

MuseumsForward

Supporting Equity, Supporting Workers: Organizational support for museum equity workers

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Abstract

The work to create a more equitable future requires many forms of labor, including emotional labor. In museums, the emotional labor associated with racial equity work compounds on the emotional labor for other work tasks. Marginalized communities, often Black and/or Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) experience added dimensions of emotional labor while doing racial equity work. While there is an increased effort within museums towards racial equity, little is known about the individual coping strategies and organizational supports to mitigate this labor. The purpose of this phenomenological research study is to understand the nature of organizational support offered by museums for staff who coordinate racial equity initiatives within the organization. Qualitative data was collected from five interviewees from three art museums who led racial equity work. The initial results indicate workers have their own coping tools to address emotional labor. Though there are institutional policies addressing this work, institutional practices, such as meaningful positive relationships with coworkers and supervisors are more efficacious. Participants indicated other relational opportunities, such as professional networks and mentorship create intra-field support. Participants indicated the relationships between white supremacy culture and capitalism within the museum field that was designed to inhibit healthy emotional labor practice. These findings have implications in the museum field through better understanding and supporting professional networks that focus on equity workers. In research, these findings relate emotional labor to the intersections of identity and purpose driven labor. Additionally, the research touches on the intersections of combating white supremacy culture, capitalism, and emotional labor in museums.

Keywords

emotional labor, museum equity work, organizational diversity, work culture

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Introduction

Museum workers do emotional labor everyday as part of their expected duties. Emotional labor has a colloquial meaning that covers emotion-based work, such as mitigating conflict with patrons or processing through off-hand comments from coworkers. In the colloquial, the term covers work that a person does and is not explicitly stated as part of their job requirements. The literature, however, focuses more internally on emotional management. In *The Managed Heart*, a seminal work on emotional labor, Hochschild (1983, 1993) examines the difficult work required in the management of staff and collective emotion and points to the effects it can have on workers. This work is frequently relational and dependent on often invisible dimensions of work people do for colleagues and visitors in museum settings.

The impacts of emotional labor can be taxing leading to burnout as employees often do not have effective support to manage this exhaustion. There is an understudied and intersecting dimension to emotional labor experienced by Black and/or Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) workers in historically white institutions. Mirchandani (2003) illuminates this issue, calling attention to the interpersonal realities of emotional labor aligning directly with a person's intersectional identities. Emotional labor experienced by BIPOC staff in historically white institutions includes tokenization, micro-aggressions and being stereotyped (Suico 2021; Jones 2020, p.154). BIPOC staff doing this work are also faced with the white fragility of their colleagues and leadership.

The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, amongst others in 2020, has changed the conversation about racism in the United States. Though a topic of research and conversation in the museum field for decades, more museums are starting to prioritize the work to make their institutions more equitable under the broader umbrella of diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) which includes examining how internal practices, and visitor facing strategies make museums more inclusive and relevant. Within this broader

movement, racial equity work in museums is about dismantling the systems that create inequity and involving communities most impacted in all steps of the process. It is relational, requiring trust building and deep personal and interpersonal reflection. While it is certainly not the responsibility of BIPOC staff to solely do this work, organizations often recruit or rely on BIPOC staff and community in decision-making roles to ensure that the work is meaningful and impactful for the communities most impacted and that the perspectives of white staff members are not inadvertently perpetuated (Anthym & Tuitt 2019, p.1085). Each organization and individuals' reason for engaging with racial equity work adds to the emotional labor. Explicitly, this does not mean that BIPOC staff and community are responsible for the education of white colleagues in their institution (DiAngelo 2018, p.64). White allies in museums also experience emotional labor doing racial equity work, though for different reasons and to different extends than their BIPOC colleagues. Until now, there have been few, if any, formalized studies to understand what, if any, emotional support tools are institutionalized to address emotional labor within a museum setting. By understanding organizational supports for these staff, one key dimension to the creation of more equitable museum and workspaces can be better understood.

The purpose of this research study is to understand the nature of organizational support offered by museums for staff who coordinate racial equity initiatives within the organization. This paper will outline relevant literature on emotional labor as well as racialized dimensions of emotion work. It also communicates research on racial equity work, on an organizational level, in addition ways that work intersects with emotion work in museums followed by a description and findings of this study.

Background

Emotional Labor in Museums

The term "emotion work" is used to describe the often-invisible dimensions of the relational work people do as part of caring for their families or performing interpersonal tasks in their personal lives (Mirchandani, 2003, p. 721). Others explain emotion work as the work of managing "emotional states that are desirable but that one does to smooth social relations rather than specific requirement of work" (Wong, 2007, p. 204). Emotional labor is the more theorized of the two and has been broken down into two strategies. The basic mechanics of emotional labor involve surface acting, when a person "displays

emotions that are not actually felt.” (Pugh, Growth, Hennig-Thurau, 2010, p. 377) This is thought to be “the more detrimental emotional labor strategy,” in that it is associated with a “wide range of negative outcomes, including lower job satisfaction, higher levels of burnout, and intentions to quit (Grandey, 2003; Grandey, Fisk, & Steiner, 2005; Pugh, Growth, Hennig-Thurau, 2010). Deep acting, on the other hand, leads to demonstrations of genuinely felt emotions. The deep actor demonstrates their understanding by empathizing with others, which leads to less emotional dissonance, or difference between felt and expressed emotions (Pugh, Growth, Hennig-Thurau, 2010, p. 378). Though emotional labor and emotion work have similar mechanics, emotional labor refers specifically to processes of deep or surface acting, and emotion work refers more holistically to all extra labor not stipulated as the “actual work” that requires additional emotional and psychological investment.

Emotional labor becomes a concern for workers when there are not sufficient strategies to support it. This can lead to burnout; a “psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 397). It involves a “progressive loss of energy and enthusiasm” (Bakker et al., 2014, p. 390). Schabram and Maitlis (2017) studied how people with a job “calling” experience challenges that lead to burnout. Calling is a purposeful beckoning toward activities that are socially, morally, and personally important. The ways that workers see themselves impact how they “frame, interpret, and therefore respond to challenges” and how these approaches accumulate over time in positive and negative ways (p. 586). Organizations with workers who feel “called” could benefit from “developing ways to support those individuals to deal constructively with challenges inherent to their work,” that aligns with each person’s path (p. 606). Because emotional labor can lead to burnout, it is necessary to understand its manifestation in workers, and how combating it can encourage talent retention (Näring, Briët, & Brouwers, 2006).

It is documented that museum workers do emotional labor, and this work is multi-faceted in relation to their audience (Munro, 2014). Museum workers perform emotional labor with the public in programs, events, and visitor interactions. For example, museums workers in trauma site museums experience emotional labor when supporting visitors’ emotional responses, when engaging in dialogue with visitors who are combative, or when being supportive of visitors with personal connections to the trauma commemorated at that site (Hardin, 2020, p. 29-30). While some museum workers have personal self-care practices

to cope with employment related stress, Svgdik (2019) found that museum workers, particularly those who worked in trauma-site museums “saw value in reflecting on their workplace emotional wellbeing” (p. 79), demonstrating that work- based reflection opportunities can be beneficial. Hardin (2020) built on this research, finding that while the museum workers identified their own personal and interpersonal coping tools, they did not see a connection “between organizational practice and what they...viewed as support of worker mental health.” (p. 44) There is a general expectation that museum workers do emotional labor as part of their job, though there remains a lack of organizational support to address this type of labor.

There is more research, however, of emotional labor in the workplace from non-museum settings. Wen, Huang and Hou (2017) found that when perceived organizational supports meet employees’ social emotional needs to recover the exhausted emotional resources, then the pressure is reduced, and employees have more will to realize organizational goals (p. 122). “Perceived organizational support” refers to the supports that people actually register, like initiatives the organization does to address emotion work and supportive norms in their workplace. It does not include the initiatives the organization does that is not noticed by staff. Other studies consider the intersection of diversity and emotional labor. A study in 2019 found that instructors of required diversity courses in higher education engage in emotional labor in that they challenge students’ ways of thinking of systems in an interpersonal setting. White women and faculty of color were more frequently sought out to perform emotional labor by teaching these courses than their white male counterparts (Miller, Howell, and Struvell, 2019). Wong underscores how, “diversity work requires emotional labor,” (2007, p. 6) demonstrating how women of color faculty work through everyday relational negotiations given the realities of White standards “for research, teaching, service, and collegiality” and their expectation to contribute to diversity in their organization (p. iii).

While emotional labor is a salient concept, research on it often normalizes whiteness. Mirchandani (2003) demonstrates how research relies on “racially homogenous samples in empirical studies, and...through the assumption that workers are, by default, white (p. 727). By applying feminist anti-racist theory, Mirchandani concludes that emotion work is fundamentally relational - emotion work depends on gender and ethnicity within the occupation of the worker, as well as their social location within their environment (p. 737). Though there is some research that considers the intersectionality of emotional labor,

there remains less known about the impact that societal constructs have on emotional labor.

Organizational Diversity

Organizations commit to and enact racial equity goals differently, with varying outcomes. Research indicates that how diversity is enacted in organizations impacts the perception of experiences of underrepresented groups' success in that organization. Kaiser and colleagues report that diversity initiatives can lead high-status group members toward an illusion of fairness where they become less sensitive to discrimination against minorities. When minority staff claim discrimination, high status group members point to the diversity structures in place to combat said issues (Kaiser et. al 2013, p. 516). In terms of emotional labor, this can lead to "emotional caretaking of whites" which includes "witnessing narcissistic coercive racist acts against others." (Wong 2007, p. 205). This idea of white fragility, a term popularized by Robin DiAngelo, can create and replicate spaces for minority group staff to do more relational work and emotional labor even as it is tied up in their identities (DiAngelo, 2018). In sum, the background research indicates that organizational diversity methods can create more emotional labor for minority groups.

In the museum field, the push toward DEAI is a growing priority and employs a range of tactics. In some organizations, DEAI stands in as a buzzword to indicate an acknowledgement of inequity, but little action. Other institutions' commitment to DEAI work is more active, working through diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion on the road to becoming an anti-racist organization. Race Forward asserts that diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts "lose potency and impact when they are deracialized, depoliticized, and dehistoricized." (Sen and Keleher 2021, p. 4). They advocate for racial equity, "a process of eliminating racial disparities and improving outcomes for everyone." (p. 5) Racial equity is a continual, intentional process that includes changing policies, practices, systems, and structures by "prioritizing measurable change in the lives of people of color." (p. 5) Many cultural institutions are formalizing their efforts to incorporate DEAI strategies and/or anti-racism work.

It is necessary to consider the lived experiences of people who are bringing about this change in their museums. Amongst other tasks, racial equity workers bring forward and challenge systems and structures that do not prioritize BIPOC staff and communities. Workers create spaces for their colleagues and leadership to discuss and

challenge their own ideas of racism, though little has been studied in this realm on the impacts of emotional labor. Part of the work of racial equity includes “interrupting patterns and practices that harm, impede, silence, marginalize, or disempower BIPOC within institutions” (Sen and Keleher 2021, p. 4). This includes systems that require BIPOC to do added emotional labor without organizational support in the name of creating a more equitable institution. Systems that “assign individuals ultimately responsibility for ameliorating systematic effects of that should be handled institutionally” must be challenged (Anthyn and Tuit 2019, p.1084). Better understanding this gap allows museum workers and institutions to identify what is already happening to combat emotional burnout that is inevitably required as part of these workers jobs.

Research Questions

The goal of this study was to answer these four main research questions.

1. How is emotional labor manifested in staff who do racial equity work in museums?
2. What coping mechanisms do staff use to combat the impacts of emotional labor?
3. What organizational support exists for staff who coordinate racial equity initiatives?
 - a. What, if any, are the formal policies outlining emotion work?
 - b. What if any are the organizational norms that support this work?
4. Do staff perceive the support as functional enough to remedy the effects of emotional labor?

Methodology

This study utilized a phenomenology design and focused staff who work at mid to large size art museums with a publicly announced commitment to DEAI work. While the research investigates racial equity, most institutions use the umbrella term DEAI to encompass racial equity as well as other inclusive practices. DEAI was the filter used during recruitment, though the focus was on the emotional labor of staff doing racial equity work within this broader category. The researcher reached out to staff who currently lead racial equity initiatives with their museums with the goal of interviewing more than

one person at each museum to better understand both formal museum supports and informal practices. Ten institutions were contacted and three responded. The researcher spoke with three professionals at the Anchorage Museum and one professional each at the Seattle Art Museum and the Mississippi Museum of Art. All three museums that participated in this study are the largest art museum in their state, although they do differ in art focus.

Museum professionals were interviewed about their experiences of equity work, its emotional labor, and formal and informal coping mechanisms. Additionally, available documents were analyzed that outline the museums racial equity work. The goal of this strategy is to have a deeper understanding of the expectations and goals of equity work at each institution as well as the lived experiences of the museum professionals who do the work. Recruitment began in mid- February 2021 for this project, and the interviews were completed by early April 2021.

Museum Sites

The Seattle Art Museum (SAM) is a large art museum located in Washington. Its collection has over 25,000 works of art from around the world. SAM aims to “share its global collections, powerful exhibitions, and dynamic programs to engage, educate and inspire.” (SAM, 2021) Three of the museum’s seven core values are equity, diversity, and accessibility. The Mississippi Museum of Art (MMA) is in Jackson, the state’s capital and most populous city. It is a midsize art museum with a mission to “connect Mississippi to the world, and the power of art to the power of community.” (MMA, 2021) The MMA’s collection is a primarily 19th and 20th century American art collection. A key program of the museum is the Center for Art and Public Exchange (CAPE) founded on the values of equity, transparency, and truth. The Anchorage Museum in Alaska “connects people, expands perspectives, and encourages global dialogue about the North and its distinct environment.” (Anchorage Museum, 2021) The museum’s collection focuses on works and objects that contribute to the story of the people, cultures, and environment of the Circumpolar North, including contemporary art and historical objects. The Museum’s diversity, equity and inclusion and anti-racism policy outlines its commitment to their values.

This study used data from two sources, interviews with museum professionals who do racial equity work, and documents that outline this work. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and

analyzed by the primary researcher. To answer the research questions, the researcher identified themes through emergent coding within participants' responses to the interview questions. Similarly, the researcher identified themes in the documents and compared with the themes explored in the participants responses.

The interview excerpts in this thesis have had pauses, stutters and other conversational bumps smoothed out for readability. Though participants received interview questions prior to the interview, the conversations flowed through earlier points and natural conversation pauses. These omissions in the presentation of quotes from the interviews are intended to smooth out the verbal pauses of conversation for this written medium, not to remove or change data. Often, participants would distance themselves from the labor, speaking in a hypothetical third person, or about colleagues at their workplace. The researcher has chosen to include some of these examples in part because they add another dimension to the analysis. When included, however, the researcher will make note of it.

Positionality Statement

The researcher is a white, cisgender, queer Jewish women. She is a student at the University of Washington in the Museology Graduate program. During the two years in this program and her undergraduate work, she has come to ground her work in the subjectivity of lived experiences. In thinking about this study, the researcher aimed to deeply investigate the experiences of museum workers. Many people doing racial equity work in museums are part of a marginalized community and have experiences different from her own. The five professionals interviewed for this study have different experiences from her own and one another. Four of the people interviewed speak about their experiences of being BIPOC. The dynamic between researcher and interviewee is fraught with power, as well as the dynamic between white people and BIPOC. The researcher and the interviewees worked to create a space of trust and shared understanding during the interviews. This was built into the instrument with ice breaker questions, clarifications about why the researcher was collecting the data and how it would be used. This all serves as a backdrop to the conversations that exist in this study.

Analysis

The data gathered from the five interviews provides a rich description of the opinions and perspectives related to emotional labor of these museum professionals within the context of their organization's existing infrastructure.

Findings

Research Question 1: How is emotional labor manifested in staff who do DEAI work in museums?

Emotional labor as a requirement of work

Though each interviewee described their experiences differently, each indicated that a key component of their job was rooted in emotional labor. All the interviewees indicated that racial equity is incorporated into all their work. They did not separate racial equity initiatives from other work tasks like collections care, fundraising, community engagement, and education. Interviewee A stated that the work must have an emotional impact because "this work requires ... a lot of thoughtfulness and care." Interviewee B explained that being professional and not shying away from conflict can be emotionally draining. In these responses, the emotional labor manifested stems from relationships required of their work and the energy it takes to do it. Interviewee C explained that it is no longer the interactions they have with an angry patron that weighs on them, though it used to. Now, as a manager, "sometimes you are exhausted, and you don't know what to do, you can say those things and be transparent, but you can't be the one crying on this zoom call like you really need to be there for the person that needs to cry on the zoom call." In these three examples, emotional labor means putting one's emotions into their work. In the final example, the interviewee explains how they surface act, or mask their true emotion and display what will be more acceptable to their colleague. These salient examples demonstrate that emotional labor is not just an aspect of the work, but rather a requirement in their job.

Speaking of other people's experiences in their institution, Interviewee B explained that their colleagues are drained by anti-racist conversation. They shared that, "being in some of those conversations are triggering." To emotionally deal with that work, they spend the rest of the day processing through it. Interviewee B surfaces that emotional labor is also a requirement of racial equity work. In the effort to strive toward an anti-racist institution, people are deeply emotionally impacted and require breaks and time to cope with that impact.

In their “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Anti-Racism Policy,” the Anchorage Museum commit to inclusion that “requires intentional, ongoing effort to ensure that diverse individuals fully participate in all aspects of organizational work, including the decision-making processes” (Anchorage Museum, 2019). A goal in the SAM’s 2018-2021 Strategic Plan aims to align organization and resources through building “an environment that is inclusive, equitable, and welcoming to SAM staff. (SAM, 2018, p. 7). At the MMA, a stated goal for their CAPE program is the fostering of “‘brave spaces’ wherein individuals are free to express differences while being challenged to reckon with fundamental realities of social inequity.” (MMA, 2021)

The emotional labor of racial equity is linked to broader societal contexts

In answering how emotional labor is manifested, many interviewees also answered where it is manifested. All four BIPOC interviewees explained that being in spaces, either leading or participating in racial equity work, was a place where emotional labor occurs. For example, Interviewee B:

“We would have had the same discussions, I think, if this call across the field hadn't come out about equity and diversity and inclusion, and accessibility after the George Floyd murder. Yeah, I don't know if that would have been as successful. I don't think people would have been aware or taken the time to recognize people's emotional investment in these topics or their ability to share, because it's very personal, right. Everything's super personal and you can't force people to open up. But if people are willing. I imagine that every person on our staff has a very different perception as to what those meetings have been like.”

By describing the personal relationship staff have with this topic, this participant indicates how being in these meetings can be emotional laborious. Interviewee D from the same institution said, “it’s been eye opening and provocative, in a good way, just sort of opening people's eyes to what experiences are for people of people of color, black people, queer people, communities of color. And this just me personally, I think the part that's been a little bit uncomfortable is that we're all sort of processing it together in the same space one kind of monolithic entity.” In these examples, the interviewees point out that

emotional labor is happening, acknowledge that the labor looks different for different people. Within these responses, implicitly and explicitly is the acknowledgment that racial equity conversations have a different impact on minority groups. For one participant, emotional labor is added by being in spaces with all staff instead of given the space to process with their own community.

Research Question 2: What coping mechanisms do staff use to combat the impacts of emotional labor?

Strategies outside of the Organization

When asked how they cope with emotional labor participants consistently started their response with mechanisms unrelated to work. Responses spanned two general areas - activities and personal networks - such as partner or family support. Interviewees spoke of hobbies such as exercising, cooking, and gardening. Interviewee A and C spoke about being artist and finding support in their art practice. All interviewees located emotional coping in personal networks, like friends and partners. One interviewee identified their coping with emotion work within their cultural heritage. Two interviewees referenced their goals for coping with emotion work. An interviewee described their "coping skills are to look to activities that allow for pleasure and rest and relief." Another interviewee pointed out that coping for them looks like finding joy in things.

Strategies within the Organization

Some interviewees located some coping mechanisms within the work environment. These coping mechanisms trended toward interpersonal relationships, such as co-worker and supervisor support. For example, two interviewees identified workplace friendships as a space to talk and process through emotion work. All participants described a supportive and trust filled relationship with supervisors or supervisees allowed them to feel more comfortable processing through emotion work. Interestingly, all interviewees identified these relationships being first and foremost about support and trust, and not around productivity was important. Interviewee C shared they work to ensure that their staff feels acknowledged and seen. Interviewee B, also a supervisor, explained they "hope that their staff know they can take the time" they

need when feeling the impacts of emotional labor instead of focusing on their missed productivity in those moments.

To expand on this, interviewees also spoke of organizational structures, such as norms that focus on work life balance and flex work. Two different participants identified an overall work culture of mutual support for all employee created space to cope with emotion work. The COVID-19 pandemic normalized working from home. Three participants identified this flexibility as another place that helps them cope with the impacts of emotional labor because they can address their racial equity work in environments that feel conducive to the emotional strain.

Finally, four participants identified deriving joy from the work itself had elements that help them cope with emotional labor. Interviewee B shared, “some of the emotional well-being of our department also relies on our public facing aspects...we get a lot of our emotional energy from people who come into the collection.” In this case, the participant indicates doing the public facing aspects of their job helps remedy other impacts of emotional labor. Participant A explained the work is hard but infusing it with hope and joy helps get through the challenging time and sees it “as an opportunity to make a big change, and a big difference in this field.” In these instances, coping tools are the work itself. Overall, the workers interviewed indicated a range of coping tools, from inside and outside their institution.

Research Question 3: What organizational support exists for staff who coordinate racial equity initiatives?

Though all interviewees listed supports their organizations provides, they also enumerated what, if any, were personally supportive for them. Frequently, the interviewees identified that the organizational norms were better for them than organizational policy. A policy is codified in writing and standardized across the organization. A norm is reportedly practiced in the throughout the organization but not codified.

Research Question 3a: What, if any, are the formal policies outlining emotion work?

For the purposes of this question, the researcher asked about policies and gave examples of what those policies might be, such as codified benefits. All the participants, therefore, mentioned that their organization has benefit packages, and four of them, to some extent, utilize them. All participants acknowledged these benefit policies include

some sort of mental health benefit. They shared that there are various reasons they remain inaccessible or unutilized. Interviewee C shared that the museum's high deductible plan requires using one's own resources. Interviewee D mentioned these benefits are not frequently considered- "you sort of forget that this really is almost like a human wellness benefit to make sure that you know our organization cares about us as humans and employees." Interviewee B spoke of stigmas in society of utilizing mental health benefits. Though mental health benefits, such as therapy, was to an extent covered, all the participants interviewed indicated they did not personally utilize them.

Other formal policies mentioned included paid time off and open sick leave. All three organizations reportedly have flexible PTO and sick leave policies, meaning employees do not have to bring in any formal proof for personal leave. Additionally, interviewees A and B mentioned access to gyms or local discounts available to employees of their museums. These participants explained that exercise is a way they cope with emotional labor. Interestingly, both participants related that they do not go to the gym that their organization provides them discounted or free access to citing that they prefer other ways of exercising, like group exercise classes or hiking. Although the discounts exist, the employees still choose to access what is convenient for them.

There are not any specific policies related to the workers doing emotional labor, but all the organizations have policies related to benefits that the interviewees identified utilizing. This study analyzed public facing documents that outline how the DEAI commitments of the organizations interact with emotion work. The Anchorage Museum's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Anti- Racism Policy specifically calls out ensuring pay and benefit equity (Anchorage Museum, 2019). One way that the benefits can be utilized is through mental health care, which can address aspects of emotional labor. The other two organizations did not include mention of benefits or other policy- based coping mechanism.

Research Question 3b: What, if any, are the organizational norms that support this work?

Professional Networks

In general, participants positively regarded the opportunities during the workday to speak with other museum professionals in their similar line of work. Interviewee C reported they "feel grateful because there are

professional networks for directors of education and I'm part of one and chosen to kind of like step into some leadership roles there, because I think that it supports me." Speaking theoretically, interviewee B stated that professional networks, and mentoring specifically,

"would help with people leaving the field and also help with stressors and guidance on how not to because then people could give advice not only on negotiating for salary or giving your perspective about what's being asked of you, but they could also support you emotionally when you are perhaps not needing a solution but needing support."

In both these cases, the interviewees indicated this support should happen during the workday and not apart from their job. The ability to do this as part of sanctioned workday tasks indicates that their organization supports this type of professional development. They underscore the support can be provided from people with similar experiences and perspectives but who do not work in the same organizations.

Supportive Work Culture

The participants identified some of the practices they found personally supportive within their organization in response to research question 2. Therefore, there is overlap between these responses. The participants, however, identified what the organization is doing, regardless of whether it is supportive to them and/or is part of their own coping tactics.

Interpersonal relationships and organizational values contribute to the organizational norms that support workers. These norms are instituted by leadership, as well as peer relationships developed organically. Interviewee D spoke of institutional leadership setting a positive tone for support throughout the organization. In general, the interviewees mentioned having encouragement from above them engenders a community of support. Interviewee E highlighted their museum's culture of openness and willingness as a norm that felt supportive. The same interviewee explained a general entrepreneurial spirit among staff offers the freedom to do initiatives without being micromanaged was compelling.

Two interviewees explained the work culture as being specifically supportive because of gender of staff and leadership. Interviewee E explained that "most of our staff are women, so I think this place is

really, particularly supportive of people’s mental health.” Interviewee A mentioned that “having that sort of professional support from our CEO is just really amazing and actually like a lot of our senior leadership are like really incredible women and women of color and... I don’t think I’ve really ever experienced that before.” The interviewees touch on the differing relational expectations of support they perceive in emotional wellbeing based on gender.

Intra-organizational Practices

Though two of the organizations represented in this study had groups that meet to do yoga or mindfulness exercises, the representatives from those museums interviewed did not personally find those supports helpful. Programs like this seem to be hit or miss amongst staff, suggested one interviewee. However, the interviewees acknowledged having these programs positively speaks to mental health in the workplace. They indicated this is important, even if those strategies are not personally helpful to them.

The documents, overall, do not have specific call outs to coping with emotion work. Rather, they have coded expectations about the work environment such as, it being a “safe, equitable workplace, and include a statement of safety and welcoming” (Anchorage Museum, 2019). Similarly, the SAM’s 2018-2021 strategic plan outlines building “an environment that is inclusive, equitable, and welcoming to SAM staff” as a goal (SAM, 2018). A safe and equitable workplace could include organizational norms that support emotional wellbeing of staff, though it is certainly not explicitly stated.

Research Question 4: Do staff perceive the support as functional enough to remedy the effects of emotional labor?

The workplace is not the only source of emotional labor

A theme that came up in the interviews is workers do not stop experiencing societal pressure when they walk into work. Many of the interviewees shared it is not just their worker identity that experiences the effects of emotional labor, but their whole selves. As such, they located some of their support coming from within the people and practices of their organization, but much more support comes from other spaces of coping. The interviewees did not compartmentalize the impact of one space of emotion work from another.

Each person interviewed responded in some ways it is enough and in other ways it is not enough. Interviewee D shared the ways their institution addressed emotional labor meets their needs but might not meet the needs of people with more public facing jobs. Interviewee B communicated their organization meets their needs because they do not expect their institution to provide support. Interviewee E shared because of the relationships they have at work, they feel supported, and they do not locate their emotional fulfillment only in their job. These responses indicate the interviewees have differing interpretations of the role their organization must play in addressing their emotional labor.

Suggestions for Strengthened Staff Support

Interviewees offered other solutions their organization could use to strengthen their support of staff. For interviewee C, the first step is acknowledging what is happening - staff are doing emotion work as part of their jobs. The interviewee worries creating policy without acknowledgement will replicate other systems of oppression museums have perpetuated. Interviewee D explained they wish their organization “acknowledge that there are staff of color that are coming to these [DEAI] meetings with very different life experiences.” For both participants, acknowledging that emotional labor is happening, and the intersectional identities compound emotional labor is key for organizational success. This sentiment was echoed by participant E, where they highlighted the work of Adrienne Marie Brown and the idea of “working at the speed of trust.” In these cases, taking the time to understand what people are experiencing and building rapport is key to successful norms and policies for staff and emotion work.

Other interviewees pointed to solutions that were mentioned in discussion about research question 3b. Participating in mentoring, professional development, and professional networking as part of one’s work creates more spaces for relational support that is not directly tied to one’s productivity or job responsibilities.

Barriers from Support

Interviewees were asked about the barriers that exist in their organization preventing these emotional supports from existing and or working. Two interviewees expressed the systems museums exist in and are a part of, namely capitalist and white supremacy culture, are purposefully not designed for rest or healthy labor practices at all.

Interviewee E expressed the work required of this is often “in contradiction to the capitalist model.” The interviewee C said poignantly,

“resisting systems of hegemonic power and oppression looks like finding pleasure and rest, right, capitalism does not want you to feel good enough, and neither does white supremacy. And those entwined systems don’t want you to take a break, ever. In fact, you should feel as though you feel guilty about a break, you feel guilty about feeling good in your body or like you got enough sleep. You should feel bad about not answering emails all the time or seeming really busy or hard to have a meeting with, you know like, those are things that that we've been taught culturally, you should aspire to fatigue and feeling inadequate.”

Both these interviewees point not just to museums or workplaces as places that create emotional labor and then do not support workers coping, but the systems they exist in as the issue.

Limitations

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many museums faced staffing changes. For this study, the researcher limited the participants to people who were still employed at the organization they were working with prior to the pandemic. Therefore, this study does not account for staff who were furloughed, lost their positions, or chose to leave their institution. Instead, this study was designed to focus on what ways professionals leading racial equity initiatives support their own emotional wellbeing and what, if any ways, their organization addresses their emotional labor.

Creswell (1998) indicates that 5-25 people should be interviewed for phenomenology design, therefore this sample size is on the low end. The COVID-19 pandemic likely impacted the sample size of this study. The plan for this research was to speak with at least two professionals at each institution. Even with follow-up emails and further inquiry, the researcher was unable to speak with more professionals. This could be for a variety of reasons, including the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on staff and staff bandwidth to participate in additional tasks.

Conclusions

This study looked to better understand organizational support for racial equity workers to combat burnout and retain staff. The racial equity workers identified emotional labor as a requirement of their work. They spoke of their experiences coping with emotional labor, some processed at work, notably through interpersonal relationships, and other aspects they cope with personally. Though each interviewee illustrated ways their organization has some, but limited, policies outlining support for emotion work, they underscored organizational norms were better suited for this work. Though the interviewees held different perspectives to if the support they received from their work was enough to cope with emotion work, they all identified opportunities for support and barriers that hinder that support.

The outcome of this study demonstrates two major areas for the museum field to act. As active museum professionals, the interviewees identified there is not a place that outlines the emotional coping tools available to museum workers. In the results of this study, the interviewees spoke of many coping tools that are of use to them, including some codified policies as well as practices. Though policies exist that can support emotion work, like benefit packages and other perks, they are available to all staff within a certain rank. These benefit packages are not designed to acutely address emotional labor, but rather provide an outlet for staff to access a certain type of support. Interestingly, the interviewees described organizational norms as more efficacious. These practices focus on the relational connections built on trust professionals have with their co-workers, supervisors and/or supervisees. Museums utilizing these tools are working toward addressing the emotional labor of workers doing with racial equity work.

This study recommends the museum field build strategies to form supportive work culture that allows for meaningful interpersonal relationships built on trust. These relationships should exist within the organizations, as well as built through professional networks connecting workers from across the field. The field can look to organizations already doing this work, particularly professional network that foster community and offer mutual support for BIPOC museum workers like Museum Hue. The Inclusion and MASS Action are two other professional networks that focus on bringing together workers who aim to make museums more inclusive spaces. This recommendation is for fieldwide action as well as future study. The field can act to better support their workers who are part of these organizations' participation by creating space in their jobs to do so. Additionally, this study recommends further research about the

professional networks that workers form that in part, address emotional labor. Specifically, what are the ways workers tap into these professional networks? In what ways can the field support these communities of practice?

This study recruited participants who remained employed at museums doing racial equity work during the COVID-19 crisis. As such, the research reflects a particular experience, not those of people who voluntarily left the field due to emotional burnout or those who were forced out of the field. It would be beneficial to explore the experiences of museum workers who left the field to better understand organizational norms and policies that were lacking or even harmful and impacted their leaving the museum field.

As detailed, emotional labor is a result of the work museum professionals do when tasked with making their museum more equitable. This adds to the literature on museum workers and emotional labor. The outcome of this study aligns with Wen, Huang, and Hou's (2017) findings that perceived organizational supports can reduce the strain of emotional labor on workers. This study, however, underscores the personal coping tools workers have, and outlines how a combination of organizational and personal coping is necessary to support workers.

Additionally, this study contributes to the literature on the experiences of minority group employees on organizational diversity. Throughout the interviews, participants outlined how their experience of emotional labor intersects with their multiple identities. BIPOC workers detailed ways in which the process of sharing and learning about racial equity with their white co-workers could be emotionally taxing, which parallels the experiences of BIPOC professors in Wong's 2007 study. This study found common themes amongst BIPOC workers in which the intersectionality of their identities created compounding conditions for emotional labor in the workplace. Further research on this topic would create a deeper understanding of intersectionality of minority group employees' experiences.

This study considers how purpose driven emotional labor can intersect with identity. Schabram and Maitlis's research (2017) underscore how workers who have a calling can experience burnout due to types of emotional investment and ways the workers think about that investment. This study considers how identity and purpose intertwine. The BIPOC interviewees in this study speak both of personal identity and purpose within their organization and the field as a reason

they engage in this work. Further study to understand how calling and identity interact with emotional labor would benefit the field.

This research also touched on the ways white supremacy culture and capitalism are deeply entrenched in museums. Though some DEAI initiatives are designed to combat this, not all are. A deeper exploration of the intersections of combating white supremacy culture, capitalism and emotional labor in museums could provide the field with a fuller understanding of the inherent clash of worker support and oppressive structures. This is just one of many ways to look at this multi-faceted issue, and issue and could explore the different ways that institutions approach racial equity and their further commitments to it.

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Appendix A: Consent Protocol and Interview Guide

Consent Protocol

I am asking you to participate in a research study that is part of my master's Thesis work at the University of Washington. The purpose of this research is to understand the nature of organizational support offered by museums for staff who coordinate diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) initiatives within the organization. It is my hope that, through this case study, a better understanding of how museum workers address emotional labor so organizations can better support their workers.

Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits, and you may discontinue participation at any time. This interview will be recorded. You and your institution can be identified within this study in order to demonstrate the participating organizations represented with your consent. Direct quotations may be used in the final paper. If you have any questions now or in the future, you may contact my advisor and I using the contact information listed above. If you agree to participate, please give your consent in an email responding to the interview request. You will also be asked to provide consent again on the video call interview once recording has commenced.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The goal of this interview is to establish an understanding the nature of organizational support offered by museums for staff who coordinate diversity, equity, accessibility and inclusion initiatives with the organizations There are four main sections with sub-questions to help guide our conversation. If there are any questions you wish to skip or if you would like a break at any point, please let me know. Do you have any questions before we get started?

Icebreakers

1. What is your role in the museum?
2. How long have you worked in the museum? And in this role?
3. How did you come about this position?
4. How central is promoting and supporting DEAI initiatives to your organization's culture/values?
5. Can you describe what you do to facilitate DEAI?
6. What has been the reaction from other staff to your work?

Emotion Work Questions

7. Would you describe your work as having an emotional impact on you?
8. In what ways do you experience emotion work in your job?
9. What are the ways you cope with the emotion work in your job?

Organizational Support Questions

10. Does your institution provide any support for emotional work that is required in your job?
11. Would you describe these as formal or informal? Why?
12. Are there any institutional policies that address emotion work?
13. Are there any institutional practices that address emotion work?

Efficacy of Organizational Support

14. What are the practices/policies that you personally find supportive? Why does this work for you?
15. What are the practices/policies that you do not personally find helpful? Why does this not work for you?
16. Are the ways that your institution addressed emotion work sufficient to support you?
17. If yes, are there any other recommendations you can make?
18. If no, what are the barriers that exist that prevent more support for your work?