience gaining confidence in an otherwise unfamiliar setting. The approach taken by the museum education officer leading this outreach activity was to invite attendance from a group of young mothers who attend short child play sessions at a local community center located outside the city center. Specifically, a playgroup leader at the community center invited



mothers attending the play session in the week before the scheduled museum-based family outreach visit. The mothers had to arrange their own travel to get to the museum on the day of the outreach visit.

The outreach visit was comprised of the following three elements (lasting a total of about two hours):

1. *Arrival and greeting* (approx. 15 min). The mothers did not arrive all at once, but rather came in ones and twos with their children. They were ushered through the reception area and into the studio / workshop room downstairs, where they were offered tea and biscuits.
2. *Gallery Visit* (approx. 20 min). The mothers and children were led upstairs from the workshop through the main gallery and into a specific room where the education officer invited everyone to sit down and got out a storybook. The story was selected based on its correspondence with an aspect of the museum collection; this correspondence was then highlighted by the education officer leading the family outreach visit. A different room within the museum galleries and concomitantly a different story were selected for each of the two visits included in the present study. The first visit within the study timeframe was to a gallery with pre-20<sup>th</sup> century paintings and furniture; the second visit was to a room filled with pre-World War I pottery and fine china.
3. *Studio-based craft workshop* (approx. 80 min). Upon completion of the story, the education officer led the mothers and children back downstairs to the workshop. This was done slowly, allowing the mothers and children the opportunity to stop briefly and look at objects in the museum collection on their way out. Once in the workshop, a craft-based hands-on activity that was explicitly linked to the museum collection (and the story read by the education officer) was explained and then handed over to

the mothers and children to conduct together. Halfway through this time, a second craft activity was introduced by the education officer and carried out by the mothers and children. Linked to the gallery component of the visit, the craft activities changed for each session. Thus, an internally consistent theme was maintained for each outreach visit.

This study included data collection before, after, and during two family outreach visit days: 24 November 2009 and 9 February 2010. The earliest data collection point was one week before the 24 November visit and the latest point was about two weeks after the 9 February visit.

Most evaluation research currently being undertaken in museums employs reductionist, one-off survey methods that are “incapable of recording the subtle and unmeasurable experiences which visitors have in a gallery” (Economou, 2004, p. 35). Indeed, the methods for this study deliberately depart from the macroscopic cross-sectional approach taken by Greenhill et al. (2007) and Bourdieu and Darbel (1967/1991). Economou (2004, p. 35) argues that “quantitative-based surveys...which do not relate their results to the local area...might provide a misleading picture when not combined with interpretative and ethnographic methods.” The present study uses such interpretive methods to focus on the microscopic detail of new and disenfranchised museum visitors’ experiences within an historic art museum. Such empirical detail is developed using ethnographic and other qualitative research methods within a longitudinal study capable of accessing these visitors’ development over time through their encounters with a museum outreach program.

### Method

Data for this study were gathered primarily through photographically documented ethnographic observation and qualitative interviewing over a period of four months, including two outreach visits at the museum and four data collection trips to a local community center

during the playgroup session. Access to the participants for this study was obtained through an organiser / leader who facilitated the loosely organized community center playgroup meetings attended by the young mothers for their very young (under 3 years old) children to play in a group setting. Sampling in general was as inclusive as possible, seeking participation from as many mothers in this group as possible. Participation in the museum-based aspects of the research was effectively self-selecting based on whether the mothers arrived with their children at the museum for the outreach activity. All such individuals were included in the sample.

The total sample size for this study was 13 mothers. The mothers who had been to the museum sessions range in age from 17-22. One mother had a level two qualification in childcare (i.e., two years of post-secondary education), which was the highest education level within the group. Most of the mothers had no secondary school qualifications.

A major component of the present study was ethnographic data collection in the form of non-participant observation punctuated with short, informal qualitative interviewing during the outreach visit experiences. The observation dimension of this research was documented in part through taking numerous pictures on a digital camera (about 250 over the course of the outreach visit). Fieldnotes also were taken during the ethnographic observations. The combination of photographs and fieldnotes provided the basis for claims about the demeanor and affect of participants that are made in this article. All interviews were conducted at the community center playgroup meetings and the museum. They were recorded and professionally transcribed.

All the qualitative data were analyzed systematically following standard procedures (for details, see Jensen & Holliman, 2009) and with the assistance of the computer-aided qualitative data analysis software program *Atlas.ti 5.2*. The analysis involved first gathering together the various forms of data, organized by individual. Then the analysis proceeded

along two lines: An overall analysis looking for patterns in the data and an individual-level analysis focusing on the journeys of the participating mothers. The overall analysis employed inductive coding procedures. The analysis began with open coding in a relatively unconstrained search for recurring patterns. Once patterns were identified, the analysis shifted into a more deductive form of coding. This was aimed at establishing the dimensions of the identified patterns. Over the course of multiple readings of the data, different aspects of participants' discourse were found to recur within and across individuals. These suggested potentially significant patterns, which are described in the results section below.

To supplement the ethnographic data collection and assist with triangulation, a questionnaire was administered with the assistance of the local community group leader in this case prior to the beginning of the ethnographic elements of the research. In addition, it was administered on the days that the outreach event took place in the museum and subsequently after the outreach visit by the local community group leader. The questionnaire gathered basic demographic and visiting information about the participants (including prior visiting patterns). Data on participants' cultural self-efficacy relating to museum visiting were measured using a Likert scale, measuring agreement with the statement "I feel confident visiting museums like the Fitzwilliam with my child." Finally the questionnaire was designed to illuminate any development in the participants' thinking about art museums. This latter variable was addressed with the open-ended question, "What do you think of when you think of the Fitzwilliam Museum?" and a "personal meaning map" on the second page of the form with "Fitzwilliam Museum" as the target concept. Personal meaning maps gather unstructured thought-listing data by providing a single concept in the center of a blank page and inviting respondents to write or draw anything that comes to mind. However, the completion of questionnaires at each point was inconsistent and only about half of participants chose to complete the personal meaning map element of the questionnaires they

were given. The low level of responses on the questionnaire made it a less useful source of data than initially anticipated, therefore questionnaire data was only used in a supplementary manner to help support and guide the interpretation of the other forms of qualitative data that were collected. The details of the questionnaire data are not presented in this article, but they were used to triangulate the interpretation of the ethnographic results that are reported.

The generalizability of this study is difficult to ascertain. Of course, the goal of qualitative research is not to come to definitive conclusions about the most important aspects of a phenomenon, but rather to begin to articulate possible explanations and processes that can be explored further through larger scale research. This is an exploratory case study, which aimed to identify the possible impacts (positive or negative) of a museum outreach activity. The small sample size and particularistic nature of this approach mean that this study may be most appropriately seen as an empirical hypothesis-generating exercise, rather than a conclusive study of the full range and extent of museum outreach impacts in the setting under study. As is always the case with this kind of research, the limitations of self-report are a salient methodological concern. However, methodological triangulation is employed to limit this concern in the form of overlapping observational, interview, and questionnaire data collected over time for this study (although the observational and interview data are the focus of this article).

## Results

The results integrate ethnographic observation data from the outreach visits to the museum with interview and qualitative questionnaire data collected over a four-month period before, during and after the museum visits. The focus in this article is the relationship that participants have with the museum, the role of their experiences of cultural institutions, their expectations of the outreach visit, and their perceptions of each component of the facilitated visit observed for this case study.

There was a clear development in the demeanour of the mothers over the course of their visit to the museum. In the 24 November 2009 visit, the mothers arrived looking reticent and tentative. They continued to appear uncertain and ill at ease (e.g. seldom speaking, maintaining a stiff posture, not smiling) throughout the initial greeting over tea and biscuits, as well as the first half of the walk through the gallery. However, starting with the story reading in one of the larger rooms in the gallery, the mothers began to appear more at ease (e.g. more relaxed posture, more smiling). Most of the mothers sat with their children on the floor while the story was being told, while two mothers sat on a nearby bench and chatted quietly. Overall, this activity seemed to provide a manageable introduction to a small portion of the museum collection. However, once the mothers were back in the workshop listening to the instructions from the education officer for the craft activity, they appeared to revert to their initial reticent demeanor. Visible indicators of this reticent demeanor subsided for good once the workshop-based craft activity was fully underway.

**Bridging childhood and adult museum experiences.** A substantial minority of participating mothers reported having visited this museum as a child with their school or parents. However, all but one of these participants had only the vaguest of memories of the museum from these childhood visits and none of the participants had returned to the museum as an individual or as a parent with their own child(ren). In this context, there is evidence that the family outreach visits have the potential to bridge this childhood/adulthood divide for the mothers in this study, offering them a facilitated return to cultural institutions in a manner that is inclusive and unthreatening. The following interview extract exemplifies the role of a facilitated visit in drawing in someone who would otherwise not have come to the museum.

Rosie<sup>1</sup>: I don't mind going 'round to look at [the museum], in a group and stuff, but I wouldn't really go on my own. (Interview at Community Center Prior to Visit - 17/11/09)

Indeed, several participants indicated that it would not have occurred to them to visit an art museum if had they not been invited to go with this community group.

Interviewer: Have you been to any other art museums, other than Fitzwilliam?

Jenny: No, it's just not really the kind of thing I'd ever think to do. (Interview at Community Center Prior to Visit - 17/11/09)

The participant in the extract above had visited the museum with the community group twice, showing the family outreach program's success at bringing in individuals who would not otherwise have visited a museum.

Indeed, there is significant potential for this approach to link childhood memories of art to the adult lives of these young mothers. As exemplified in the extract below, without this kind of outreach program most of these mothers would not otherwise have engaged with the arts.

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<sup>1</sup> The names used in this report are fictional pseudonyms in order to maintain participant confidentiality.

Interviewer: Do you have general views about art, art in general?

Jenny: I used to do art and that at school, but I've not really- not really ever thought about it, to be honest. (Interview at Community Centre Prior to Visit - 17/11/09)

Jenny's statement above that she "had not really ever thought about" art, with her only prior art experience being in school, is indicative of the low level of prior engagement these individuals have had with the arts. The outreach visits have now begun to build an adult connection with the arts for Jenny and some of the other mothers.

**General perceptions of the museum.** For the participants, the museum was viewed and discussed first through the prism of their children's behavior and enjoyment of the day, and only secondarily through their own perceptions of the aesthetic qualities of the museum and cultural artefacts.

Interviewer: What were your impressions coming into the museum today?

Katie: Yes, it's alright. I was making sure she [participant's daughter] was coming with me really. She's a nightmare. Yes, it's alright. It [the museum] looks nice. (Interview at Museum on Day of Visit - 24/11/09)

Another participant's perceptions of the museum were shaped by her family connection to the museum.

Interviewer: Do you have any general impressions of the Fitzwilliam, even though you haven't been there?

Jane: Well, I haven't been there recently, but I've heard about it. You know, it's really good. And if it's anything like when my gran worked there, then I quite liked it. It's quite spacious, isn't it? It's quite organized. I quite like that. You know, you go to some museums, and you're just



scared of breaking things. (Interview at Community Center Prior to Visit - 17/11/09)

The mention of being “scared of breaking things” in the extract above highlights a pattern in the positive comments of participants regarding the family outreach visit. That is, multiple participants mentioned their prior concern about their children breaking things, indicating that this concern could be a factor in museum non-attendance for these mothers.

Interviewer: How did you find it overall?

Tina: Yes, it was all right, a lot different to what I expected.

Interviewer: What were you expecting?

Tina: Boring school stuff.

Interviewer: There was more activity then?

Tina: Yes, more focused at children rather than just lecturing about what each thing is. (Interview at Museum at End of Visit - 9/2/10)

In addition to these general perceptions of the museum, there were specific comments about the two main elements of the family outreach visit: The time spent walking around a gallery with the education officer reading a story to the children in the gallery and (2) the time spent in the downstairs workshop doing craft activities linked to the museum collection.

**Perceptions of gallery time.** In order to understand, the development process that took place for these mothers, it is important to note their starting position in terms of their perceptions of art and the museum. For example, Katie indicates in the following extract that there is “only so much art and stuff I can take nowadays.”

Interviewer: And what did you think of the Fitzwilliam Museum as a whole?

Katie: It's all right. It's a museum, to me.

Interviewer: Just like a typical museum?

Katie: I wouldn't know. I don't really go to many museums to find out, to be honest. But yes, it's all right....[The Fitzwilliam Museum] is interesting and everything. It's always interesting, but there's only so much art and stuff I can take nowadays. So yes, it's fine. (Interview at Community Center after Visit - 1/12/09)

This self-report suggests that the organizer of this outreach visit is right to keep the time visiting the gallery relatively short.

It is clear that the gallery visit served to provide the mothers with some exposure to the museum's collection within a manageable framework and time period. In addition to looking around on the way into the gallery, the mothers and their children lingered on the way out (after the storytelling was complete), pausing several times to view paintings or artefacts on route back to the downstairs studio room.

One participant—who was visiting a museum for the first time ever—discussed her response to the gallery “walking round” aspect of the visit in a follow-up interview one week later.

Interviewer: So what did you think overall?

Carrie: Yes, I really enjoyed it. I would've actually liked to have walked round a bit more because [my daughter] was fascinated with it all. So it would've been nice if we could've walked round a bit more so she could have had more of a look around. But apart from that, I really liked it. It was really good and she really enjoyed it....

Interviewer: Yes, she seemed to be very taken by the horse.

Carrie: Yes, she did. She liked that and all the armor and stuff. It attracted her attention. She wouldn't leave. I had to drag her away.... She kept going back to it. But yes, it was good. I enjoyed it and she did.

Interviewer: What did you think of the amount of walking around we did?

Carrie: Yes, it was good and she enjoyed it. I really would've liked to have looked at other stuff, more stuff. And during the story, I found that quite difficult because of her—because she's at that age where she doesn't want to sit still. She wants to get up and walk around and stuff. So I found that bit quite difficult, to try and get her to sit still. She wasn't having none of it. (Interview at Community Center after Visit - 1/12/09)

The mother in the extract above indicated in a post-visit questionnaire (completed 24 February 2010) that she now strongly agrees with the statement, "I feel confident visiting museums like the Fitzwilliam with my child." Indeed, the words that she listed as coming to mind when she thinks of the museum in the post-outreach visit form are *friendly*, *fun*, and *educational* (24 February 2010). However, Carrie's mention that her daughter finds it difficult to sit still for a story suggests the possibility that the informal speech genre of *storytelling* has not been fully routinized for Carrie's daughter.

The perceived value of the time spent in the gallery can also be seen in the following post-visit interview extract, which highlights the same issue of the children not wanting to "be sat around."

Interviewer: What did you think about the walk around the gallery?

Katie: That's always good, because it's always good for them as well. Because obviously they don't want to be sat around all the time doing stuff. So it's nice for them to see different stuff and that, yes. (Interview at Community Center after Visit - 1/12/09)

It is noteworthy that Carrie and Katie both viewed time walking around in the gallery positively as active and in contrast with the idea of "sitting around" (which was viewed more

negatively). Tina was similarly positive about the time in the gallery, emphasising that she viewed it as a manageable introduction (“not overloaded”).

Interviewer: Anything that you think could have been done differently?

Tina: No, I think it's all right. I'm guessing that each time these groups are on, they'd be looking at different things, so I think it's pretty good. One thing at a time. Not overloaded with everything all at once....

Interviewer: Do you think it was about the right amount of time in the gallery or would you have liked to have had more or less time there?

Tina: I think a little bit more, kind of like just going with the flow sort of thing. (Interview at Museum at End of Visit - 9/2/10)

In particular, Tina highlighted the use of toy animals as a tool for engaging children with the collection. Indeed, it is noteworthy that this technique of handing out toy animals to the children through the course of the storytelling was also used to involve the mothers, with the bag of toys sometimes handed to the mother to administer. Other times the mothers just took the cue to lead the interaction with their child. The children were each given one of the toys used in the story in the 9 February 2010 visit, then invited to go around the gallery identifying other animals in the collection. The children then carefully inspected the objects displayed in this gallery.

Tina commented on the use of animal toys in this gallery-based component of the outreach visit.

Interviewer: Is there anything you think worked particularly well?

Tina: The toys worked well as we were going around [the pottery room]. That worked pretty well. Down to like their level. (Interview at Museum at End of Visit - 9/2/10)

The mothers accompanied the children as they walked around in the gallery and, as can be seen in the extract above, this component of the visit was viewed as effective. In addition, the use of the animal toys enrolled the mothers in the engagement activity (as opposed to them being passive bystanders while the education officer delivered the story activity). The active role of mothers in this gallery component of the visit could be clearly seen in the ethnographic observations.

**Perceptions of workshop time.** After the gallery visit, the education officer led the mothers and children back to the studio room, where they had begun their visit with tea and biscuits. The collection-linked craft activity was first explained by the education officer. At this early stage, there was clear non-verbal behavior indicating reticence and hesitance amongst the mothers (e.g. leaning away from the education officer, stony-faced expressions, arms folded, stiff posture). When the mothers and children commenced creating their craft objects, these initial indicators of reticence melted away and the mothers gave every indication of becoming fully engaged in the activity with their children.

Indeed, the workshop component was consistently praised by interview participants. In the following extract, the workshop time was highlighted as a positive experience for the participant's daughter.

Interviewer: Was there anything about the workshop that worked particularly well?

Jenny: I think because they [the children] do like making stuff and that, it's just the sort of thing like clay and stuff, and I don't really have a lot of those kind of materials at home. But it's something for them to make. So that sort of stuff [worked particularly well]. Just general different things. Yes, it's good. [Participant turns to her child.] You liked it, didn't you? Having a run around? (Interview at Community Center after Visit - 1/12/09)

In addition, the craft activity could be viewed as a means of connecting the museum collection with the important child activity domain of play. The perception of this craft time as a form of play can be seen in the following extract.

Interviewer: What kind of things do you think she got out of [the museum visit]?

Katie: It's just playing with all that different stuff, all the creative stuff that she doesn't have at home. It's just that sort of stuff. It was nice for her to do different stuff and playing with the other kids and stuff. It's a good environment for her. (Interview at Community Center after Visit - 1/12/09)

In addition to the dimension of play, the extract above highlights the perceived value of the social dimension of the craft-based activity ("playing with other kids"). In addition, participants reported that the craft activity linked well to the children's broader interests. In the following extract, Sarah highlights her daughter's general interest in craft activities such as this.

Sarah: She loves to learn to cut and stuff; she watches Mr. Maker on CBeebies [a children's television show] and then she tries to copy him. (Interview at Museum during Visit - 9/2/10)

As can be seen in the interview extracts above, mothers viewed the workshop-based component of the outreach visit as an effective way to engage the children through an art-based form of play. It was also clear from observing the non-verbal communication that the workshop activity allowed both mother and child to engage together in the collection-linked craft. Indeed, despite the initial framing of the workshop activity as solely focused on the children's enjoyment, the mothers were actively involved in this process with their children.

The participants were more able to acknowledge the joint enjoyment of the workshop activity after multiple visits. For example, Betty wrote in the personal meaning map on her

post-visit questionnaire (25 February 2010) after three family outreach visits “I like doing the activities there and so does [my son].”

There was also evidence for the idea that the family outreach visits offered a supportive context within which these disadvantaged mothers could develop new social contacts and interact in a new setting. This finding is supported by Betty’s personal meaning map completed on the day of the 9 February 2010 visit, which reports “everyone’s friendly”. The potential benefits of enhanced gregariousness and social contacts are well established, particularly for socially excluded individuals.<sup>2</sup>

**Secondary impacts of family outreach visits.** A key indicator of the perceptions of the young mothers engaged by this recurring outreach event is their interest in returning for future visits. On this point, there was universal agreement amongst those who attended an outreach visit: They all expressed strong interest in attending future outreach visits.

Interviewer: Do you think you’d be interested in going the next time?

Carrie: Yes, yes, I’d go again. I’d definitely go again because [my daughter] really enjoyed it. (Interview at Community Center after Visit - 1/12/09)

In addition, there was evidence of a secondary benefit of the family outreach visits bringing the mothers into a historic part of the town that they would not normally visit.

Interviewer: Do you go to that part of town very much?

Carrie: Not really, no. I go to the main town center usually. (Interview at Community Center after Visit - 1/12/09)

Moreover, for a mother who used to visit the part of town near the museum, she did not visit the museum or other nearby cultural institutions. Thus, this visit took her into new territory.

Interviewer: Do you go out to town very much?

Katie: Well, I used to live over that way [unclear] so I used to go around town and that, but not really to do anything specific, to be honest. (Interview at Community Center after Visit - 1/12/09)

The interview extracts above offer some preliminary evidence of the potential secondary benefits of this outreach program in engaging individuals with the cultural offerings in their community.

### Discussion

This exploratory study found that the family outreach visits in the present case were viewed positively from the perspective of those engaged. The very low level of prior experience with cultural institutions presented an initial barrier to these individuals' attendance at the Fitzwilliam Museum. However, this barrier was overcome for a number of disadvantaged young mothers through the opportunity to visit the museum as part of a facilitated group, with activities aimed at ensuring their children's enjoyment.

Within the outreach visit, mothers valued both the gallery and workshop-based components. Anchoring the gallery visit with a collection-linked children's story in one particular gallery was viewed as a manageable introduction to the main museum collection, although some of the mothers indicated they would prefer more time walking around the gallery. The use of toys and a focus on animals in the second outreach visit's gallery time was viewed as particularly effective at introducing and enhancing the children's experience of the museum collection. This finding aligns with O'Neill's (2002, p. 35) argument in favour of "managing the context in which individuals encounter aesthetically charged objects so that individuals can have positive rather than negative experiences is the ethical responsibility of art museum curators."

Moreover, the workshop-based activities were viewed as an engaging way to bring play into the visit, thereby fully distancing the family outreach visit experience from prior



negative stereotypes of stern behavioral and noise control from museum staff. Overall then, this method of engaging previously excluded young mothers was valued and viewed as effective by participants. All who attended expressed positive views about the visit and indicated they would be very interested in attending further events in this kind of facilitated group setting. It would be worth exploring in future research the degree to which the outreach visits examined in the present study translate into broader engagement with cultural institutions beyond the museum in the present study. Nevertheless, it is clear that this approach reached individuals who might otherwise not be engaged by cultural institutions at all. Future research could investigate the longer-term impacts of engagement with museums for those who are culturally excluded, beyond the few months time horizon of the present study.

The outreach program evaluated in this case gives fodder to both optimistic and pessimistic accounts of museums' efforts to be more inclusive. The optimistic interpretation is that the outreach program demonstrates the museum's commitment to developing ever greater inclusivity and reducing erstwhile cultural exclusion that it has historically helped to reinforce. The pessimistic interpretation is that an art museum creating an outreach program like the one examined in this case is a way to keep the external pressure for greater inclusivity separated from the core operations of the museum. That is, if the outreach agenda is addressed by one distinct program within the museum, then the museum can absolve itself of responsibility for making its collections and interpretation practices more inclusive.

Nevertheless, the results of the present study suggest that the political view that art museums are "engines of ideology" (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1969/1991, p. 3) and exclusion should be partially re-considered. Indeed, this research indicates that "home town museums" can be particularly important for bringing in members of "disadvantaged classes" (Bourdieu & Darbel, 1969/1991, p. 23). In this case, the link to a local playgroup for socially excluded

mothers and their children was effective at bringing them into the museum. Once in attendance, the family outreach visit then provided an emotionally safe and positive introduction to the museum. Furthermore, it could be useful to explore the degree to which addressing social exclusion factors such as lack of transportation correlates with changes in cultural exclusion patterns. In the present case, the barriers to museum attendance were primarily subcultural and psychosocial, not economic or physical. However, the degree to which basic infrastructure can block access to cultural institutions is worth further exploration in a broader range of cities.

A key strength of the practitioner's approach throughout the family outreach visits in this case was the successful enrollment of mothers into taking an active role in the engagement process. In the gallery-based component, aspects of the gallery were highlighted for the children to seek out with their parents' support. In the studio an initial demonstration of the craft activity by the education officer was followed by a clear handover of lead responsibility to the mothers, with the education officer circulating to offer support and assistance as needed. Such techniques provided an empowering experience for the mothers involved. Future research aimed at identifying further specific techniques that are effective at enhancing inclusivity in museum practices would be beneficial. Moreover, the positive outcomes from these experiences offer preliminary evidence that the view of art museums as inherently exclusionary may excessively reify past and current communication practices within these institutions.

This research contributes to the literature on the impacts of cultural experiences, indicating the ways in which museums can make such experiences more inclusive. The question of whether resources will be invested and mainstream museum practices shifted to reduce exclusivity remains unanswered in most Western contexts globally. The broader issue of whether combatting cultural exclusion and ensuring access to so-called "high culture" is a

worthwhile goal also remains open to debate. Public funds are always a scarce resource, and policymakers will have to consider whether the high cost of increasing inclusivity and participation in high art and culture amongst socially excluded groups is justified by the kinds of benefits elucidated in the present study.

Despite the relative success of the present outreach case, museums and galleries should not develop an unrealistic view of what they can change (Newman, 2002) on their own or within a single visit (Dawson & Jensen, 2011). However, delivering a positive experience for “first-time visitors to art museums, for whom [potentially] none of the works make sense” (O'Neill, 2002, p. 35) is not a simple or straightforward task, particularly for socially excluded young mothers with very young children. Indeed, the barriers to inclusivity should not be underestimated. Any cultural institution's contribution to a social and cultural inclusion will be limited in its reach given the scope and complexity of the problem, which cuts across the domains of health, education, housing, unemployment, and crime. Given this complexity, any outreach activities of cultural institutions should be conceived as part of broader efforts to foster a more inclusive society (Jensen & Wagoner, 2012; Wagoner & Jensen, 2009). Simply sitting back and waiting for audiences that have heretofore been excluded by the framing of high culture within art museums to spontaneously initiate a new relationship with such institutions is obviously unrealistic. This study shows that such outreach requires well-considered action on the part of museums.

The methods employed for this research were primarily ethnographic in nature, but do not constitute a full-scale ethnography. A full-scale ethnography would have involved much greater embedding in the local community and more regular contact with the young mothers outside of the playgroup and museum context. Nevertheless, this study is unusual within the museum studies literature because it took place at least in part outside of the museum, and within the participants' local community. Such moves beyond the physical space and typical

visitor profile of the museum opens new possibilities for insights into the ways in which museums can develop new audiences and impacts (Dawson & Jensen, 2011). Future research closer to full-scale ethnography would likely generate even greater insights.

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<sup>1</sup> The GCSE qualifications represent the end point for compulsory schooling in the UK (completed at age 16). After completing this qualification, the pupil decides whether to stay on in formal schooling on a university-oriented track, go for vocational training, or enter the workforce.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dta.org.uk/resources/glossary/socialinclusion>