**Exploring our values – an invitation to museums**

New research opens up exciting potential for museums to explore, with impacts on our communal values

*Museums are custodians of our material culture. They are safe and respected communal spaces which offer a real opportunity to reflect upon our past, ponder life’s complexities and potentially to think about the world differently.*

*Museums can play a crucial role in reflecting and shaping people’s values – the things that matter to people in life. These values play a crucial role in determining levels of wellbeing, cultural belonging, and public expressions of concern about a wide range of different social and environmental challenges. Research suggests new ways to encourage reflection on values and the factors that shape these.*

Common Cause Foundation recently worked with internationally leading social psychologists and Ipsos-MORI to conduct **a survey of the values of one thousand demographically representative UK citizens**.

We found that:

* 74% of UK citizens place greater importance on *compassionate* values (associated with greater wellbeing, cultural belonging, concern about social and environmental issues, and civic engagement) than *selfish* values
* However 78% of UK citizens *underestimate* the importance that atypical fellow citizen places on compassionate values and *over-estimate* the importance that they place on selfish values
* People who suffer such misconceptions about a typical fellow citizen’s values also report higher levels of cultural estrangement and lower levels of civic engagement (they are less likely to have voted, for example).
* Asked what values they believe are encouraged by ‘arts and culture – galleries, museums, theatre and music’, most people say that they believe these institutions encourage compassionate values less than they themselves hold these to be important, and encourage selfish values more than they themselves hold these to be important.

**Why is this important?**

These results point to the potential benefits of supporting people to understand:

* Their own values
* Common misperceptions about other people’s values
* Factors that shape both people’s own values and their understanding of other’s values

We predict that an exploration of people’s own values will strengthen awareness of the importance that they typically place on compassionate values, and the benefits of this for personal wellbeing.

We predict that conveying a more accurate perception of a typical fellow citizen’s values will further strengthen people’s wellbeing, cultural belonging and civic engagement.

Finally, we predict that equipping people to understand some of the factors that shape their values – and those of their fellow citizens – will lead them to become more supportive of institutions that foster the expression of compassionate values, and more critically aware of the impacts of institutions that encourage selfish values.

**What are the implications for staff in museums and galleries?**

*Implication 1: Build values-literacy among staff*

Staff in museums and galleries could develop an understanding of values and the cultural importance of these. They could come to understand how values are implicitly communicated through the work that they do – through all aspects of the experience that they create for public audiences, and the interpretations that they produce. Building on these insights, they could work to embed compassionate values in visitors’ experience.

Our research suggests that arts and cultural institutions outstrip others in encouraging compassionate values. But there is still work to be done. People report that they themselves attach greater importance to compassionate values than institutions in the arts and culture sector. Making these values implicit in a visitor’s experience would, we predict, lead to a deepening of public appreciation of the work of museums, an increase in return visits, and a deepening of public support for the work of museums.

Some questions that museum visitors might be invited to explore: You’re a young woman from Manchester? How do your values different from those of a typical person from Manchester? A typical woman? Other people of similar age? How do they compare to those of a typical person of the same age and gender living in Birmingham?

*Implication 2: Build awareness of others’ values*

Most people are unaware of the importance that others attach to compassionate values. This is something that could be conveyed compellingly through exhibits in museums. We can foresee, for example, exhibits which prompt people to explore their own values and the implications of these for their wellbeing, cultural belonging and civic engagement. These could be built around a simple values-quiz that visitors could be encouraged to complete – perhaps leading to the generation of a personal ‘values profile’ for them to take away. A person’s own values-profile could then be mapped alongside those of other people (previous visitors to the museum, representative citizens from the locality, or nationally representative data). This would help to ‘correct’ misperceptions about others’ values. How do the values of overseas visitors to the museum compare to those of visitors from the UK? Experiments suggest that such exercises can strengthen people’s own compassionate values and deepen their commitment to civic engagement.

Some questions that museum visitors might be invited to explore: You’re a middle-aged man from Bristol? How accurate are your perceptions about the values of other people living in Bristol? Do you think people in Bristol are typical of those nationwide? What does the data tell us here? Do people typically think that those who live in their home city are different from an average UK citizen?

*Implication 3: Build understanding of the factors that shape values*

Most people are unaware of the subtle yet powerful ways in which social institutions influence their own values. An understanding of this could be conveyed in different ways, including through live data collection from visitors themselves. For example, visitors to a museum may be invited to view photographs (or to experience through a created exhibition space) showing two different routes for walking to work: one through a commercial district, one through a city park. Previous experiments suggest that when subsequently asked about their own values, people who “follow” the route through the park are likely to attach higher importance to compassionate values. What are the impacts of time spent in a shopping centre or driving to work? What are the most impactful aspects of people’s daily experience in the locality in which a museum is based?

Based on their personal ‘values profile’, people could be encouraged to reflect on how their own values differ from those of a typical person living in their region. What might be the reasons for this? Drawing on insights from social psychology, exhibits could explore a wide range of factors – from style of parenting to educational background.

Some questions that museum visitors might be invited to explore: You’re an elderly woman from Leeds? How do your values differ from those of a typical person living in Leeds? Why might these differences have arisen? Could this be as a result of childhood experiences in the 50s? Are these differences typical of other people of your generation? No? What other factors may be important here?

**How we can help**

Happy Museum Project and Common Cause Foundation are joining forces to work in this area. We are looking for collaborators in the museums sector who recognise their crucial role in helping to shape cultural values, and who are motivated to develop programmes and exhibits that support visitors in exploring their own values and the importance of these. These could be collaborators who already have funding in place that would permit the development of such opportunities, or otherwise people with whom we would partner in the development of proposals to be taken to funding organisations.

For more information contact us at Happymuseumproject@gmail.com or contact me direct on the contact numbers below.

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**Tom Crompton** has worked for nearly a decade with some of the UK’s best known charities – including NSPCC, Oxfam, Scope and WWF – on values and social change. He has advised the UK, Scottish and Welsh governments on issues related to cultural values, has collaborated in research with some of the world’s foremost academics working in this area, and has published numerous articles on cultural values in both academic and popular journals. He holds a first degree in Natural Sciences from the University of Cambridge, UK, and a doctorate in the evolution of altruism from the University of Leicester, UK. Tom is a founding director of a small not-for-profit, The Common Cause Foundation (www.valuesandframes.org).