Understanding the Theme Park Visitor: A Psychological Perspective

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Edward J. Mayo
Lance P. Jarvis

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UNDERSTANDING THE THEME PARK VISITOR

DICK POPE SR
INSTITUTE
for
TOURISM STUDIES

College of Business Administration
University of Central Florida
UNDERSTANDING THE THEME PARK VISITOR

A Psychological Perspective

by

Edward J. Mayo, Ph.D.
Director, Dick Pope, Sr. Institute for Tourism Studies
College of Business Administration
University of Central Florida

Lance P. Jarvis, Ph.D.
Associate Dean
College of Business Administration
University of Central Florida

The Dick Pope, Sr. Institute for Tourism Studies
College of Business Administration
University of Central Florida

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* Many of the ideas presented in this monograph are extracted from Chapter 4 of the authors' forthcoming book, THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LEISURE TRAVEL: Effective Marketing and Selling of Travel Services (Boston: CBI Publishing Company, 1981), 400 pages.
Psychologists have often found it useful to think of an individual's personality as consisting of three parts. Each part is a separate source of thoughts, feelings, and motivations — and it is useful to view each part as directing an individual's behavior at different times. This psychological perspective, it seems, can be very useful to those who market the modern theme park. Its product — the assortment of attractions it offers to potential guests — and the way it is promoted must appeal, in one way or another, to each distinct part of a prospective visitor's personality. This monograph briefly outlines the theory underlying this psychological perspective and then discusses several important implications for those who market and operate modern theme parks as well as others in various segments of the visitor industry.
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UNDERSTANDING THE THEME PARK VISITOR
A Psychological Perspective

Explaining the popularity of theme parks in the United States would seem to be an easy task. One newsweekly describes theme parks as offering "wholesome family entertainment at reasonable prices" -- entertainment which, it says, is hard to find elsewhere. Theme parks are also described as offering a temporary escape from reality -- an outlet that has become more and more necessary in an increasingly hectic and urban society. A trip to a theme park is also recognized as an adventure, a fantasy, a chance to play in a non-competitive environment. The theme park's exciting and seemingly dangerous rides also provide an opportunity, as one sociologist puts it, "to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon otherwise lucid minds."

Probably the easiest way to explain the popularity of theme parks is simply to say that they provide their visitors with the opportunity to have a lot of fun. They help amuse people -- and by appealing to multiple interests, they amuse and attract larger and more diverse audiences than the traditional amusement parks ever did.

Nevertheless, words like, fun, fantasy, amusement, entertainment, and escape -- by themselves -- do not
adequately explain the popularity of the modern theme park. They do not adequately explain why millions of Americans each year pack up the children and travel for hour, and sometimes days, to visit one of the major theme parks in the United States.

Transactional Analysis -- a relatively new branch of psychology -- provides a new perspective for understanding the popularity of major theme parks and for explaining the psychology of family interaction and behavior during a theme park visit. The purpose of this paper is to explain some of the basic concepts of Transactional Analysis and to indicate how these basic concepts can provide a more in-depth understanding of the attractiveness of theme parks, of the many different needs and motives that a diverse set of patrons carry with them into a theme park. Examples will also be presented to illustrate how Transactional Analysis can help improve theme park advertising, group sales activities, the management and supervision of theme park employees, and guest relations.
THE THREE COMPONENTS OF PERSONALITY

Many of the roots of Transactional Analysis -- or T.A. -- come from Freudian psychology. The concepts of T.A. have provided psychologists with a new language and a simplified approach to the art of understanding human behavior. Simple words, rather than Freudian jargon, are used to describe personality factors, motivations, and social behavior. One of the basic T.A. concepts is called the "ego state" -- which is discussed in detail below, because it helps shed some important light on the behavior of theme park visitors.

According to T.A., an individual's personality consists of three important parts -- each of which is called an ego state. These three ego states are called the Parent, the Adult, and the Child. Each of the ego states is a separate source of thoughts, feelings, and behavior. And in any given situation, an individual's behavior can be directed by any of these personality parts or ego states:

You can feel things, smell things, touch things . . . you can talk to people, listen to them, look at them, and act toward them with separate and quite distinct behavior from each one of your ego states. And, because your Parent, Adult, and Child each have their own programming, each one can respond to exactly the same experience in different ways.²

¹To distinguish them from actual parents, adults, and children, the three ego states -- Parent, Adult, and Child -- are all capitalized.

The Parent and the Child ego states develop from permanent recordings in the brain. They are mental recordings of events, thoughts, images, and feelings which have happened to and around an individual almost from the time of his birth. Everything is recorded and constantly replayed within the individual's mind. Almost all of the "replays" occur unconsciously when a new situation is encountered and the individual seeks information and guidance from previous similar experiences. As suggested above, the individual can respond to exactly the same experience in three different ways -- depending upon the ego state recording he listens to. Each of the three ego states is discussed below.

The Child

Psychologists believe that the first of the ego states to develop in an individual is the Child. The Child ego state is comprised of natural feelings, thinking, and behavior. It also contains information a person needs to adapt to emotional situations. A person acting from his Child ego state would behave as he wanted to act or as he was trained to act when he was a child.

The Child is that part of one's personality which experiences feelings of frustration, inadequacy, and helplessness. In addition, it is the Child which experiences joy and which is the source of curiosity, creativity, imagination, spontaneity, impulsiveness, and the excitement
born from new discoveries. It is the Child which is responsible for completely uninhibited behavior, for seemingly ridiculous actions or playful, natural acts and statements.

The Child is that part of one’s personality responsible for feelings and emotions. And it is the Child which is responsible for most of one’s wants and desires. Whenever a person feels that he wants something, it is his Child which expresses his desires:

- "I want to go to Disney World!"
- "I want to buy a Corvette!"
- "I want to go to Hawaii!"
- "I want another piece of cake!"
- "I want to have fun!"

In I’m OK – You’re OK, Dr. Thomas Harris offers a number of physical and verbal clues to behavior directed by the Child ego state. These clues are listed in Figure 1 on the following page, and they clearly indicate that the Child ego state is responsible for an individual’s needs, wants, and desires; his sensuality; his feelings, and his emotions.

The Parent

The second ego state to develop in an individual is the Parent. It is the source of behavior and attitudes copied, usually, from the individual’s own parents, or from some other parental figure. The Parent ego state is a main

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source of an individual's opinions and prejudices, "how-to" information, and right-wrong information:

- "You ought to save for a rainy day."
- "Good girls don't stay out all night."
- "You're doing it all wrong. Let me show you how."
- "No! You can't do that."
- "Don't go to Disney World. It's a ripoff."

An individual's Parent lectures, moralizes, points its finger righteously or accusingly, teaches, and "lays down the law." The Parent is in command when the individual is scolding, when he is lecturing about what's wrong (or right) about today's youth, and when he finds himself correcting someone's grammar or manners. Other verbal and non-verbal clues to Parent-directed behavior are listed in Figure 1. These clues indicate that there are two sides to the Parent ego state. One side is sympathetic and comforting. The other side is critical, directive, and appraising. The Parent tells the individual about the way things ought to be, and it also tells the individual what is right and what is wrong.

The Adult

The third ego state to develop in an individual is the Adult. The Adult is the part of one's personality which directs rational thinking and the objective processing of information. The Adult directs behavior which is almost computer-like, devoid of emotion, and totally objective. It is the ego state which directs problem-solving. The
Adult also tests data which is stored in the Parent and Child ego states for appropriateness in specific situations.

Everyone, even little children, has an Adult which is capable of making assessments about outside reality. Thus, the Adult ego state is not related to a person's age. It is oriented to current reality and the objective gathering of information. It is organized, adaptable, intelligent, and functions by testing reality, estimating probabilities, computing dispassionately, and making judgments based on facts. Figure 1 provides a number of verbal and non-verbal clues to Adult-controlled behavior.

**Ego State Balance**

Each of the three ego states — the Parent, the Adult, and the Child — functions in an emotionally healthy individual. In other words, in a normal person, there are times when his Parent will be and should be in charge of his behavior. There are also times when a person's Adult will be and should be in charge of his behavior and times when his Child will be and should be in charge of his behavior.

For example, when a loved one needs sympathy or when a youngster needs discipline, it will normally be the Parent which gives the sympathy or the discipline. When someone is working on the family budget or trying to solve a complex problem at work, his Adult will normally be in command. A person's Child will normally be in command when he is in active pursuit of having fun — on a vacation.
trip to Las Vegas, during an inter-office softball game, during a visit to a theme park.

A person whose behavior is controlled almost exclusively by just one ego state may have a serious enough personality problem to warrant psychiatric help. For example, a person whose behavior is guided primarily by his Parent ego state -- the so-called Constant Parent -- often treats everyone around him as if they were children. The Constant Adult usually qualifies as a bore; his relationships with others are likely to be sterile because the caring Parent and the fun-loving Child are not allowed to function. The Constant Child is the perpetual little boy or little girl who, like Peter Pan, does not want to grow up; this person does not think for himself, make his own decisions, or take responsibility for his own behavior.

Summary

An individual's three ego states can be likened to three different voices. The Parent is the voice which says things like: "You must... You ought to... No, you shouldn't... Don't ever..." The Parent plays back such old familiar recordings as: "If you're going to do a job, do it right... Big boys don't cry... Idleness is the devil's playmate... A penny saved is a penny earned."

The Child is the voice which says things like: "I want what I want when I want it... Try and make me... Wow!.. Great!.. Drop dead..." Anytime an individual experiences feelings or emotions (fear, sadness, anger, joy, excitement, etc.), his Child is participating in the experience in some way.
The Adult operates on facts -- or at least what the individual perceives to be facts. The Adult is the voice which says things like: "What's going on here? .. Why am I doing this? .. How much will it cost? .. Can I afford this? .. If I leave now, I should have no trouble catching the five o'clock plane."
THEME PARK APPLICATIONS

The major point of the preceding discussion is that each individual personality has three important parts to it: the Parent, the Adult, and the Child. Each of these parts of the personality is responsible for directing different kinds of behavior. Although it would seem that the behavior of a theme park visitor would be controlled primarily by his fun-loving Child, his Parent and Adult may have a lot to say about the decision to visit the theme park and what the individual does while he is there. Thus, it may be useful to consider that each theme park guest brings with him three different personalities and each must be catered to in some way or other.

This second section identifies and discusses how this particular psychological viewpoint of the theme park visitor might affect theme park advertising and promotion and the assortment of attractions built into a theme park, as well as guest-employee relations, and other activities and operations.

The Theme Park Product

Before any single individual will decide to visit a theme park, each of the three parts of his personality — the Parent, the Adult, and the Child — must be convinced that such a journey makes sense. The Child ego state, of course, is easily "hooked" on visiting a theme park because, first and foremost, it promises a lot of fun. It is not unlikely, however, that the Parent and the Adult will have some reservations and questions about such a journey — and these must be addressed in some way or other.
The Parent ego state, in particular, can have some serious reservations about the Child's desire to indulge itself with a theme park visit. Remember that the Parent ego state is the main source of an individual's opinions and prejudices, "how-to" information, and right-wrong information. There are two sides to the Parent ego state, and one of these is the so-called Critical Parent. It is in this part of the personality that difficult-to-forget "do's" and "don'ts" are recorded. Some of these are illustrated on the following page, and it is easy to see how they could discourage a person from taking a trip to a theme park.

In one way or another, many of the Critical Parent messages are often expressed in the frequent conversations that take place between Parent and Child. Everyone talks to himself, and psychologists refer to these discussions as "internal dialogues". If one were to listen closely to these internal discussions, it should be easy to see that the dialogue is usually between different ego states. Very often, the internal dialogue takes place between Parent and Child -- with Adult serving as an arbitrator, because the conversation often involves conflict.

Remember that the Child ego state is that part of the individual's personality which says -- and usually with great determination: "I want what I want when I want it -- and I want to have fun now!"

At the same time, the Parent ego state is often programmed to answer the Child as follows: "No! Duty before pleasure! Let's get some more work done -- and then maybe we can talk about having some fun!"

The following internal dialogue would not be an unusual one:
Work before pleasure. Work hard and get ahead. Duty first. Be productive. Don't be lazy. Make sure you've got all your work done. Don't spend more than you can afford. Don't spend what you don't have. Live within your budget. Don't waste money. Save for a rainy day. A penny saved is a penny earned. Don't get ripped off. Waste not, want not. Plan ahead. Don't waste time. Don't...
C: "I want to go to Great Times Theme Park! And I want to go right now! Today!"

P: "Yes, but today's only Monday, and we've got to work the rest of this week."

C: "Well, why don't we take the day off?"

P: "We can't do that."

C: "Why not?"

P: "Because we've taken off too many days recently."

C: "Well, how about next Saturday?"

P: "No, because we have a wedding to attend on Saturday."

C: "How about Sunday?"

P: "No, because we have to leave town on business next Monday, and we wouldn't be able to get ready on time. And besides, we really can't afford the money this month."

Obviously, this sort of dialogue could continue for some time, but somewhere along the way one might hear:

C: "You're no fun! All you do is work, work, work!"

P: "The trouble with you is that all you think about is fun, fun, fun. . . ."

In short, the internal dialogue described here is one where the Child is calling for more fun and where the Parent answers by saying, "No, some other time."

The modern theme park can help solve this Parent-Child conflict by offering the fun the Child seeks and, at the same time, benefits that the Parent values. This can be illustrated by showing how creative advertising can be made to appeal to both the Child and the Parent.
Theme Park Advertising

According to the school of thought described here, effective theme park advertising would speak to each of an individual's three ego states. Its first task is to "hook" the "I want" Child ego state. It must clearly demonstrate that what a theme park is about is having fun. This is easily done by creating mental pictures of roller coasters, ferris wheels, live cartoon characters, cowboys, porpoises, happy people with big smiles, and so forth.

Theme park advertising's second task should then be to appease the Parent ego state and encourage it to grant permission to the Child to indulge itself. There are several ways to achieve these objectives. The most effective is to address various leisure-time motives that belong primarily to the Parent. Education is a good example. Stored somewhere in the Parent ego states of many people is the proscription: "Education is one of the most important things in life." To the extent that this Parent message is replayed while an individual contemplates a theme park visit and to the extent that he is aware that the theme park offers some educational benefits, the more likely that the individual's Parent will grant permission to his Child to indulge itself with the theme park visit.

Educational benefits, in fact, play a key role in travel behavior in general. Washington, D.C., Amish Country, Yellowstone National Park, Greenfield Village, and many other attractions are popular in no small part because they promise educational benefits. Trips to destinations are not easily classified as frivolous because the Child, though amused and entertained, stands to learn something of lasting importance. Such a journey will be "productive" in the truest since of the Protestant Work Ethic.
Old-time amusement parks offered no such benefits. They offered little besides unadulterated amusement and fun. The modern theme park is a different story. The visitor to Disney World is not only amused and entertained, but he is also given, among other things, a refresher course in American history in the Hall of Presidents. At Busch Gardens in Williamsburg, Virginia and at several other major theme parks, the visitor is treated to a day in a foreign land. At Magic Mountain and Winona Falls in the Pennsylvania Poconos, the visitor gets to spend a day in a wild west town. The Sea World parks teach their guests about marine life, while Knott's Berry Farm teaches their guests about the laser. At Marriott's Great America in Santa Clara, California, at Opryland, at Six Flags Over Texas, and elsewhere, one learns something about the history of music in America. Guests to Kings Island learn about the history of college football through the nearby College Football Hall of Fame. Educational attractions like these are the sorts of things that can appeal to the Parent in any potential visitor and convince him that a theme park visit can be something more than roller coaster rides, bumper cars, and cotton candy.

Education, of course, is not the only motivating factor that can encourage the Parent ego state to say yes to a theme park visit.

If the Parent senses some sort of obligation to permit the Child some periodic amusement, then it will be more likely to say yes.

If the Parent senses that the individual does deserve some kind of a break or change-of-pace, then it will be more likely to say yes (McDonald's promoted this with its "you deserve a break today" theme.

If the Parent senses that a theme park visit will somehow promote solidarity within the individual's family, then it will be more likely to say yes.
If the Parent believes that a theme park visit does not represent an unreasonable outlay of money, then it will be more likely to say yes.

If the Parent perceives that there is some measure of prestige or status attached to a theme park visit, then it will be more likely to say yes.

In short, educational and cultural benefits, family togetherness, relaxation and change, obligation, economy, and status and prestige are motives that normally reside in the Parent ego state. They are motives that can be addressed in theme park advertising to encourage the Parent ego state to grant permission to the Child ego state to indulge itself.

After the Child ego state has been "hooked" and after the Parent ego state has been presented with information encouraging it to give permission to the Child to indulge itself, theme park advertising would then provide the Adult ego state with factual information that will allow it to plan the theme park visit. The Adult acts as an arbitrator, trying to please the Child -- which would like to leave right away, stay forever, and spend all the money in the world -- and trying to accommodate the Parent -- which really might only wish to budget a "reasonable" amount of time and money for the journey. The Adult will need information about how to get to the theme park, how long a journey it is likely to be, how much money to bring, what lodging facilities are nearby and what they cost, and other information that will allow the individual to make travel plans. It is not unlikely that the Adult would postpone the journey until necessary factual information becomes available.

In summary, it is necessary that theme park advertising communicate with the Parent, the Adult, and the Child in each potential theme park
visitor. If appeals are made or information provided to each of the three ego states, the probability that the individual will make the theme park visit will increase.

**Theme Park Group Sales Activities**

Group sales can represent an important source of business for many theme parks. Group sales are often solicited from many different types of groups: church organizations, credit unions, fraternal organizations, labor unions, industry groups and so forth. Many of the same principles discussed above in terms of theme park advertising can be applied also to group sales activities.

In the case of group sales activities, of course, the initial objective is, in effect, to recruit group leaders (union officials, personnel officers, etc.) to help promote theme park visits by group members. To do this, special appeals must be made to each group leader's Parent and Adult ego states. The nurturing side of the group leader's Parent ego state must be addressed. The nurturing side of the Parent ego state is responsible for saying things like:

- "Take a break. You've been working too hard."
- "Is there something special you'd like to do that would make you feel better?"
- "Don't worry about it. I'll take care of everything."

These examples suggest one of the roles played by the group leader. Among other things, he is responsible for looking after the welfare of the group. This may include responsibility for providing group members with a variety of recreational and leisure-time opportunities. To promote theme park visits by group members, the group leader must be shown how
theme park visits will help him fulfill his nurturing-Parent role. By helping to promote theme park visits, he provides group members with the opportunity to enjoy wholesome family entertainment. His active assistance allows him to offer group members a viable alternative form of recreation; an alternative leisure-time activity that provides a healthy form of escape from home, office, or factory; and an alternative recreational activity that provides an opportunity for families to spend enjoyable leisure-time hours together. Theme park visits, in other words, should represent an attractive alternative to group picnics, the organizations' campgrounds, and other leisure-time activities and facilities sponsored by the group.

The group leader's Adult ego state must also be addressed. The Adult ego state, it will be recalled, is the part of one's personality which directs rational thinking and the objective processing of information. Adult-directed behavior is computer-like, devoid of emotion, and totally objective. The Adult would want to know how much it will cost group members to attend the theme park, whether special discounts are restricted to certain days of the week, and so forth. The group leader's Adult will want to know whether, in return for his assistance, group members will be entitled to any other special considerations. His Adult will also want to compute the probability that group members will avail themselves of the theme park promotion — and this computation will be aided by endorsements from leaders of other groups. The group leader's Adult will also want to examine any promotional materials with which he will be provided.

In short, the group leader can be recruited to help promote theme park visits through appeals made to his Parent and Adult ego states.
His Child ego state may also need to be addressed because he may be a potential visitor himself. Instructions accompanying promotional materials provided to the group leader should be clear and simple, and the promotional materials themselves should be viewed as point-of-purchase advertising and designed according to the principles discussed earlier.

Theme Park Guest-Employee Relations

During the past few years, one of the most popular business applications of Transactional Analysis (as well as other so-called "behavior modification" techniques) has been in organizations where there is a great deal of direct customer contact: banks, hospitals, hotels, airlines, and fast-food restaurants. T.A. is basically a communications technique, and it provides useful tools for ensuring that customer-employee relations are harmonious. T.A. offers a way of better understanding the theme park guest's motivations and expectations and a way of more effectively communicating with him so as to ensure his satisfaction.

A "transaction" occurs when an individual sends a message — either verbally or non-verbally — to another person who then responds in one way or another. A normal conversation involves a series of transactions — which, in terms of ego states, may be Adult-to-Adult, Parent-to-Child, Child-to-Child, etc.

To analyze a transaction, one has to decide which ego state made the statement (transactional stimulus) and toward which ego state of the receiver it was aimed. The transactional response from the receiver is then analyzed in a similar fashion.

There are two types of transactions which are of importance here. The first is called a complementary transaction. This type of transaction is one in which the sender receives an expected response from the other
person. There is an element of comfort involved in such a transaction.

Consider the following examples:

**ADULT-ADULT STIMULUS**

Theme Park Guest: "What time does the park close tonight?"

Theme Park Employee: "Not until 11:00."

---

**CHILD-PARENT STIMULUS**

Teenager (holding wrist and in obvious pain): "I think I broke my wrist."

Theme Park Employee: "Let me help you. I'll take you down to First Aid. It just might be a sprain."

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**CHILD-CHILD STIMULUS**

Theme Park Guest: "That's the scariest ride I've ever been on!"

Theme Park Employee: "Yeah! I love it too!"

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The second type of transaction of interest here is called a crossed transaction. In this type of transaction, an expected response is not given by the receiver. When this happens, an uncomfortable situation arises, and effective communication normally comes to a halt:
ADULT-ADULT STIMULUS

Theme Park Guest: "I'm afraid I left my pocketbook on the bench by the merry-go-round. When I went back, it was gone. Can you help me?"

PARENT-CHILD RESPONSE

Theme Park Employee: "Why did you leave it there?"

CHILD-CHILD STIMULUS

Adolescent Girl: "Disney World is the greatest place in the whole universe!"

PARENT-CHILD RESPONSE

Theme Park Employee: "But it's always so crowded. My family doesn't go there anymore."

PARENT-CHILD STIMULUS

Irate Theme Park Guest: "This is the last time I'm bringing my family here!"

PARENT-CHILD RESPONSE

Sarcastic Employee: "You do what you want to. As you can tell, we've got more than enough customers."

Theme park employees should know how to communicate effectively with theme park guests. The objective, in other words, should be to have complementary transactions. This does not necessarily come about
Some people, without knowing anything about Transactional Analysis, have a gift for being able under most circumstances to communicate harmoniously with other people. Others do not have this gift. And nearly everyone, under certain circumstances, will not be able to say the right thing at the right time. The ability to communicate effectively will be taxed under situations of stress, long hours, fatigue, hot weather, and so forth.

T.A. offers the tools that a theme park employee needs to avoid non-productive, crossed transactions with theme park guests. The theme park employee can be trained to identify the ego states controlling the behavior of park guests, and he can be trained to select the ego state from which it would be best to respond to park guests. The appropriate ego state response, for example, the complaints of an irate guest would be different than the appropriate ego state response to the guest who has fallen ill or to the smiling youngster who has asked what time the park closes. T.A. training and other forms of "behavior modification" that equip employees to handle all of the various guest relations situations that can arise in a theme park can be conducted in relatively short, periodic training sessions.

Supervision of Theme Park Employees

Many of the principles discussed above can, of course, also be applied to the management and supervision of theme park employees. In terms of effective communications, there is no difference between guest-employee relations and the relations between employees and their supervisors and theme park managers. The objective of effective guest relations is to keep the visitor satisfied and happy, and the objective of effective employee
relations is to keep the employee satisfied, happy, motivated, and productive.

A theme park manager with supervisory responsibilities would be a more effective manager if he knew when he should supervise from his Parent, from his Adult, and from his Child. There are times when each of these ego states should be utilized in a supervisory situation. A knowledge of T.A. techniques can be useful to top, middle, and lower level managers and supervisors.
SUMMARY

Psychologists often find it useful to think of an individual's personality as consisting of three parts. Transactional Analysis is a popular new branch of psychology that refers to these three parts as the Parent, Adult, and Child. Each of these is a separate source of thoughts, feelings, and motivations — and each, in effect, directs an individual's behavior at different times.

The Child is that part of one's personality that expresses most of his needs and desires. It is the fun-loving part of a person — the so-called "I want" part of one's personality. It would seem that it would direct most of the behavior of a theme park visitor, be he five or thirty-five. The Parent and the Adult, however, may have a lot to say about the decision to visit a theme park and what the individual does while he is there.

Each of the three parts of a visitor's personality must be catered to in different ways, because each has its own motivations and each is responsible for directing different types of behavior. This has important implications for theme park advertising and promotion, the assortment of attractions built into a theme park, group sales activities, the training of employees for effective guest-employee relations, and the supervision of theme park employees.