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Taking Care of the Workers: Investigating the Use of Emotions in Museum Work

Introduction

In recent years museums and heritage sites have been encouraged to form deeper, more democratic and transparent relationships with their diverse publics, arguably requiring a different range of skills and ways of working which use workers' emotions. However, the experience and use of emotions in this work is only just beginning to be discussed within the sector and in academic research, and there remains a limited understanding of the role of emotions in creating resilient and sustainable organisations. In this article we reflect on why worker emotions are a pressing concern for the sector today, briefly outlining how emotions have been discussed from different perspectives within museum and heritage studies literature. We also introduce a new research project seeking to explore what we see as the critical questions on emotions in museum work. By highlighting wide-ranging discussions relevant to the sector, our aim in this article is to encourage museum professionals to reflect on when, how, and why they might be using emotions in their own work.

How we arrived at this topic

Before introducing current sector interest in emotions, we begin by introducing our own arrival to this subject which emerged through different academic research

projects in and outside of museums and heritage studies. The focus of these projects was not usually explicitly emotions, but nevertheless emotions arose as something present, persistent, and underexplored. For example, Anna was part of a series of projects looking at heritage and climate change in the UK and in the Republic of Kiribati, a low-lying island nation.[1] The research team on these projects were consciously aware that enquiring about long term planning in the event of forced migration felt (perhaps not surprisingly) emotionally laden for the heritage practitioners involved in the research. This prompted questions around whether museum staff have sufficient emotional capacity to effectively and safely tackle global challenges. Jennie's (Morgan 2018) research on institutional change in museums highlighted deep, varied emotions associated with transformation, from excitement and anticipation to ambivalence and loss. More recent work on curating 'profusion' (Macdonald et al. 2020) considered how social history museums and households decide what to keep for the future when faced with proliferating material and increasingly digital things. Specific emotions – including uncertainty about what might be valued in the future, feeling overwhelmed by things, and a deep sense of obligation to objects and to people – were found to shape decisions. Overall, our collective experiences informed us that there was much more to explore in relation to workforce emotions.

Why now? Sector interest

Our interest in emotion in museum work parallels a more recent intensity of practitioner concern with workforce wellbeing in the sector. Undoubtedly, the global COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 increased awareness of workforce emotional wellbeing. Even a brief skim through the pages of the Museums Association's *Museums Journal* from this period shows vibrant discussion around the emotional intensity of museum work during the pandemic. For example, professionals expressing difficult emotions including 'anxiety, grief, and confusion'[2] when presented with proliferating pandemic-related collecting opportunities; or noting heightened, emotional experiences during post lock-down engagement work. Not forgetting the wider trauma of staff cuts from furlough and layoffs – issues of job precarity that in the UK (the context the authors are most familiar with) continue post pandemic through a cost-of-living crisis and wider public services sector cuts. Our reading of these materials indicates that experience of the emotional intensity of working through the pandemic was accompanied by calls from workers for better support and enhanced protocols to ensure their wellbeing (more on this below). For example, Bannell and Sexton's (2024) recent examination of archivists' emotional reactions during COVID-19 rapid collecting argues that trauma-informed approaches to collecting crisis or tragedies are needed to ensure the psychological safety of the workforce.

Yet, this attention to emotions is not simply related to the issues of worker wellbeing and safety presented by the pandemic and its aftermath. We argue that emotions are increasingly being considered integral to museum work as museums seek to

effect positive change in relation to complex, intersecting global challenges including: the culture wars, anti-racism and decolonisation, climate justice and sustainability, the cost-of-living crisis, inclusion and engagement, and campaigns for fair work. We believe it is vital to consider if these challenges bring greater emotional demands or require workers to use their emotions in more complex ways, or both.

It is within these wider contexts we have observed activity associated with emotions in museum and more widely in heritage work. For instance, the development of **tools and protocols to support workforce emotional wellbeing,** such as risk assessments dealing with the emotional impacts of some areas of heritage work. One example is the UK National Archives guidance for staff working with potentially 'upsetting histories'.[3] In a section on staff and audience wellbeing, the risk assessment recognises that engaging with such content may lead to 'upsetting conversations', staff feeling 'overwhelmed', and even 'psychological harm'.[4] The assessment suggests a range of mitigation strategies including working in pairs or groups, mental health and wellbeing support, clear mechanisms for raising concerns, training on managing emotions, and provision of time and space to process emotional impact from upsetting content.

The emergence of **targeted workforce research** to understand emotionally laden work and its intersections with worker wellbeing is another area we have observed. This includes the Museums Association's workforce wellbeing advocacy and 2022 survey of over 600 professionals working in and with museums in the UK. The survey

defined wellbeing as ‘the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy’[5] and sought to identify organisational factors impacting on workforce wellbeing and to recommend priorities to support positive change. Among the survey’s insights was the finding that ‘many respondents felt their organisation did not care about or prioritise their wellbeing’.[6] Importantly, recommendations are presented as a sector (rather than individual workers’) responsibility to address the ‘cultural, structural and resourcing deficits’[7] impacting workforce wellbeing. This focus on collective responsibility indicates sector desire to better understand the impact of wider infrastructure (including policy and training, resourcing, decision-making, communication, workplace cultures, and power) on worker wellbeing.

Finally, we note a growth of **sector events and networks** foregrounding emotion through ideas of ‘care’ and related notions like ‘healing’. Some recent examples include the inaugural GLAM Cares conference, ‘Caring 24: Wellbeing and Care in the Cultural Sector’ (May 2024) and the Social History Curators Group Conference, ‘Emotion and Museums’ (June 2024). Attention to the emotions of workers is also a strand of concern for grassroots initiatives and professional networks concerned with creating healthy and fair workplaces. For instance, *GLAM Cares* which describes itself as a care and support network for people working with communities in galleries, libraries, archives and museums; *Fair Museum Jobs* which seeks to highlight good and bad practice in museum jobs and recruitment; and the *Radical Rest Network* which addresses issues of burnout and exhaustion in the sector.

Museums and polycrisis

This flurry of sector interest seems aligned with wider concern with how museums can better help address what scholar-practitioner, Robert Janes (2024: 40), calls ‘planetary chaos’. Drawing on over 40 years of sector experience, Janes argues that museums have an important role to play as ‘lifeboats’ assisting the navigation of the imminent threat of ‘societal collapse’ from intersecting issues around climate chaos, economic inequalities, social injustices, biodiversity loss, political ineptitude, and more. The existence of global crises that are interrelated, mutually reinforcing, and highly complex (albeit unevenly experienced) is what is more widely termed a situation of polycrisis (Janes 2024: 9). In this context, Janes argues that museums must reinvent themselves to play a more active role assisting individuals, families and communities to transition towards new sustainable and resilient lifeways. Interestingly Janes argues that museum workers will need to develop their ‘personal agency’ (Janes 2024: 104-105) by bringing new experiences, skills and values to the museum as ‘lifeboat’. We find this argument interesting because, conceivably, bringing the full self (or embracing ‘personal agency’) to work might extend to include bringing one’s emotions. However, we also recognise that there can be risks in foregrounding personal agency (e.g., burnout, vulnerability, exploitation).

How have emotions been considered in museums?

Having introduced emerging interest in this topic, it is worth giving a brief overview of the areas where emotion has been considered or is starting to be considered within the museum. These can be summarised as: 1) emotion and affect in relation to visitors, 2) the discourse of care, 3) emotional labour. We will now look at each of these in turn.

Emotions and affect in relation to visitors

In contrast to earlier ideas of emotions being something inferior, interfering with or obscuring objectivity, or even 'dangerous' (Smith and Campbell 2016: 447), emotions are now seen as key to understanding engagement with heritage. Museum and heritage studies scholarship has both observed and contributed to a so-called 'turn' towards emotions. Important work raising the profile of emotions in heritage and museum studies has been conducted (e.g., Smith and Campbell 2016; Tolia-Kelly et al. 2017; Smith et al. 2018; Watson 2019).

Researcher, Marzia Varutti for example, has explored the idea of 'affective curatorship' or 'curatorial approaches specifically aiming to affect visitors emotionally' (2023: 61). She identifies three areas through which 'affective curatorship' can be observed. The first is the inclusion of emotions in exhibition subject matter and themes, the second is the use of exhibition design and

architecture to generate an emotional visitor experience, and the third is specific activities that prompt emotional response from visitors (2023: 65) – for example, 'empathy tours' that facilitate conversations between visitors about the emotions they feel when viewing specific artworks to encourage understanding of different viewpoints (p. 68).

This brief introduction of museum and heritage literatures draws attention to important trends, but also highlights some remaining gaps. A significant gap is that, apart from a small number of museum and heritage researchers, such as Arvanitis et al. (2023),[8] Wilson (2011), Munro (2014), Morse (2021), and Frost (forthcoming 2024), and researchers such as Naismith (2019)[9] and Fortier (2023), working in the area of arts, health and wellbeing, research predominantly focuses on visitor emotions rather than the emotions experienced and used by staff.

'Care' and workforce emotions

The second area we wish to draw attention to in relation to workforce emotions is the discourse of 'care' in museums. Of particular importance for this article, museum workers have been more explicitly present within work on care. For example, in her book *The Museum as a Space of Social Care* (2021: 2), Nuala Morse argues we should understand museums as spaces that 'care for things, care for stories, care for the issue, care for people, care for the community, **care for staff**, care for the present and the past and care for the future' (our emphasis). Notably, attention to

‘care for staff’ raises the idea that museums and their workforce need care rather than solely providing care. This maps well with seeing museums as ‘peopled organisations’ (Morse et al. 2018). We take this term to understand museums as organisations that are created by real people with unique lives, personalities, emotional needs and personal circumstances, an idea which has been less pervasive as we tend to think of museums as faceless organisations with little sense of the people who work in them.

Used to frame our interest in emotions in museum work, these perspectives encourage examining how workers are, or could better be, supported (cared for) when undertaking emotion work. It raises the question: what does it mean to take care of the workers, including their emotional wellbeing? Finding answers to this question is needed because the capacity for museums to function effectively in their social and other responsibilities requires supporting all elements, from the collections and audiences to the staff. As Latham and Cowan (2024: 5-6) put it:

> a framework for flourishing museums must include everyone involved, not only visitors. The **museum must be considered as a whole**, and that includes those who create them, work in them, and with them, from leadership to frontline staff – *all* museum staff […] A museum is, after all, **an ecosystem** that relies on all parts of the whole, and therefore, **no part should be ignored or underrepresented.** (our emphasis)

However, while the care discourse is an important frame for foregrounding emotions in museum work, it also requires critical interrogation. We argue that there is scope to see if 'care' is actually the lens practitioners use to discuss, understand, and give meaning to their emotions at work. It is entirely possible that there may be instances when emotions are used or experienced for intended effects that are not exclusively about caring relations. For example, does the discourse of care allow for those who do not care or who perhaps care too much? While care does seem difficult to ignore (and we don't suggest ignoring it completely), the interplay of this discourse with emotions we suggest warrants exploration.

Having looked at visitor and emotion, and care and emotion, we turn now to the third area of how emotions have been considered in museums through discussions of 'emotional labour'.

Emotional labour

Emotional labour is a term with an established history, especially in scholarship focusing more widely on creative labour (e.g. Fortier 2023). As a term, it is only just starting to be applied to museum and related sector work. For example, in a forthcoming discussion of emotional labour and museums' digital work by Frost (forthcoming 2024), but also the kinds of professional guidance already noted such as in the UK National Archives guidance for staff working with potentially upsetting records.[10] To help understand this term, a useful starting point is Arlie Russell

Hochschild's well known conceptualisation of emotional labour from her 1983 book *The Managed Heart*. Beyond giving visibility to emotions in the workplace, Hochschild's study of the production and performance of emotions in the work of flight attendants and debt collectors revealed how emotions are managed through professional norms; or what Hochschild called 'feeling rules.' It is these 'feeling rules' which help workers negotiate the void between what they really feel and what they *ought* to feel in the context of their employment. Transferred to museums, this idea is pertinent because it raises the question of what 'feeling rules' may be present across different roles within the sector. For example, does someone working in a front of house role use different 'feeling rules' to someone working in collections documentation?

There is a sense, also noted by Frost (forthcoming 2024), that the 'feeling rules' in the museum sector are shifting due to the wider contextual factors mentioned above. There is a shift towards a greater openness (as Frost puts it) to 'emotional vulnerability and honesty' and recognition that emotional labour in museums is intersectional, being shaped by power and structural inequalities. Another valuable aspect of Hochschild's concept is that emotional labour is theorised as being neither inherently positive nor negative.

While a useful starting point for thinking about emotions and museum work, the term 'emotional labour' has also suffered from 'concept creep'[11] which potentially reduces its usefulness. As Hochschild noted in an interview with *The Atlantic*, the term has

become ‘very blurry and over-applied’[12] used to describe any use of emotions at work rather than as a concept relating to how emotions are operationalised in different forms of work. More generally, we have observed that this blurriness of terminology characterises the emerging but limited research and practitioner commentary. For example, there is a diversity of terms used to connect emotions with museum work, from ‘emotionally laden work’ used in the Museums Association workforce wellbeing survey;[13] to the ‘affective dimensions’ and ‘emotionality inherent within’ museum work mentioned by Frost (forthcoming 2024); and while not from within museums, Ariel Ducey’s (2010) ‘caring’ and ‘affective labour’ are similar, perhaps, to Morse’s (2021) ‘affective cultural work’. Within this terminology there is perceptible sliding between the terms ‘emotion’, ‘feelings’, and ‘affect’ – terms themselves deserving of further discussion (beyond the focus of this article). Moreover, existing work tends to focus on community facing roles to the exclusion of lesser known or less visible roles such as museum management, training, front of house, operations, conservation, marketing, and collections management. The use of emotional labour in these other kinds of roles remains little understood.

Emotions in museum work: An emerging research agenda

The discussions above lead us towards a set of themes and questions that we are starting to unpack in a new research collaboration. Overall, we consider that there is a need generally to better understand how workers perceive, articulate, and give meaning to emotions at work. It is important to also begin to appreciate the tensions

and ambivalences associated with emotions in museum work across a diversity of different kinds of professional role and to delve deeper into understanding what actions these emotions prompt museum workers to do (or not do) within their roles.

It is also our observation that much of the current focus is on detrimental impact of emotion work in museums, such as stress and burnout, to the exclusion of considering more positive, or even ambivalent impacts. Positive emotions are certainly not absent from museum work. For instance, those who work with collections have expressed ‘object love’ (Geohegan and Hess 2015) or ‘enthusiasm’ (Geoghegan 2009, 2013; Woodham et al. 2020). Interestingly, some emerging findings from our new research project indicates that museum workers experience a complex (and sometimes conflicted) co-existence of different emotions held simultaneously. For example, feeling fortunate to work in a specific role or organisation, but also guilt that having this role means they hold a certain amount of privilege. From this we can hypothesise that museum workers’ emotions may closely relate to understandings of both professional and personal identities. Finally, there are important questions not typically dealt with in the literature and commentary discussed here around power imbalances and hierarchies which looking at emotion work in museums could help to reveal. Much greater attention needs to be paid to who this work falls onto, and to consider if gender, class, and/or ethnicity matter (and in what ways).

With support from a Royal Society of Edinburgh workshop grant, we are designing and hosting two workshops in 2024 to bring together invited scholars, museum and related-sector professionals for discussion and knowledge exchange on the topic of emotions in museum work**.** We have developed a project website where any museum professional or researcher can join the discussion by sharing (anonymously if preferred) their own experiences of emotions in museum work via a guest blog post. People can also get involved through the events we promote and by making use of resources we have compiled including a reading list on the topic.[14]

While the project is in its early stages, an initial surprising finding is the strong interest in this topic in the museum sector. Additionally, informal knowledge exchange between the authors and different museum workers has indicated that discussions on emotions in museum work usually tend towards intense emotional 'moments'. For example, managing visitor response to exhibitions, or the uncertainties and anxieties associated with workforce precarity. Confirming some of our initial thinking introduced above, what appear less evident is a fuller spectrum of emotions to include the ongoing (or routine, less emotionally intense), or the more positive emotions such as joy and excitement, and even what might be less acceptable emotions such as boredom, anger or professional regret. Additionally, while our first workshop held in May 2024 started to identify emotions experienced in museum work, there remains huge scope to delve more deeply into how emotions are actively *used* in this work. It is clear from wider scholarship (particularly on emotional labour)

that emotions *are used* to achieve work tasks – for instance, through the emotional management of others.

Finally, conversations so far have usefully challenged us to address the ‘so what’ and ‘what next’ questions. It feels not enough to simply recognise or identify emotions, but to take these questions seriously by considering what training, support, awareness, and management might be needed to facilitate safe and productive emotions work in museums. One possible outcome might be that understanding the nuances of emotions experienced and used could increase awareness of the emotional intensities of specific jobs. If there is an emotional ‘rhythm’ or flow to certain jobs, understanding this could be useful in both the design of different roles and how these roles are appropriately supported.

Conclusions

In this article, we have brought emotions – their experience and use in museum work – centrally into discussions about the changing nature of museums and their role in society. We have identified that as museums seek to position themselves as responding to and helping society to address wider global challenges the full self, or ‘personal agency’ (Janes 2024), of museum staff is likely needed and this may impact a wider sense of what professionalism means in the sector. We have argued that this conceivably includes using their emotions in new and more complicated ways. Yet we have also recognised that the demands of using emotions can result

in detrimental impact for worker wellbeing, such as workforce stress and burnout, especially if not adequately managed and supported.

Our view is that there is urgent need to better understand how emotions are being used, by whom and for what purposes across the broad spectrum of museum work. By bringing together diverse relevant scholarship and sector initiatives, this article has evaluated the wider context and established a platform for this important work. Underpinning this platform, it has advocated for novel ways of understanding museums which view museums as complex interrelated and interdependent ecosystems. In this view, it becomes clear that the role and influence of emotions in the professional practice of museum workers needs to feature and to be interrogated, for the vital reason that what museum workers do matters. While emotions have been a hitherto neglected aspect of this ecosystem, now is the time to address this gap.

The RSE workshop grant we introduced in this article has just started and will run until February 2025. We therefore do not have conclusive findings to share here, however there are, we think, some emerging themes touched on throughout this article that we can reflect briefly on in this final paragraph. The response we have received to the project has been hugely positive, and the participants at our first workshop appreciated the opportunity to come together to start to unpack and reflect on this topic in an open yet positive and hopeful space. Some have fed back to us that the discussions encouraged them to start conversations on this theme within

their own organisations and teams, and to also consider how emotions in museum jobs could be better valued and possibly even quantified. These may seem like small 'findings' yet it confirms to us that there is a growing momentum around this subject and a genuine desire to build the conversation. In this spirit, we hope that the ideas introduced in this article may also encourage readers to reflect on when, how, and why they might be using emotions in their own work, and if sharing our interest in this topic to get in touch.

Endnotes

[1] The projects were: '*Troubled Waters, Stormy Futures: Heritage in times of accelerated climate change'* project, a follow-on project called: 'Troubled Waters Reaching Out' and an associated research project called '*Enduring Connections, heritage, sustainable development and climate change in Kiribati.* Each project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) (AH/M006263, AH/P00959X, AH/ P007635).

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[14] The project website is www.museumemotion.stir.ac.uk.

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