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# Perspective-Taking Can Lead to Increased Bias: A Call for 'Less Certain' Positions in American Indian Contexts

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**Abstract** This paper presents findings from research conducted by two U.S. scholars from divergent disciplinary fields (Indigenous studies, cognitive science) and backgrounds (Chiricahua Apache, first-generation U.S. immigrant) under a National Endowment for the Arts grant (2015-2018). Our goal was to assess perceptions of American Indian peoples reflected in verbal responses (and in the lab settings, eye gaze) to historic photographs with the aim of enhancing visual competencies and deepening cultural interpretation in museum settings. Data was drawn from museum visitors at the Autry Museum of the American West and undergraduate students in a lab setting at Occidental College, both in Los Angeles, CA. Our findings indicate that perspective-taking methods employed across both field sites do not alter enmeshed and persistent bias for interpreting American Indian lives. Participants who took the perspective of the subject and even adequately visually described the photograph still tended to engage in conventional narratives (i.e. stereotypes) unrooted in comprehension of living Native communities. These findings starkly expose the distance that largely non-Native institutions must travel to fully reach the equity and inclusion efforts museums aspire to. Generalized diversity efforts in museum education based on empathy or simple description (as found in Visual Thinking Strategies) are not effective means of comprehending difference as viewers are not equipped to adequately draw independent conclusions free of bias. We argue that, especially in museum settings, where emotions are heightened, educators may productively consider methods of encouraging visitors to forestall conclusion-making and to embrace uncertainty.

## INTRODUCTION

### Revisiting Empathy

Museums and cultural institutions are newly enthusiastic about the cultivation of empathy as a desired attribute in their programming, education and outreach efforts. The Minneapolis Institute of Art recently established a Center for Empathy and the Visual Arts with Mellon Foundation support of $750,000. Their mission states it is the responsibility of art museums, "to look outside ourselves and attempt to identify with the experiences of others." (Minneapolis Institute of Art Center for Empathy & the Visual Arts, 2018, p. 1) Not only is empathy thought to enhance diversity and inclusion efforts, but it also viewed as a useful marketing tool. In 2017, the marketing firm Culture Track released a report which highlights fostering empathy as a goal for institutions catering to "cultural consumers," with museums being the most populous of this group. (*Culture 2017 Study*, 2017).

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Museum education efforts aimed at creating a more equitable society and reaching diverse audiences are certainly worthy goals, but how can museum professionals be sure that their efforts are effective? In particular, what data exists indicating museum audiences are able to alter inherent bias while visiting a museum? Moreover, what are the roles that emotional empathy and cognitive perspective taking play in decreasing cultural biases? These questions led us to design a National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) funded collaboration in 2014 titled "Expanding cultural competencies for interpreting American Indian subject matter in museums through cognitive perspective taking." Rather than only theorize these academic debates, we sought to demonstrate our hypotheses utilizing empirical methodologies.

We tested the assumption that increased empathy and prejudice reduction are best achieved through cognitive perspective-taking by collecting data in a controlled lab setting and in the naturalistic environment of the museum. Our interdisciplinary work as co-researchers yielded striking results about museum visitors' behaviors when tasked to take the perspective of American Indians.[1]

## Background

Our research process began when Mithlo, (Chiricahua Apache), as former Chair of American Indian Studies at the Autry Museum of the American West, encountered a striking carte-de-visite photograph being prepared for exhibition. The photograph was of an elegant and self-possessed Native man wearing a Victorian coat, with what appeared to be a trade blanket wrapped around his waist. The caption on the photo read, "Little Crow, A Sioux Chief and leader of the Indian Massacre of 1862 in Minnesota." An adjacent photo was titled "Cut Nose, who in the Massacre of 1862 in Minnesota, murdered 18 women and children and 5 men." Additional photos in the same series taken by Joel Emmons Whitney made the purpose of the photographic documentation clear – "executed at Mankato, for taking part in Indian Massacre of 1862 (Figure 1)."[2]

The U.S. government's public execution of 38 Dakota leaders by federal authorities in Mankato, Minnesota on Dec. 26, 1862 (a spectacle that a reported 4000 people witnessed), was the largest mass-execution in U.S. history. Today known as the U.S. Dakota War, this narrative of treaty abrogation, starvation, warfare and death, stands as a key indictment of our country's treatment of Native peoples.[3] These still-under-recognized histories are a catalyst for American Indian scholars like Mithlo to create Native-centric interpretations of original source materials, a responsibility that was heightened in her role at the Autry Museum.

The discrepancy between the first reading of the image alone of a stately Dakota man captured in the elegance and intimacy of the small photo, and the purposes to which this particular photograph circulated, as a souvenir of a horrific retaliatory execution of political leaders, was disturbing. The distinction between appreciating the photograph itself as a visual prompt and the subsequent reading of the caption presented a disjuncture – a quandary of how to react given the gristly circumstances of the photographic moment.

On a broader interpretative level however, the physical evidence of this souvenir and its place in American history within the context of museum display is another consideration altogether. This photograph, and the ends to which it was used as a souvenir of a public hanging, is reminiscent of the "Without Sanctuary" lynching photography book, website and exhibit that circulated in 2000

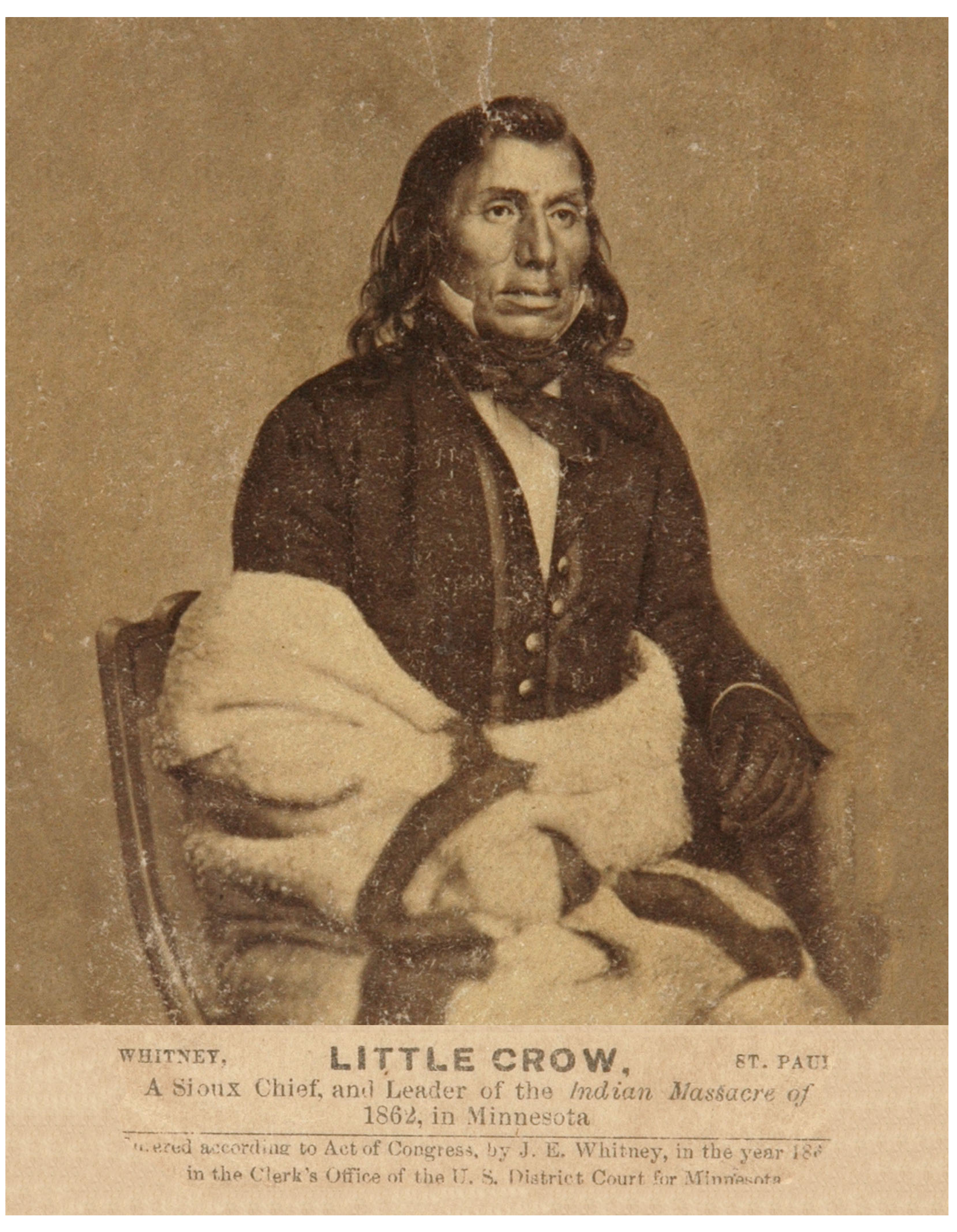


**Figure 1.** Whitney, Joel Emmons. (1862). "Little Crow, a Sioux Chief." Albumen print, 4 × 2 1/2 in. Gift of Ms. Janet Laird. Braun Research Library Collection, Autry Museum; P.38444. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

(Collection of James Allen and John Littlefield, n.d.). The prominent difference between these two sets of photographic evidence is the lack of a public register in which to view the Emmons Whitney photographs of American Indians, a conceptual gap that is all to frequent in interpretation of American Indian history.

As researchers, we were confident that the average museum visitor would not feel the same charge of recognition – the keen sense of betrayal of Native rights and the injustice of genocidal government policies – that those knowledgeable of American Indian history might feel upon revisiting this violent event. In fact, the Walker Art Center in 2017 discovered its complicity in historical forgetting when it received strong protest in reaction to the recreation of hanging gallows similar to the ones used at Mankato as a piece of art (Cascone, 2017). This lack of a Native perspective is what makes visiting museums for American Indian peoples often a lonely and trying experience. Disheartened by ignorance, perhaps even angry, Native visitors, (the subject population of museums with American Indian holdings), are subjected to the "willful ignorance" not only of museum visitors, but also museum educators, staff and leadership that fail to incorporate Indigenous perspectives.[4]

Studies consistently reveal that non-Indians possess little understanding of American Indian history and often "have a foggy, distorted set of perceptions about Indians, usually based on little direct contact and what some admitted were little more than Hollywood stereotypes and generalizations." (Doble & Yarrow, 2007, p. 11) The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), the oldest and largest national organization of American Indian and Alaska Native tribal governments confirmed in a recent resolution (2017) that "Native people are concerned with our collective image, identity and acceptance and believe these misrepresentations jeopardize our future" naming the harms enacted by inaccurate depictions of Native people stating, "Negative images and representations through film and television lead to negative treatment of Native youth impacting their self-esteem and mental health."

The historic amnesia of many Americans is the cumulative outcome of U.S. political policy that has normalized American Indian victimhood, subservience and degradation (Mithlo, 2019). These state-sanctioned policies over time create a context in which the human rights of Indigenous peoples and communities are commonly trivialized – politically, socially and economically (Moreton-Robinson, 2016). The Indigenous studies approach to museum education that we are employing in this study makes this frame of willful ignorance of American Indians transparent.

How then can American Indian materials be employed in museum education settings without disparaging and alienating Native communities? And is it possible to reach non-Native audiences on a level of understanding that does not minimize the genocidal horrors of American conquest and colonization, but may productively engage these harrowing narratives? We believe that images do matter and that museums have a role to play in addressing the harms that inaccurate representations perpetuate. These harms can be mitigated with thoughtful and purposeful educational initiatives based on scientific findings.

Thus, our aim was to identify interventions that may be successful in altering persistent conceptions of racial difference using the arts as a forum of analysis. We asked Autry Museum visitors and student participants at Sherman's lab in Occidental College to take on specific mindsets when interpreting historic photographs of American Indian peoples. Based on a vast psychological literature, we hypothesized that cognitive perspective-taking (i.e. asking participants to take on the perspectives

of the American Indian peoples depicted in a set of historic photographs) would increase emotional engagement and empathy, while decreasing participants' use of conventional narratives relative to controls. It is significant that we carried out this research in the large, urban core setting of Los Angeles, a city with one of the highest populations of urban American Indians nationally (Mapping Indigenous LA, n.d.).

Within the psychological literature, empathy is often understood in one of two contexts; emotional empathy refers to understanding another individual by "resonating" with their experiences and emotional states (e.g. I observe that you are in pain and subsequently feel pain as well). A related process, cognitive empathy, also often called *cognitive perspective taking*, refers to understanding others by making inferences about their intentions and simulating their experiences in your mind's eye (e.g. I observe your pain and understand it but do not necessarily feel pain myself). Both emotional empathy and cognitive perspective-taking seem to play a role in moral behaviors (Decety & Cowell, 2014). For example, when participants are invited to adopt other's perspectives in psychology lab experiments, they tend to show decreased stereotyping, increased perceived similarity and closeness, increased emotional investment, increased intergroup understanding, desire to engage in intergroup contact, and increased cooperation (e.g. Bodenhausen, Todd, & Richeson, 2009; Stephan & Finlay, 1999; Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003; Wang, Kenneth, Ku, & Galinsky, 2014).

In contrast to these standard findings, our research demonstrates the inability of museum visitors to consider American Indians as anything but objects; basically, props in an often-elaborate fantasy world populated by fictional "chiefs" and "princesses." While visitors may feel more emotion seeing photographs in a museum exhibition setting than seeing photographs on a computer screen, these heightened emotions did not indicate empathy or understanding, even in settings with high populations of American Indian peoples. Importantly, and counter to many standardly accepted findings, perspective-taking proved to be an inefficient tool for garnering empathy in contexts addressing American Indian cultures. Our conclusions are in concert with related psychological research on implicit bias demonstrating how Native people are considered equivalent to sports mascots and both are disparaged (Chaney, Burke, & Burkley, 2011).

Our central recommendation from the study is for museum visitors to delay an automatic interpretation of American Indian materials and to cultivate curiosity, rather than seek reinforcement of prior assumed knowledge. We argue that the adoption of an uncertain position is a productive attitude for learning, especially in American Indian subject contexts in which notions of the primitive and civilized still prevail, leaving little room for detailed or nuanced understanding. We recognize however, that the institution of the museum may be limited in its present form to enact these types of changes. Anthropologists Ivan Karp and Corinne A. Kratz (2015) propose the concept of the "interrogative museum" defined as "moving away from exhibitions that seem to deliver a lecture. . .to a more dialogue-based sense of asking a series of questions" and to "develop a plural sense of answers to the enduring and the changing questions that museums ask. . ." In concert with the direction of our recommendations, the authors readily concede that the "interrogative museum" approach may not be easily incorporated in the museum enterprise as it is currently conceived, "Admittedly this may not be fully realized in any real-world situation, but it is a goal towards which to strive" (Karp & Kratz, 2015, p. 281). Likewise, our research aims to bring forth new considerations as a means of forwarding the dialogue between Native peoples and the museum enterprise without overt concern for a

solution-based outcome. Indigenous populations have been making loud and public truth claims about the colonial institution of the museum for decades. These findings add veracity to the arguments presented in the past, while leaving the solutions open for interpretation and potential implementation.

Readers may note that as researchers, our project was crafted to collect data, and was not focused in advocating for pre-determined outcomes. Our stance was broadened over time as our host institution, the Autry Museum of the American West, invited us to share our project during one of their "Research in Progress" public programs. The staff, docents and public who attended our presentation made it clear that they anticipated that we would provide recommendations, so we gradually incorporated more prescriptive aspects into our reportage of the findings. Our reluctance to provide recommendations was based in our desire to provide non-biased data that others could then implement according to their own needs and orientations. In addition, we recognize that each museum context will vary and that universal applications in museums and cultural institutions may not be productive or advised.

## DESIGN EXPERIMENTATION

Andrew J. Pekarik (2010) advocated what he termed "design experimentation," stating, "If we organize exhibitions as design experiments, we can begin to define – in a clearer, more thoughtful and accurate way – the ecology of the environment that gives rise to the museum experience." His essay indicated that he was unaware of an exhibition project that "has been or is being consciously developed as a design experiment."

Our project is just that – an experiment designed as a museum exhibition. This interdisciplinary research was composed of two sets of experiments – one that took place in a lab setting on the campus of Occidental College and another data collection set that took place in the Autry Museum's "jewel case gallery" – a temporary exhibit location that merged seamlessly into the *Art of the West* exhibition in the Irene Helen Jones Parks Gallery of Art (February 2017 – May 2017). Data collection across sites included the participation of Sherman's undergraduate research assistants and students enrolled in Mithlo's "Culture of Collections" class at Occidental College. Note that aspects of the lab results will be referenced in this essay, but are elaborated upon more thoroughly in associated publications (Sherman, Cupo, & Mithlo, 2020).

A defining strength of our study is its interdisciplinary nature. Sherman's training as a cognitive scientist and Mithlo's training as a cultural anthropologist/American Indian Studies scholar contributed uniquely to the character and implementation of our collective work. Our research enacted what scholars at the Laboratoire de Muséologie et d'Ingénierie de la Culture (LAMIC) defined in 2006 as, "one of the most interesting ways of practising museology" adapting "transversality" and "multidisciplinarity" as requisites to enacting a "meeting space" rather than simply theorizing museums (Côté, Dubé, Edwards, & Bourbeau, 2006).

Our research investigated how viewers' mindset, including prior perceptions and knowledge, shaped their interpretation of historic photographs. We asked whether it is possible for viewers to think about individuals they see represented in art and material culture, individuals who they may

consider to be distinct from their own background and role in a way that can enhance their own self-understanding as well as their understanding of others.

We used photographs of American Indians as eliciting devices with Autry Museum visitors and Occidental College lab participants to ascertain attitudes and beliefs about American Indians. To garner more accurate results, we selected visuals that were standardized. We chose photographs based on them being: (a) of a sufficient size to employ in the museum context, (b) a high enough resolution without distracting out of focus qualities, (c) ideally made by the same photographer to ensure consistency and (d) accessioned in the collection of the Autry Museum. The visuals we ultimately chose to use as research prompts are those of photographer Edward S. Curtis (1868—1952) known for his production of the 20-volume photographic project "The North American Indian" (1907–30).

Adoption of the Curtis legacy as visual prompts represented an interesting turn of events as Mithlo had published a critical review twenty years prior charging that exhibits of Curtis's work served to "reify rather than challenge notions of historic authority" (Mithlo, 2003). We ultimately decided to use the Curtis collection because the images satisfied our selection criteria of standardization and could function as generic prompts due to the ubiquitous nature of Curtis' oeuvre. This selection process again illustrated the dynamic nature of interdisciplinary work as Mithlo's training alone would have irretrievably rejected Curtis as a candidate due to his close association with assimilationist sentiments, whereas Sherman refreshingly was not familiar with Curtis or his disputed legacy.

Our methodologies included eye gaze (lab-only), self-reports, physiology, and written (lab-only) and verbal (museum-only) responses. The museum data collection consisted of 59 museum visitor responses (out of 75 recruited participants) to four portraits, and the lab data collection consisted of 116 responses to fifteen portraits.[5] Each viewer was assigned to one of three mindset conditions: (1) perspective-taking, (2) conventional narrative suppression, or (3) control. For perspective-taking, participants were asked to imagine the life of the subject – what would it be like to walk in their shoes; what were they thinking or feeling. For suppression, participants were asked to avoid thinking of conventional narratives during viewing and to remain objective and detached. Finally, for control, participants were not given specific instruction. After viewing the photograph for a minute, viewers were asked first to share their impressions and reactions, to describe what they saw, and finally to rate how emotionally engaged they were with the image. We hypothesized that compared to control and suppression, encouraging viewers to take the perspective of the individual depicted would affect how emotionally moving they found the photograph, how they perceived and visually described the photograph, and how much cultural bias they instantiated.

Here, we only report on a subset of the data collected, with a focus on the verbal and written responses, with coding applied to the variables of (a) conventional narratives, (b) visual descriptions, (c) emotion-related judgments, (d) self-related judgments (e) curiosity and uncertainty, and (f) historical assessments. Viewers' responses were transcribed and coded by three independent raters blind to the mindset condition and participant information (co-authors and a student researcher). Below, we detail the criteria that raters used to code whether conventional narratives were present in the verbal and written responses (Table 1).

It is important to note that our coding methodology looked for not one instance of the words or phrases above, but a clustering of these words and descriptions. In addition, we are aware that some

Table 1.
Qualitative coding criteria

| | |
|---|---|
| Emotion-related judgments | Positive: Describe the subject positively (e.g.): "happy," "proud," "strong," "powerful," "wise," "solemn knowledge," "calm." |
| | Negative: Describe the subject negatively (e.g.): "annoyed," "bad temperament," "strict," "angry," "not happy," "twisted," "miserable," "tired." |
| Empathy | Relates the subject to something/someone in their lives. |
| | Suggests they feel compassion and understanding for the person. |
| Visual descriptions | Any reference to subjects' attire, hairstyle, or headdress. |
| | "Objective" descriptions of what can explicitly be seen: Describing the quality of the photograph/ coloring. |
| | Age, gender, physical features (e.g. eyes are glassy). |
| | Modern/traditional: but only insofar as it descriptive of what can be seen (modern clothing vs. traditional clothing). |
| Conventional narratives | Employs narratives and biases they already have. May seem like descriptions but there is no evidence in photograph to support them. |
| | Seems to be jumping to a conclusion/creating a closed narrative. |
| | Creates fantastical or exoticizing narrative. |
| | Employs own standards to judge the person ("The jewelry or headdress they are wearing suggests they have a high status in society") when statements are wrong. |
| | Seems to have small amount of knowledge that is applied inappropriately under the guise of the pan-Indian model ("I knew a Native person once," "I just read a book on Natives," "I just bought a pot in New Mexico," "I always buy jewelry from Indians.") |
| | Questioning the subject's cultural authenticity based on their appearance or clothing. |
| | When two or more of the following stereotypical references are combined with closed narratives: |
| | Describing the subject as looking tired, dirty, lonely, isolated, worn out, exhausted, as having been through a lot, having survived so much, or as having "a tough past." |
| | References to a subject looking proud, hard-working, resilient, or like a tribal leader. |
| Curiosity/uncertainty | Uses of the words "curious," "questioning," or "wonder." |
| | Demonstrating that they want to know more about the subject's story, not jumping to conclusions. |
| | Feeling enlightened/learned something new. |
| | Use of open-ended questions. |
| | Questioning whether the subject wants to be in the photograph or is forced into taking the photo. |
| Historical assessments | Responses that include references to American imperialism, colonization, forced assimilation, or oppression. |
| | Responses to the time period specifically: "This is 1945..." |
| | Placing the photograph into history or questioning time frame ("I wonder when this was taken.") |
| | Commenting on cultural norms. |

**Figure 2.** Distribution of gaze allocations using a heat map for a representative participant from each condition (left: control, middle: perspective-taking, right: suppression). Curtis, Edward S. (1923). "Wife of Modoc Henry-Klamath." Photogravure, 18.1 × 13.3 in. Braun Research Library Collection, Autry Museum; CUR.1545. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

of the attributes conveyed in these verbal descriptions might appear as positive in nature. This is where the utility of the phrase "conventional narrative" comes into play. Mithlo argues that the use of the word stereotype indicates only a negative interpretation and is too weighted with pre-determined saliences to be useful as an analytical tool (Mithlo, 2009). Adoption of the reference "conventional narrative" is a more productive approach to thinking through these tightly-woven associations of visual descriptions and meaning. All social groups use the shorthand knowledge associated with what we commonly refer to as "stereotypes" not simply so-called dominant groups. Releasing the associations of the referent "stereotypes" to a broader association of "clusters of meaning" inherent in the conventional narrative framework allows researchers to look more deeply into how implicit bias and racism function.

## FINDINGS

We present both the lab and the museum data to demonstrate the convergence of evidence in a controlled setting (lab) relative to a naturalistic (museum) environment.

Results from lab data suggest that perspective-taking led viewers to gaze at the eyes of the depicted subject more often, whereas conventional narrative suppression led viewers to gaze at objects more (i.e. decorative features, hair, headpieces). Additionally, viewers who took the perspective of the subject used more emotional words relative to control and suppression. For application in museums, these findings point to the positive impact of interpreting Native peoples' lives rather than focusing on the objects that Native people manufacture (Figure 2).

Results from the verbal and written responses in the museum and lab told a striking story. These findings, when taken together, powerfully demonstrate consistent responses in the controlled setting of the lab and the naturalistic setting of the museum that are summarized as follows.

1. Consistent with previous findings (e.g. Kreps, 2015), museum visitors used more emotion-related language when describing the photograph than did lab participants. Overall, participants assigned to perspective-taking used more emotion-related language when describing the photograph than did participants who were assigned to control or suppression. These differences (between perspective-taking, suppression, and control) were larger for lab participants than they were for museum visitors.

2. Across both the lab and museum contexts, there were few responses demonstrative of empathy. However, museum visitors exhibited more empathy than did lab participants. Additionally, perspective-takers exhibited more empathy than control groups across both the lab and museum contexts.

3. In both the lab and museum, perspective-takers used fewer visual descriptions than those assigned to control or suppression. This result is congruent with eye tracking results in that perspective-takers may focus more on the person and their inner states, whereas participants assigned to control and suppression may focus more on visual descriptors such as objects.

4. Significantly, half of all respondents (lab and the museum) expressed cultural bias by use of conventional narratives. While perspective-taking appeared to lead to fewer conventional narratives in the museum than control and suppression, lab participants taking the perspective of the depicted individual employed more conventional narratives than individuals in control or suppression groups. These conventional narratives were often accompanied by a visual description suggesting that participants may have used visual information as a means for justifying and confirming their biases. In addition, the perspective-taking was sometimes taken to a level where the respondent adopted the personality of the individual depicted, speaking in a first-person narrative as if in a dramatic play. We interpreted the counterintuitive finding of perspective-taking resulting in significantly higher rates of conventional narratives (stereotypes) as indicative of implicit bias and what we term "cultural fantasy" about American Indian peoples. In short, visitors were unable to enact a humanistic response when tasked to take the perspective of American Indian people because they may not conceive of American Indians as real contemporary people, and can only relate to them as fictional characters. We consider recognition of a common humanity as a prerequisite for one to exercise empathy toward a person from a different cultural background.

5. Overall, responses rarely featured open-ended questions, curiosity or comfort with ambiguity.

6. Little historical assessments were expressed, even in the museum where more historical context was present in the form of object labels. While viewers assumed historic images were old and may have commented on the dichotomy between modern and contemporary, they rarely contextualized individual's lived realities, which included warfare and genocidal political policies. In the few instances this recognition was present, the implications were minimized (Table 2).

Table 2.
Results from verbal and written responses in the museum and lab

| | Control | | Perspective-taking | | Suppression | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Museum | Lab | Museum | Lab | Museum | Lab |
| Presence of emotion-related judgments | 72% | 60% | 75% | 72% | 70% | 59% |
| Exhibiting empathy | 11% | 5% | 14% | 7% | 6% | 5% |
| Presence of visual descriptions | 56% | 61% | 45% | 37% | 53% | 61% |
| Presence of conventional narratives | 48% | 40% | 39% | 60% | 51% | 7% |
| Exhibiting curiosity/uncertainty | 14% | 14% | 23% | 7% | 7% | 14% |
| Presence of historical assessment | 19% | 7% | 13% | 7% | 8% | 6% |

Examples of the linguistic responses include (Figure 3):

> *I'm a young woman going to meet a man my parents think I would be a suitable bride for. Don't know how I should feel, but it's nice to dress up like this (Figure 3).*

> *Picture of a young girl who seems like her clothes are burlapped- they're not good quality. Her arms are dirty. She seems maybe she had a good life that could have been better but now it's turned on hard times. I say that because the necklaces- maybe they were given to her by people that were doing better but now they've hit a hard patch (Figure 4).*

These responses are jarring for a Native person or Native advocate to process and indicate the vast distance that museums (especially non-Native museums displaying and interpreting American Indian materials) must navigate to reach a place of equity in audience reception and museum education efforts. Our research and the labor of our student researchers who equally were challenged to hear, process, and theorize this data are validated however by the promise that these findings can result in greater sensitivity on the part of museum employees who may be desensitized to these common refrains that minimize the humanity of the subjects, and by extension their living descendants.

## CONCLUSIONS

That perspective-taking increased emotionality and empathy but did not increase curiosity and historical assessments nor decrease cultural bias reveals a disjuncture in the assumption that museum visitors have an intuitive means of accessing core interpretative themes of art. In a similar vein to the exposure of wage-differentials in museum employment once "minority" populations entered the museums workforce and could not subsist off of unsubsidized earnings, an increase in non-White museum visitors exposes the selective knowledge base assumed to be present in standard educational museum outreach methodologies (Harris & Pogrebin, 2019).

Perspective-taking is premised on the supposition that a viewer can embrace the common humanity of a subject depicted. But what if this response is missing or heavily flawed due to bias and racial discrimination? Most importantly, do our cherished museum theories (including Visual Thinking Strategies, or VTS) work when dealing with race and covert racism? (Hoel, 2018) Our

**Figure 3.** Curtis, Edward S. (1910). "Wishham Girl." Platinum print 16 1/4 × 12 1/4 in. Braun Research Library Collection, Autry Museum; CUR.40. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

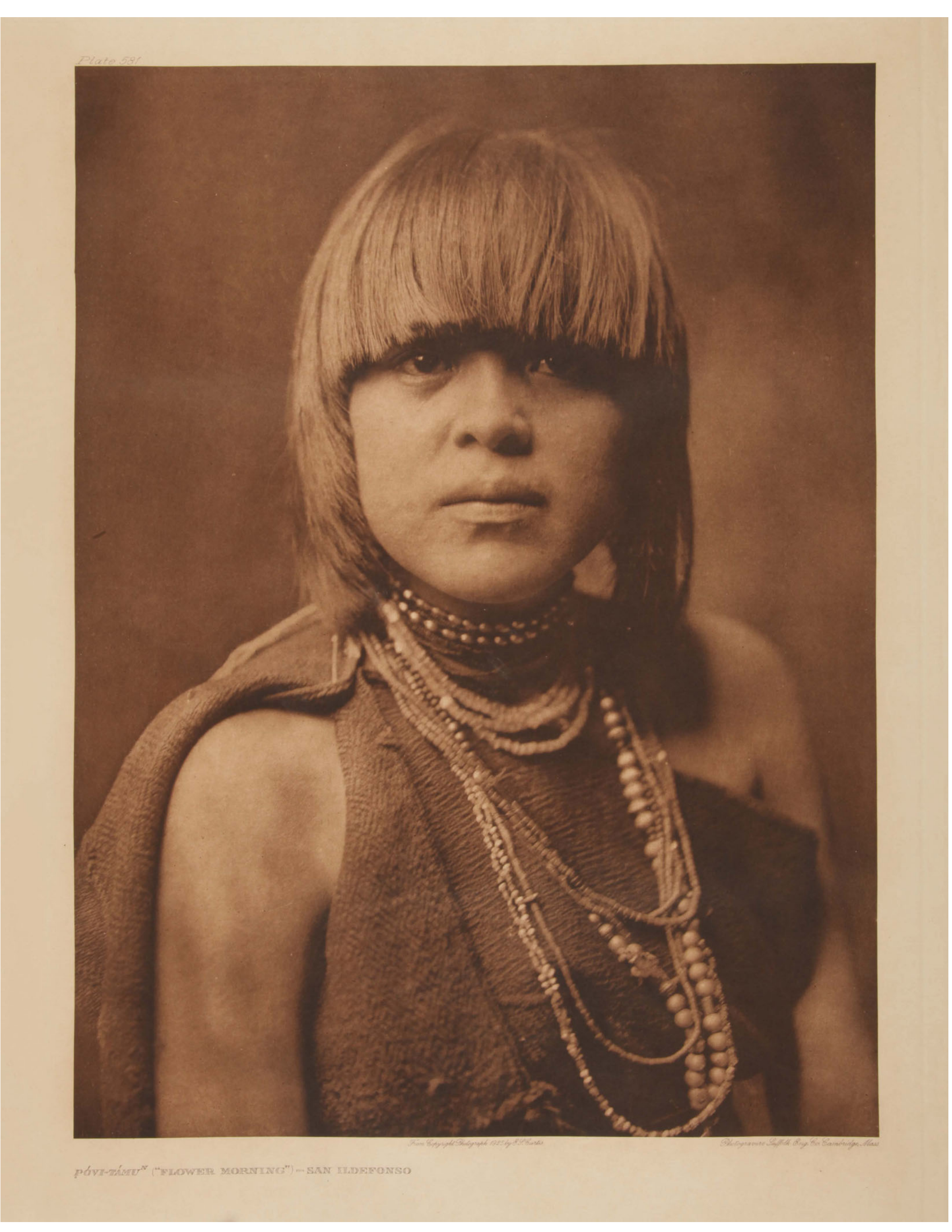


**Figure 4.** Curtis, Edward S. (1925). "Povi-Tamu (Flower Morning) San Ildefonso." Photogravure, 15 9/16 × 11 1/4 in. Braun Research Library Collection, Autry Museum; CUR.1681. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

findings cast doubt on the utility of encouraging museum visitors to independently respond to works of art with no contextual information provided. Just as majority White museum visitors may interpret cultural differences in a flattening or even biased manner as presented here, non-White museum visitors responding to works depicting their own communities may be alienated when exposed to standard or even "multicultural" educational prompts that do not reflect an accurate reading of their own cultural experiences. Pre-existing knowledge cannot be presumed, but must be conscientiously researched, and openly explored with a knowledge-leader in order to avoid stigmatization.

We realize that this position of advocating leadership in museum interpretation may appear as a regression to a didactic museum educational model, rather than the dialectic interpretative model in vogue over the past two decades (Rice & Yenawine, 2002). To be clear, our findings are not limited to a discussion framed in the debate of "top-down" or "bottom-up" learning. Inclusivity efforts in museums require educational models that can lead as well as follow. Whereas earlier debates centered around the contrast of entertainment or education in the museum, our discussion of racial and cultural variables seeks to expand current frames of analysis that assume a linear and authoritative structure by embracing an Indigenous research methodology of non-hierarchical leadership and learning. Mithlo (2012) defines this curatorial approach as American Indian Curatorial Practice, which is premised on the following attributes – work that is long-term, reciprocal, mutually-meaningful and with mentorship. These four criteria both insure that museum work is coherent with Native community needs while providing structure for intercultural exchanges.

A prerequisite for effective intercultural exchanges is the self-recognition that one's perceptions are limited. Cultivating an attitude of curiosity and even modesty are essential components of expanding one's range of understanding. Researchers at the Nura Gili Centre for Indigenous Programs, University of New South Wales, Australia argue that "less certain positions" enhance learning outcomes by requiring more intricate language and complex analytical arguments. They propose Indigenous pedagogies for decolonization whereby students are encouraged to understand the limits of their own thinking and adapt, "open, exploratory, and creative inquiry... while building language and tools for describing and analysing what they engage with." (Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012).

This "less certain" approach admittedly requires more effort on the part of museum visitors who may desire only entertainment as well as for museum professionals who are challenged to craft educational materials that allow for uncertainty while increasing their engagement with uncomfortable topics. We believe this work is worthwhile and overdue. Our approach finds congruence with recent studies such as the 2018 American Alliance of Museums' Diversity, Equity, Accessibility and Inclusion report recommending that, "every museum professional must do personal work to face unconscious bias," concluding "inclusion is central to the effectiveness and sustainability of museums (http://www.aam-us.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/AAM-DEAI-Working-Group-Full-Report-2018.pdf)."

## Questioning the Entrance Narrative; Getting Specific While Remaining Inquisitive

Ideally, museum visitors gain new understandings that enhance their pre-existing knowledge base, but the literature on museum education indicates this is an on-going challenge. A 1996 essay by

Doering and Pekarik identifies the powerful tendency for museum visitors to simply confirm their "entrance narrative," stating, "They may not want to learn much more specific detail than they already know, and they certainly do not intend to have their narratives radically revised (https://www.jstor.org/stable/40479072)."

We know a lack of a framework for interpretation leads viewers to affirm their own biases. Perspective-taking in the museum can temper some of these effects, but being "objective" and offering no context can make these biases stronger. Research specific to American Indian communities indicates that "a one size fits all" methodology for building empathy is not effective. Our findings demonstrate that cultural biases about American Indians are stubbornly resistant to change and, in some cases, appeared even more frequently for participants encouraged to adopt others' perspectives. Therefore, programming and educational interventions aimed at a generalized diversity and inclusion model (for example, Asian-American, African American, Latinx, LGBTQ audiences as a whole equating to "difference") are ill-informed and not effective in mitigating bias. Culturally specific educational outreach is required, especially in the case of American Indian topics as these programming efforts are commonly mired in incomplete and even celebratory approaches, rather than in historic truth and contemporary reality. We argue that current interventions in conveying cultural knowledge, especially in the museum setting, cannot be uniformly applied, but must be unique to each cultural group impacted. The history of American Indian peoples in the settler context of the United States must be addressed directly to achieve progress in social equity.

Future experimental research which considers the individual visitor experience may provide important insights that are more productive for change-making than the current norm of community outreach efforts alone. We are thus proposing actions beyond the standard of "utiliz[ing]. . .current cultural stakeholders to give voice for their culturally valuable historical objects" (Davidson & Esslinger, 2018, p. 169). We believe the value of uncertainty can productively extend to museum professionals responsible for exhibit content as well as to museum visitors. The value of forestalling conclusions and building tolerance for uncertainty are interventions that may be successful in altering persistent conceptions of racial difference using the arts as a forum of analysis. Future studies that investigate the reception of American Indian and Indigenous cultural materials in varied institutions, regions or using different elicitation devices may illuminate the findings presented here, providing rich data from which museum educators may productively draw. **END**

## NOTES

1. We have utilized the term "American Indian" in alignment with major cultural and educational institutions such as Mithlo's place of work at the University of California Los Angeles's American Indian Studies Center. We consider the term "American Indian" as an inert social category that is not significant for the research pursued in the present study.
2. This photo collection was destined for inclusion in the exhibition "Empire and Liberty: The Civil War and the West" (April 25, 2015- January 3, 2016) co-curated by Carolyn Brucken and Virginia Scharff.
3. The Minnesota Historical Society terms this event "the U.S. Dakota War" rather than the outdated reference "the Minnesota massacre."

4. The term "willful ignorance" is addressed in Mithlo's forthcoming book *Knowing Native Arts*, University of Nebraska Press, 2020.
5. The demographics of the subjects were: Occidental College undergraduates (age range: 18-22, 70 females), Autry Museum visitors (age range: 19 - 79, 34 female).

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