
New futures of care: Investigating emotionally laden work in museums

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Introduction

The New futures of care: Investigating emotionally laden work in museums project was a 12-month research collaboration that took place between February 2024 and February 2025, funded by a Royal Society of Edinburgh workshop grant, the University of Stirling and King's College London. The project explored how museum workers in the UK articulate, experience and utilise emotions in their professional lives. This is a topic that has received little focused attention, yet it is of growing scholarly and sector concern as museums increasingly operate in contexts of urgent change (e.g. presented by anti-racist, decolonial practice and climate justice).

Within this context, museums are being encouraged to become more socially engaged, relevant and sustainable organisations. This has led to our hypothesis that practitioners are experiencing new demands to adapt, change and experiment with established ways of working. This evolving landscape potentially demands the use of emotions in new and perceivably more complex ways.

By bringing together a diverse group of museum and heritage professionals, advocacy and grass roots bodies, and academic researchers, the project aimed to:

Exchange views relating to the experience and use of emotions in museum work

Create a better understanding of this relatively hidden area of museum practice

Give greater visibility to the emotionality of museum work

Identify key questions and routes for further detailed research

Throughout 2024, we undertook a range of collaborative and networking activities including creating a [website](#) to share resources and emerging findings and to build a community of practice; we also participated in relevant sector events; and – of particular focus for this report – designed and delivered two workshops on emotions in museum work.

This report captures a summary of key insights from the project. It sets up areas for future exploration, which we plan to take forward in subsequent work.

If you would like to join our ongoing conversation on this important area of museum and heritage practice do get in touch!



Museum Work and Emotions

Setting the scene and research questions

Emotions in museum work have received little sustained scholarly or sector attention beyond the emotional experiences of visitors and other users. While some important insights have been revealed by looking at public outreach and community engagement work, in this project we felt it important to prioritise exploring emotions used across the sector. For example, what emotions are used in collections management or conservation work? How might this differ from the emotions experienced and used by museum leaders and managers?

When thinking about this topic the work of Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) comes to mind. Hochschild brought attention to the idea of emotional labour through her exploration of how flight attendants and bill collectors manage their emotions at work. This hugely influential study highlighted the intersection between emotions and professional practice; however, the idea of emotional labour has not yet been fully developed in the museum and heritage sectors. While we can theorise the use of emotions by museum workers in different ways, we felt Hochschild's ideas were a valuable starting point for this project.

Our initial desire was to better understand if emotions are increasingly integral to museum work in current contexts of professional practice. Responding to the global challenges, noted above is complex, sensitive and demanding work. Yet little is understood about the part emotions play in museum workers' day-to-day activities, nor how the use of emotions may be reshaping ideas of professionalism in the sector.

The report considers the following interlinked questions:

Q1: Do museum workers perceive emotions to be integral to what they do? How do they discuss emotions in the context of their work? What spectrum of emotions arise?

Q2: How are emotions experienced and used across different areas of practice? Are emotions more prevalent in some roles and organisations than others – and if so, why?

Q3: What are the implications of acknowledging emotions in museum work for future research and sector support?



There is a real need for these conversations

(workshop participant feedback)

It felt like a moment in the sector as this subject comes to light!

(workshop participant feedback)

Totally urgent, compelling terrain for the sector

(workshop participant feedback)

The project

A central focus of the project were two knowledge exchange workshops. The first workshop was held on 1 May 2024 at the University of Stirling (UK) and the second on 20 November 2024 at the Dana Research Centre and Library, Science Museum (London, UK). The workshops used a collaborative format to create an open space for the sharing of experiences and insights.

The invitees for both workshops included a mix of early-, mid- and established-career professionals from the museum and heritage sector and academic researchers, who brought diverse views and experiences, including freelance and consultant perspectives. This mix was important to capture differently positioned viewpoints and to acknowledge that different roles, career stage and employment status were likely to intersect to shape emotions in practitioners' work in distinct ways.

To identify invitees, we first consulted the project steering group and other sector representatives for their suggestions. We also identified invitees that were known to be active in this area either through their academic research or museum work. Workshop participants were made aware that their contributions may be used in project outputs anonymously (unless they wished to be identified).

To create a safe space for discussion of this potentially sensitive topic we introduced a code of participation at the start of each workshop. Finally, we invited participants to complete anonymous written feedback after each event, which we have drawn on in this report. Feedback suggested that participants appreciated the care taken towards creating a space where everyone could feel valued and supported.

The Stirling workshop was attended by 19 individuals and the Dana Centre workshop by 21 individuals. Workshop participants could, if they wished, draw on their experiences in their present, or former roles and research, or across their entire career. Each workshop had a distinct focus.



An atmosphere of exchange and friendliness

(workshop participant feedback)

Thank you for this valuable space [...] loving the range of voices and roles included

(workshop participant feedback)

[A] sense of connection and catharsis was also evident

(workshop participant feedback)

The Stirling workshop included a deliberately broad mix of individuals working and/or researching across different kinds of museums, activities and roles from diverse areas of museum work such as leadership, to collections management, to visitor services and community outreach. This mix was an opportunity to develop a broad understanding of where, how and why emotions might be used in museum work, and the opportunities and challenges for supporting this work.

Several individuals who had attended the first workshop were invited to participate in the second Dana Centre workshop to help facilitate continuity of discussion. A key difference from the first workshop is that all participants in the second workshop worked and/or researched directly with museum and heritage collections. This included individuals working in the areas of conservation and curatorship, exhibitions, documentation and collections review work.

Each workshop opened with two key-note presentations pairing practitioner and academic speakers, followed by bite-sized 'provocations' from invited individuals, leading into facilitated discussion with the group to delve more deeply into key identified themes and issues. The format enabled participants to speak from direct experience allowing us to start building a network of practitioners and academics and establish a broad understanding of the topic.

While this report will predominantly focus on summarising workshop findings, it is also informed by the wider project activities. These included our website and blog posts, social media presence, networking, participation in sector and scholarly events and other written outputs (included in the Resources section).



Top: University of Stirling
Bottom: Dana Research Centre and Library

Summary Findings and Discussion

Q1.

Do museum workers perceive emotions to be integral to what they do? How do they discuss emotions in the context of their work? What spectrum of emotions arise?

Q2.

How are emotions experienced and used across different areas of practice? Are emotions more prevalent in some roles and organisations than others – and if so, why?

Q3.

What are the implications of acknowledging emotions in museum work for future research and sector support?

Summary Findings and Discussion

Question 1

Do museum workers perceive emotions to be integral to what they do? How do they discuss emotions in the context of their work? What spectrum of emotions arise?

A key finding of the project is strong interest in this topic from practitioners and researchers. We learnt that there is desire to draw attention to, discuss the impacts of and consider routes for better supporting the emotions experienced and used in museum work. Workshop participants valued the chance to discuss emotions in the workforce, as such opportunities remain fairly uncommon. This is despite the feeling, for some workers, that our conversations “showed how embedded emotions [are] in everything we do” (workshop participant). The project highlighted a growing critical mass of research on workforce emotions emerging across museums, heritage and the cultural sectors.

We learnt of examples of research looking at:

Health and social care community initiatives in museums

Trauma informed collecting and curating collections with ‘difficult’ pasts

The work of creative arts practitioners in culture-led wellbeing work

The emotions of digital labour

Public programming including the emotions of exhibition making

However, this remains a fairly disparate and disjointed conversation, which would benefit from being joined up to address what we feel are the outstanding ‘big questions’ (see Looking Forward section).

We found that workshop participants used many different ‘labels’ to describe how emotions intersect with museum work, including the idea that such work is ‘emotionally laden’ and that specific ‘emotional competencies’ may now be required.

Although there was some reflection on the differences between emotions, feelings, moods and ‘states’, we found that workshops participants did not seem concerned about discussing the distinctions between these concepts.



Our conversations “showed how embedded emotions [are] in everything we do”

(workshop participant feedback)

Where discussion did focus was acknowledging the holding or co-existence of a wide range of emotions in museum work which were felt simultaneously. This included the more negative ('stress', 'fear' (of getting things wrong), 'anxiety', 'burnout', 'frustration', 'uncertainty') to the more positive ('excitement', 'delight', 'inspiration', 'joy', 'passion', with 'hope' being circled around consistently). This may possibly indicate that museum work has an emotional ambiguity.

Workshop participants frequently articulated a sense of feeling fortunate and grateful to be able to undertake museum work, but also guilty that having this role means they hold a certain amount of privilege. What museum workers mean by feeling 'privileged' and a sense of 'guilt' may have many different meanings across organisations and roles. From feeling grateful to work in the sector when jobs are highly competitive and being proud to work with different communities, while also at times feeling frustrated by the limitations of their roles and organisations.

This emotional ambiguity perhaps made it difficult for workshop participants to always articulate what precise emotions they experience and use in their roles - as one person put it "It's difficult to explain what emotion this is" ([website blog](#)). It is perhaps not surprising that workshop participants struggled to pinpoint these given, we suspect, that emotions are a largely tacit i.e., an unspoken 'felt' aspect of museum work.

Adding to the complexity, workshop participants mentioned slippage of emotions between different contexts including work and homelife, and expressed difficulties of sometimes recognising if emotions are 'personal' or 'organisational'. Sharing what are perceived to be personal emotions was thought by some to be risky and carrying vulnerability, as one workshop participant said, "we risk ourselves".

Overall, workshop participants from across a wide spectrum of roles appeared to acknowledge that emotions are integral to their work, yet there has been very little opportunity to reflect on how and why and, importantly, what makes emotions in museum work distinctive (if indeed they are).



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Summary Findings and Discussion

Question 2

How are emotions experienced and used across different areas of practice? Are emotions more prevalent in some roles and organisations than others – and if so, why?

Workshop participants expressed a desire to consider how emotions are experienced and used not only across different areas of practice but – as one person expressed in workshop feedback – “in institutions of differing scale from tiny local museums to big nationals”. This perhaps indicates that context, including organisational structures, is seen to matter when it comes to the kinds of emotions experienced and utilised by museum workers. One workshop participant was keen to understand, for example, the “emotional impacts of siloed working” that characterise certain organisations (workshop feedback).

The research has tended to support our hypothesis that emotions are utilised by a wide range of museum workers, not only those in public-facing roles. However, there appeared to be consensus that roles involving work with the public can be especially emotionally demanding and there is a perception that such experiences are growing in intensity. One workshop participant gave an example of how in the past visitor assistant job descriptions focused on security tasks whereas “now those same roles often do the emotional heavy lifting, facilitating complex, deep-rooted discussions [with visitors]” ([website blog](#)).

There was also discussion that drew attention to the spaces of visitor interaction in digital and electronic forums. It was felt that these channels could bring new emotional pressures, for instance as museums use social media in more participatory ways. This brings a degree of uncertainty around the content and tone of what is received (which might include strong emotions expressed by users), as well as potential feelings of overwhelm when trying to manage and maintain an active presence in this space.

Somewhat confirming our initial suspicion, the project has suggested that many different kinds of work – including work with little or no direct public interaction – is emotionally laden. In the workshops we encountered a range of examples, from the emotional challenges of researching ‘difficult’ collection histories, to the intimacy of working closely with objects (often for extended periods of time as may be the case with some conservation and curatorial work), to the embarrassment of not always holding information about some objects and the perceived vulnerabilities of making the ‘right’ decisions about how collections are managed. For example, in conservation work which may result in changes to an object or in curatorial work in knowing what to collect to tell representative and diverse stories. An intriguing example, and we think ripe for further attention, was the association of certain spaces within the museum with particular emotions and feelings.

This included specific museum storerooms that prompt a range of emotions from feeling unsettled due to certain smells, contents and environmental conditions, to positive feelings of being in close proximity to certain objects. We briefly reflected upon what a storeroom ordered by specific emotions might look like.

Although the project engaged with a range of different museum professionals, there remains scope to expand the areas of museum work considered (e.g. HR, finance, security and commercial roles). This is important to do because the project revealed a sense that ideas of professionalism may be starting to change broadly across the sector to incorporate emotional skills and competencies, yet it is unknown which roles this is most prevalent within and how such change is manifesting.

There was also a feeling that these emerging ideas of professionalism are in tension with traditional notions of what museums are and what they do. Museums are institutions associated traditionally with ‘objectivity,’ ‘neutrality’ and ‘rational thought’ (which typically fails to acknowledge the full spectrum of emotions) yet the project suggested this logic may no longer serve museums and their publics well. For example, a consistent point of discussion emerged around what emotions are appropriate (or not) in the workplace.

One participant queried how well-equipped sector leaders are to deal with the rage, anger and dissatisfaction that might be experienced when, for instance, museum workers are faced with social injustices encountered by the communities they work with. Such emotions could be deemed ‘difficult’ in the workplace, but they argued equally these may be considered positive and activating if channeled towards social action.

The project did give some tentative insight on perceived inequalities of emotions in museum work. Especially when workshop discussion focused on emotional labour and who this falls onto. It was felt by participants that aspects such as gender, career status (including seniority and contract type), and ethnicity influence who this work falls disproportionately onto (or not). The perception was that emotional labour tends to fall on those in the lowest paid and least empowered roles. More research is needed to better understand the intersectional nuances between these aspects.

Although we set out to explore how emotions are used in museum work and what decisions, actions and outcomes emotions may inform, we found this to be a highly challenging area to elicit discussion on at the workshops.

This is perhaps not surprising given that participants were more familiar with discussing what emotions they experience and feel at work (rather than use) as this is supported by current wellbeing initiatives focused on workforce comfort, health and happiness (to draw on the Museums Association’s [definition of wellbeing](#)). The difficulty identifying how emotions are used perhaps confirms once again the tacit nature of emotions at work. It shows the need for a range of research methods to be utilised that enable insights into the question: ‘how do I use my emotions in my museum role’?

Beyond museums we understand that emotions are used in a variety of different kinds of work. A known example is how professionals in caring roles, such as nurses, may use their own emotions as part of complex interactions with service users. Museums are also places of social care (Morse 2020). They care for people; collections; place; stories; identities; values; the past, present and future; as well as the environment. More understanding is needed on how emotions are used in care work that may feature across a wide spectrum of museum roles, and what is distinctive about the intersection between emotions and museum work given the variety of what museums and those working in them care for.



The project has suggested that many different kinds of work – including work with little or no direct public interaction – is emotionally laden

Summary Findings and Discussion

Question 3

What are the implications of acknowledging emotions in museum work for future research and sector support?

Workshop participants expressed that while sharing and talking about emotions is valued, this is not enough. To move the conversation forward requires addressing and acting upon the 'so what' question. For participants there was a direct link between emotions and worker wellbeing, leading them to question: what sectoral change and support is needed to enhance wellbeing, if we acknowledge emotions are an integral part of museum work?

Our discussions highlighted some existing initiatives, mechanisms and approaches that recognise the links between wellbeing and emotions in museum work, including:

Support, training and resources offered by the Museums Association on workforce [wellbeing](#), one of their current priority areas

Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM) sector risks assessments identifying and mitigating impact on the psychological health and safety of workers

Spaces, networks and events (online and offline) for peer-to-peer care and support

Charters for change in specific areas of museum work such as [front-of-house](#)

The application of trauma informed and feminist practices

There was a feeling that the momentum of this work that is already underway could be productively built on to not only create more targeted practical interventions but lead to structural and cultural change within the sector.

Structural and cultural change

The project indicates hope within the sector to give greater acknowledgement to the reality that museum work can be emotionally demanding, and even highly distressing, with ever increasing external pressures. Workshop participants noted that organisations have a duty of care towards their staff undertaking such work. They felt that the sector needs to be more open to recognising, legitimising and valuing emotions being experienced and used in museum work. This means viewing emotions as a valid (and sometimes even required) part of the work being done. To accelerate this structural and cultural change a shift in how professionalism and leadership in the sector is considered and practiced may be required.

However, workshop participants also expressed that there needs to be mindfulness of respecting and valuing difference in how people perceive and understand emotions, a point that was revealed through discussions of neurodivergent experience. Certainly, the project is not suggesting that all roles, or all staff, volunteers or freelancers, must undertake emotional labour, or to do so in the same ways.



Workshop activities

Relatedly, workshop participants felt having greater discussion and acknowledgement of the power dynamics that influence who this work falls onto, the differences across locations and institutions, and what unspoken expectations and assumptions are present in the sector could benefit all. There is need to include in conversations on this topic “the people from the global majority who are dealing/working with different emotional issues in museums” including those workers managing collections “from deeply problematic/troubling colonial contexts” (workshop participant feedback).

The project has indicated that these cultural and structural changes will need to be accompanied by targeted practical interventions. The following are examples of ideas raised within the workshops, some of which reinforce directions in existing initiatives:

Ideas for practical interventions arising from the workshop participants:

Regular reviewing of the emotional ‘touchpoints’ of specific job roles and/or tasks to support staff to be better aware of the range of emotions that might be encountered from the more to the less intense (e.g., including the mundane and apathetic). Mapping emotions in this way may help identify and plan for times when increased support is needed, while raising awareness of how emotions might influence decisions, actions and/or outcomes.

Systematic ways of identifying, recording and making visible the emotionally laden elements of specific roles and/or tasks. For example, job descriptions acknowledging emotionally laden duties, or using logs to record and reflect on day-to-day emotional experiences in specific roles/tasks.

Building in space in workflows to feel and process emotions safely and encourage a “sense of solidarity” (workshop participant) which was felt to be a valuable support mechanism. This might include wider use of models of supervision, creating a culture of coaching and/or mentoring and drawing on (but possibly adapting) the expertise of professionals working in other sectors known for emotionally laden work (e.g. healthcare).



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Looking Forward

The *New futures of care: Investigating emotionally laden work in museums* project has been a productive first step into exploring how emotions are experienced and used in the museum sector. It has offered insights on the complexities and ambiguities of emotions in museum work and indicated willingness within the sector to consider emotions as being valid in museum work, especially as institutions seek to become more socially relevant and engaged. The project has thus reinforced the timeliness and perceived importance of this topic. Yet it has also revealed the need for more work to be done to generate a fuller picture than what could ever be achieved in this small project.

Our engagement with practitioners and academics, who have shared their interests, reflections and experiences, has inspired us to look forward and to identify what we take to be examples of the ‘big questions’ that need addressing through further in-depth empirical research:

What range of emotions do museum workers experience and why?

What is specific about emotions in museum work (if anything)?

What are the ‘feeling rules’ of museum work and how are emotions used? I.e. do they inform decisions, actions, outcomes, relationships, inaction etc.

Power and inequity: who does this work fall upon?

Where are the gaps in support and how might these be filled?

What models of leadership advocate for emotions in museum work?

How are ideas of professionalism changing (or not?)

Resources

Below is a selection of writing relevant to this topic. A fuller reading list is included on our [project website](#).

BANNELL, K., & SEXTON, A., (2024) 'Affect and rapid response collecting: Exploring the significance of emotion in UK archives' COVID-19 collecting projects', *Archives and Records: The Journal of the Archives and Records Association* 45(2): 153-175.

FROST, S., (forthcoming 2025) 'Digital labour is emotional labour'. In: R. Parry, V. Dziekan, and K. De Wild (eds) *Museums and Digital Confidence: Organisation, Collection, Exhibition*. Routledge: London.

GEOGHEGAN, H., & HESS, A., (2014) 'Object-love at the Science Museum: Cultural geographies of museum storerooms', *Cultural Geographies* 22(3): 445-465.

HOCHSCHILD, A., (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press: Berkeley.

JANES, R., (2023) *Museums and Societal Collapse: The Museum as Lifeboat*. Routledge: London.

LATHAM, K.F., & COWAN, B. (2023) *Flourishing in Museums: Towards a Positive Museology*. Routledge: Abingdon, Oxon.

MORGAN, J., & WOODHAM, A. (2024) 'Taking care of the workers: Investigating the use of emotions in museum work', *Social History Curators Group Journal*, 48: 7-17.

MORSE, N., (2020) *The Museum as a Space of Social Care*. Routledge: London.

MUNRO, E., (2014) 'Doing emotion work in museums: Reconceptualising the role of community engagement practitioners', *Museum & Society* 12(1): 44-60.

VARUTTI, M., (2022) 'The affective turn in museums and the rise of affective curatorship'. *Museum Management & Curatorship*. 38(1): 61-75.

VARUTTI, M., (2021) 'Affective encounters in museums'. In: T. R. Bangstad and Þ. Pétursdóttir (eds) *Heritage Ecologies*, 129-144, London: Routledge.

WILSON, R., (2011) 'The curatorial complex, marking the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade'. In: L. Smith, G. Cubitt, R. Wilson and K. Fouseki (eds) *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums, Ambiguous Engagements*, 130-145, New York: Routledge.

Websites:

Museums Association Wellbeing Hub:

museumsassociation.org/careers/wellbeing-hub/

'New futures of care: Investigating emotionally laden work in museums' project:

museumemotion.stir.ac.uk/

'Touching collections project' website:

helsinki.fi/en/projects/touching-collections-museums-emotional-arenas

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day1.org.uk

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