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Doing emotion work in museums: reconceptualising the role of community engagement practitioners

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Abstract

In this paper I investigate the practice of community engagement, and suggest that ideas around emotion work and emotional labour might offer new ways of thinking about the role of museum staff in community engagement settings. Through material gathered as part of an ethnographic research project conducted with Glasgow Museums – the city of Glasgow’s municipal museums service – I show that community engagement practitioners routinely utilize emotional performances as part of their work. I argue that, often, the emotion work that is done in these settings is under-valued, and suggest that both scholars of museums and museum professionals need to pay more attention to the interpersonal relationships that might be forged within community engagement settings.

Key words: community engagement; outreach; emotion work; emotional labour; museums; stress

Introduction

Museums are emotional places. We find emotions in the interactions between visitors as they move around, discussing the exhibitions and displays, or as they chat over coffee in the museum café. We also find emotions in the interactions between visitors and museum objects themselves – we often speak of ‘loving’ certain exhibitions, whilst ‘hating’ others. Emotions are also present in backstage areas where curators and conservators ‘look after’ objects that they often care deeply about. Yet exactly how emotions ‘fit in’ to our understanding of museums is, as yet, far from clear.

Contemporary museum studies is increasingly concerned with the ways in which museums can contribute to social policy objectives, and recent years have seen a particular focus on the ways in which museums can contribute to social policy objectives around health and wellbeing (Camic and Chatterjee 2013; Chatterjee and Noble, 2009; Chatterjee et al, 2009). Much of this work argues that engagement with museums can be beneficial to those individuals who could be considered marginalized, vulnerable or otherwise excluded. In particular, in recent years, museum professionals and policy makers have emphasized the ways in which engagement with museums may positively impact individuals’ physical and emotional wellbeing (Jermyn 2001). Research indicates that engagement with museums can have lasting effects on individuals’ wellbeing, and there is a large body of work that seeks to investigate the impact of cultural activities on individuals’ self-esteem and self-confidence, for example (Galloway and Stanley 2004; Newman *et al* 2005).

Drawing on fieldwork conducted with Glasgow Museums – the city of Glasgow’s municipal museum service – this paper investigates one key aspect of contemporary museum practice: community engagement. In this paper, I argue that emotions are utterly central to the practice of community engagement, and that the ‘emotional’ nature of community engagement is key to its perceived social impact. My paper focuses predominantly on the *delivery* of community engagement programmes within Glasgow Museums, and investigates how museum staff understand the impact of community engagement, before going on to examine the ways

in which museum staff encounter and use emotions during the course of their community engagement work.

The paper is split into four sections. The first offers a review of recent literature regarding affect and emotion – with a particular focus on ideas around affective labour and emotion work/emotional labour. The paper then illuminates the research context, and outlines my methodology. I move on to illustrate the ways in which community engagement settings require emotion work on the part of facilitators. I highlight the ways in which emotions might be thought of a resource before going on to show how emotion work might be considered problematic by many members of staff.

The ‘affective turn’ in museum studies: thinking through affect and emotion.

Heritage and museum studies have seen something of an ‘affective turn’ in recent years, with many writers embracing the languages of affect and emotion in order to highlight the ways in which heritage sites and museums might ‘act on the social’ (Bennett 2005: 525). Much of this work is concerned with challenging reductive ideas around the impact of heritage sites and museums by illuminating the often-unexpected ways in which engagement with these institutions affects individuals and groups.

The affective turn in heritage and museum studies has highlighted the complexity of visitors’ responses to these places (for examples, see Bagnall 2003; Bennett 2012; Crang 1997; Crang and Tolia-Kelly 2010; Gregory and Witcomb 2007; Tolia-Kelly and Crang 2010; Witcomb 2013). Much of this body of literature argues that visitors’ affective responses to heritage sites and museums may work against the authority of these sites. For example, Crang and Tolia-Kelly (2010) emphasize that what is felt at heritage sites and museums is often ignored, and yet the embodied experiences brought about by engagement with these spaces can have unexpected effects – in their case, they argue that the embodied experiences of visitors can work against institutional attempts to ensure accessibility and inclusion. Gregory and Witcomb (2007) argue that the museum experience is changing as a result of recent thinking around the affective nature of museum-visiting; these authors argue that some museums are moving away from familiar, didactic models of museum display in favour of new models that embrace uncertainty (see also Matthews 2013; Modlin *et al* 2011).

The affective turn in these areas builds upon work regarding the emotional nature of our interactions with heritage sites and museums (Schorch 2012). This body of literature focused predominantly on those heritage sites and museums that seek to bring about emotional responses in visitors; for example, museums devoted to understanding painful or ‘difficult’ historical events (Logan and Reeves 2008; Tyson 2008). However, as the opening paragraph of this paper suggests, emotions are also important to the everyday experience of museum visiting and feature in the most ordinary and unexpected settings.

One of the major problems facing scholars examining the affective component of engaging with heritage sites and museums is the uneasy synergy between theories of affect and theories of emotion. Whilst these two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, Hardt and Negri (2005: 108) warn against conflating affect and emotion, arguing: ‘unlike emotions, which are mental phenomena, affects refer equally to body and mind’. Within geography – a discipline at the forefront of critical scholarship around affect and emotion – writers have, however, expressed concern that theories of affect may work to further ‘[distance] emotions from “reasonable” scholarship’ (Thien 2005: 450), by dint of their complexity.

The concept of affective *labour* is not at present widely used within heritage and museum studies, but is of particular importance to this paper. Affective labour is usually described as labour carried out by one person that is intended to produce an affective or emotional experience in another person. There are close links between theories of affective labour and older theories around emotion work/emotional labour, given that both refer to labour that is concerned explicitly with stimulating a reaction in another person. Hardt (1999: 96) suggests that affective labour produces – amongst other things – ‘a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion – even a sense of connectedness or community’. In line with the aforementioned attempts to evidence their social impact, museums are increasingly being asked to ensure that they are accessible and welcoming spaces, in order to produce feelings

of safety, security and inclusivity for all visitors. Of course, so much of this hinges on the attitudes and demeanour of staff, hence it is perhaps surprising that theories of affective labour and emotion work/emotional labour have yet to gain a foothold in museum studies.

Theories around affective labour are not without their critics, with many commentators arguing that the concept does little to extend the analytical power of theories of emotion work and emotional labour (McRobbie 2010; Mitchell and Elwood 2012; Weeks 2007). McDowell and Dyson (2011) suggest that literatures concerned with affective labour do not incorporate feminist analyses of emotion work, emotional labour and the closely related concept of caring labour. In light of these critiques of affective labour, in this paper I draw primarily on ideas around emotion work/emotional labour in order to examine the practice of community engagement.

Emotion work and emotional labour are concepts associated with Arlie Russell Hochschild (1979, 1983, 1993). In her study of Delta Airlines workers, Hochschild (1979, 1983) describes how air stewardesses engage in emotion management. To carry out emotion management necessitates presenting an appropriate emotional 'performance' on cue; Hochschild (1979, 1983) calls this emotion work. Hochschild (1979, 1983) argues that we all engage in emotion work at various points in our lives but that emotion work can also be exploited as part of the labour process. In these cases, emotion work becomes a requirement in some jobs, where it is considered an essential part of the commodity being sold; Hochschild (1979, 1983) calls this emotional labour in order to distinguish it from emotion work, which does not necessarily have profit as a motivating force. Hochschild (1983, 1993) illuminates the hard work that goes into the management of emotion, and examines, in detail, the negative effects that it can have on workers.

In her review of recent scholarship on emotion work and emotional labour Wharton (2009) notes that, nearly 20 years after the publication of Hochschild's *The Managed Heart* (1983), emotion work remains poorly understood. In large part, this may be due to the links between emotion work and domestic care; James (1989, 1992) has argued that these links obscure the effort that emotion management in institutional settings requires, as care itself is consistently under-valued (England *et al* 2012). James (1989) has further argued that the expectations placed upon those employed in public sector settings are often unhelpfully compared with domestic care arrangements, putting workers under considerable pressure.

Of course, in many occupations emotional labour is also under-valued despite the fact that it is a requirement of the job (Hunter and Smith 2007). Ndring *et al* (2006) write that, in light of this persistent under-valuing, we need to better understand the effects that 'doing' emotional work can have on workers. In particular, Ndring *et al* (2006) argues that we need to investigate the connection between emotional labour and 'burnout'. Burnout is usually understood as a reaction to stress, common amongst those workers whose jobs require sustained, emotional interactions with the public (Maslach 2003). Burnout has been investigated particularly amongst healthcare practitioners, but it has also been explored within the service industry (Erickson 2004b) and amongst teachers (Kyriacou 1987; Ndring *et al* 2012).

Within the last decade or so, other authors have attempted to understand the tactics that workers in emotionally demanding jobs might deploy in order to ensure the emotional 'safety' and comfort of all concerned. In particular, a large body of literature has grown up interrogating the links between so-called 'emotional' work and the psychotherapies. Bondi (2005, 2008) emphasizes that relationships between individuals are extremely complex and dynamic – regardless of the setting – and notes the usefulness of therapeutic ideas such as empathy and identification for those engaged in emotional work (see also Bondi and Fewell 2003). I draw on this body of literature later in the paper, in order to expand and deepen understanding of the relationships that are forged within community engagement settings.

As I have shown in this short section, there has been a flourishing of work concerning emotion management, emotion work and emotional labour in different contexts, hence it seems surprising that there has been relatively little work that seeks to understand the emotional aspects of museum work. In the next section, I outline the key characteristics of community engagement in Glasgow Museum and suggest that the emotional component of community engagement is key to its perceived social impact. I then go on to outline the ways in which community engagement facilitators encounter and use emotions in the course of their work.

The research context: community engagement in Glasgow Museums

At the time of writing, Glasgow Museums is the UK's largest civic museums service outside of London, with 13 museums located across the city. Glasgow Museums' dedicated Learning and Access department¹ handles all work relating to social inclusion, lifelong learning, support for the formal education sector, outreach, and community engagement. As Beel (2009, 2011) has recently written, Glasgow Museums promptly incorporated social inclusion into the museum service in the years after Tony Blair's Labour government made it a key feature of cultural policy. However, Glasgow Museums has been committed to what has latterly become termed 'social inclusion' since at least the 1940s, when the museums service created a post designed to support the formal education sector.

In 1990, Glasgow Museums created the Open Museum, a 'virtual' museum devoted to outreach and community engagement (see Dodd *et al* 2002). Historically, the Open Museum handled most of Glasgow Museums' community engagement activities, but in recent years, this area of museum practice has been expanded, meaning that community engagement projects are no longer necessarily carried out in conjunction with the Open Museum (O'Neill 2010a, 2010b). Within Glasgow Museums, community engagement projects sometimes take place in one of the many free-to-enter museum buildings dotted around the city, however, community engagement may also happen outside of museums, 'in spaces where people [...] meet and gather – community centres, care homes, health centres, shopping centres, festivals and prisons' (Glasgow Museums, 2010: 4).

Glasgow Museums understands community engagement as anything that brings about the 'involvement of local communities in museum activities' (Glasgow Museums 2010: 3). As I have written elsewhere (Munro 2013b), community engagement within Glasgow Museums generally refers to the museum interacting with small groups of people – usually people who do not or cannot access the museums service – around a set of goals. The goals for community engagement projects may be short-term (for example, the construction of a one-off exhibition) or long-term (for example, the creation of a sustainable partnership between the museums service and a particular community). Community engagement sessions are designed to encourage interaction between participants, by providing opportunities for individuals to talk with one another, and with facilitators. Community engagement sessions may utilize objects as catalysts for discussion but, alternatively, they may represent spaces where individuals are invited to simply talk and listen, and in these cases the relationship-management skills of facilitators are key.

The kind of interaction privileged within community engagement carries with it certain associations: within Glasgow Museums, being invited into a safe, supportive space and being encouraged to simply talk and listen is understood as contributing to individuals' emotional wellbeing. It is also seen as able to help people to learn from and make sense of past experiences, to help them to build resilience as regards tackling future challenges, and may raise the self-confidence and self-esteem of participants (Kavanagh 2002). Additionally, within Glasgow Museums, individuals' emotional wellbeing is explicitly linked to the objectives of social inclusion policy, in that individuals' emotional wellbeing is seen as key to improving the wellbeing of other groups and communities with which they may be associated.

For my PhD, I conducted an ethnographic study of Glasgow Museums' social inclusion programme. This study entailed extensive interviewing around Glasgow Museums, and participant observation on a community engagement project called *Curious*. The *Curious* project formed part of the Legacy project associated with the London Olympics and the upcoming Commonwealth Games (to be held in Glasgow in summer 2014). *Curious* had a four-part structure, consisting of: the creation of training programme for museum staff and volunteers working with issues of cultural diversity, written after consultation with students at some of Glasgow's central colleges; a community exhibition (see Munro 2013a; Strachan and Mackey 2013); a conference for museum professionals; and a learning programme for schools, themed around citizenship.

My research entailed working on the training programme, which involved working alongside college students – young people taking part in one of the college's vocational courses, and recent immigrants to Glasgow taking part in the English Speakers of Other

Languages (ESOL) course – in order to investigate their everyday experiences of cultural diversity. The participants' experiences directly informed the creation of the training programme: participants were consulted regarding how museums could better represent diversity such that individuals felt that their distinctive identities were respected within their exhibitions and displays, and how museum staff and volunteers could contribute to this. Of course, due to the makeup of the groups, experiences varied widely: whilst many individuals' experiences were positive and celebratory, some of the individuals engaged had been the victims of discrimination. As a result of this, sensitivity was needed when asking people to recount their experiences. I worked on the training programme with four members of Glasgow Museums staff and one other volunteer, although I also interviewed other community engagement practitioners as part of my research. The material presented in the following sections consists of a combination of interview material and data taken from my ethnography.² All participants are anonymized in line with university Ethics guidelines, and are referred to by their position within the museum service.

Community engagement as emotional arena.

As previously outlined, community engagement within Glasgow Museums is understood as contributing to social policy objectives around social inclusion, and health and wellbeing. One very experienced member of the *Curious* team summed up the perceived social impact of community engagement, and gave some insight into the potential short, medium and long-term effects of engagement:

These [participants] are usually people who, for whatever reason, are excluded. Bringing them here and giving them the chance to talk, listen, get out of their daily routine – it's really important. It's good to do something new. And I guess the medium to long-term hope is that attitudes are changed, or at least people's mood is improved, perhaps they just feel [...] able to manage little things. Everyone needs to feel valued [...] but there's a lot of people who are denied that (Curator, meeting, 5/11/2011).

This curator suggests that, within Glasgow Museums, community engagement is understood to have a wider social impact. This draws her situated, 'everyday' understanding of community engagement in line with policy discourses. The 'ripple-out' effect of small-scale projects such as community engagement has been critiqued in recent years (see in particular Sennett 2012), with some commentators arguing that these localized interventions have little impact on society more broadly. However, the curator quoted above is representative of the way in which Glasgow Museums staff understood community engagement – they were pragmatic and understated when discussing the ways in which community engagement might have wider social impact; nonetheless, engagement was understood as having positive short and long-term effects. It was extremely common for staff within Glasgow Museums to emphasize the importance of 'doing something new' (particularly if those individuals being engaged could be seen as excluded, marginalized or vulnerable); however, this curator suggests also that emotional support – feeling valued and respected – is also key to individuals' wellbeing. In this respect, the interpersonal skills of staff are key to ensuring that participants have a 'good' community engagement experience, or, one that may have impact both in the short and longer-term.

Those Glasgow Museums staff with experience of community engagement spoke about the often-emotional nature of their work. Once I began work on the *Curious* project I started to see for myself the ways in which community engagement sessions quickly became emotional, and how difficult this could be to manage:

After the session today (which consisted of us essentially asking recent immigrants to the city what they liked about Glasgow and what they missed about 'home') I probably looked a little tired, and in the lift [member of senior management team] smiled at me: "It's not always so busy but you do get all sorts – folk upset, folk in pure hysterics".³ Having seen what community engagement entails, I feel as if I better understand the emotional (and potentially stressful) component that interviewees and colleagues have mentioned. The unpredictability of sessions

is difficult, and the atmosphere in sessions can change extremely quickly. In this session, I found asking individuals about 'home' was a minefield, as for many people 'home' was a difficult thing to talk about, and the experience of leaving home was often a stressful one and so many people were happy to talk, but others fell quiet when asked, or deflected the question preferring to talk about something else. But despite these potential pitfalls, it does feel as if we're doing something good – people seem to value the opportunity to meet with others, talk and listen, and do something 'different'. It is difficult to encourage and enable people to talk, and to convince them that there's no 'right' or 'wrong' answers to a question like "What do you like most about living in Glasgow, and what do you miss about home?" but it does feel, overall, as if it's worth it and that engaging people on this very personal, emotional level might have real, lasting effects.

It is evident from this note – reflecting one of my earliest experiences of facilitating – that engagement may require emotional performances from facilitators, and that facilitators have to be 'ready' to work with emotions.⁴ The ability of facilitators to quickly 'read' and respond to the affective register of a community engagement session (or indeed, overlapping conversations and activities going on within sessions) struck me as a visiting researcher, although it appeared as just 'part of the job' for experienced practitioners. One curator that I worked with extensively spoke of 'doing the dance' (Curator, meeting, 5/11/2009) in sessions, meaning, moving quickly from one situation to another, relying on a different set of interpersonal skills – and often, a different emotional performance – in each context. In this respect, community engagement practitioners relied heavily on their emotional intelligence in order to 'read' participants' emotional cues and respond accordingly.

Emotion work and burnout

Many staff I spoke to within Glasgow Museum were apprehensive about taking on community engagement projects, stating that they frequently came with particularly heavy workloads. The volume of work that community engagement entailed was often seen as a result of the fact that these projects involved a lot of prior organization, and liaison between different departments within Glasgow Museums and within the wider council, as well as outside agencies and individuals. One member of the city council's social inclusion unit summed up the process of organizing projects as 'bitty', likening it to 'a spider's web' (Social inclusion officer, interview 28/8/2009). Some staff also noted that projects had a very quick turnaround, meaning that they were often left with little time to prepare for community engagement sessions, and that as a result they sometimes felt unprepared. Staff also suggested that organizing community engagement projects was made particularly difficult due to the fact that community engagement sessions are rarely replicable but rather, are highly contextual, meaning that there is no 'tried-and-tested' way of doing things.

One curator emphasized how difficult she found community engagement, and stated that she felt unsupported in her practice:

My friends at home were saying: "It's great, no-one is telling you what to do", but [...] it was so stressful. I needed to have a vague idea of what I was meant to be doing [...]. It's very emotionally taxing, very exhausting. You ask yourself questions: "Am I good enough? Do I know what I'm doing? Am I a fraud? Am I letting people down?" (Curator, interview, 2/9/2010)

This curator outlines how this lack of support made her *feel*, stating that she blamed herself for the problems she was encountering. In this respect, she highlights the potential for mental health problems to arise in the workplace as a result of overwork, and she echoes some of the research that has been done on 'burnout' within emotional work settings (Maslach 2003; Maslach and Jackson 1982).

Other interviewees also suggested that community engagement involved a lot of work, but differentiated between the amount of work that goes into planning and executing projects, and the difficult *nature* of the work that was done within sessions:

[Community engagement] is brutally inefficient. Not just here, I have to emphasise

that, but everywhere. So much work goes into planning these projects, and it could be halved if only we had a proper handbook, or even just a list of community engagement projects that have gone before, and their evaluations, and any facilitator notes [...] And all that's before you take into account the sort of thing we *do* in community engagement. (Curator, interview, 4/4/2011)

This curator digs a little deeper into what makes community engagement distinctive, and potentially problematic. He suggests that there is something distinctive about what community engagement practitioners *do* compared to other cohorts of staff in the museum service. England and Folbre (1999) write that problems with the nature of caring work or, broadly, work that seeks to create and manage relationships, are often conflated with general problems of overwork and work stress. Similarly, Dyer *et al* (2008, my emphases) note – albeit speaking of a different context – that care is often ‘rationalized to a series of tasks *which fail to account for the relational and context-specific nature of caring*’. As can be seen in these quotes, Glasgow Museums staff distinguish between the volume of routine administrative work that community engagement entails and the complex, relational work done as part of facilitating.

I have argued elsewhere that museums' community engagement programmes could usefully be understood as spaces of care (Munro 2013b). Bondi (2005, 2008) has argued, with reference to psychotherapeutic work, that the relational nature of care and its emotional component means that care situations always assume different formations, and are rarely replicable. Milligan and Wiles (2010) have noted that this can contribute to the strain on both the carer and the individual/s being cared-for. This was clear in the sessions that I volunteered in; for example, some participants would express irritation that facilitators did not offer them the same attention that they had in previous weeks, or were annoyed when facilitators forgot small details about them and their lives; this clearly had a negative impact on the experiences of both participants and facilitators.

It became evident as my time in Glasgow Museums progressed that there was a threat of burnout amongst staff as a result of both overwork and the emotional nature of much community engagement work:

The curator told me that he had requested a transfer out of his place of work, and it had been refused. He explained he found himself “taking work home”, and said that whilst he cared deeply about community engagement, he did not want to end up sacrificing his quality of life because of work.

This curator illustrated a problem that I encountered repeatedly when speaking to community engagement practitioners. Those people employed to care, in whatever capacity, are generally so employed because they really do care about the welfare of their charges (England and Folbre 1999). The community engagement practitioners in Glasgow Museums were deeply committed to their work, and were proud to work for a committed and socially conscious museum service, however there were often personal costs attached to their caring; at times, this required practitioners to privilege self-care above their commitment to community engagement. Unfortunately as the curator above notes, the failure of the organization to recognize and value the emotion work done by facilitators means that sometimes staff are left in danger of burnout.

Digging deeper: emotion work and the ‘mask’ in community engagement settings

As Hochschild (1983) has articulated, emotional labour often begins as a deployment of the ‘mask’: hiding a true, felt emotion behind a fixed expression of another dependent on the situation. In the early *Curious* sessions I masked the fear that came from doing something I had relatively little experience of behind a display of jollity that was designed to put participants at ease. For the most part these early sessions were enjoyable affairs; most of the topics under discussion brought forth pleasant memories for participants (although as I have noted earlier in the paper, the affective register of sessions could change quickly). Yet I also found that no matter how I was feeling on a particular day, I had to work hard to attempt to ensure that personal feelings did not creep in to my performance in sessions:

The sessions are fun, but that's not to say they're easy. For the most part the topics under discussion are things that generate happy memories for people, and get people talking – for example, we've been speaking about home, about travelling around Glasgow, about the places the participants like to visit and show to visitors and friends. And yet the sessions are stressful, and tiring – it's tiring being constantly pleasant and helpful, and I remember this feeling well from working in cafes, etc. And there are many little things that threaten to throw you off track, most of which stem from working in an unfamiliar environment (yet working 'outside' the museum is key to community engagement): where are the rooms? Have we brought enough kit? Where are the toilets? What are we doing today? Why is there such a low turnout of participants? In any ordinary work situation it would be ok to get annoyed about say, a participant talking on their mobile during the session, or not having enough paper and pens, or late-comers disrupting the 'class', but you have to mask your annoyance and stay sunny in front of participants.

Similarly, a curator that I volunteered alongside spoke about the need to display a mask to participants:

I cannot let them see how stressed and frustrated I am. That has no place in the workshops; I need to play my role which is supportive, helpful, regardless of how I'm feeling. And [...] the more it goes on then that [...] becomes what is expected all of the time, regardless of how you're feeling (Curator, interview, 2/9/2010).

This gives further insight into how difficult it is to play the role of the facilitator. In both cases we had to hide our stress and frustration from participants, as well as ensuring that personal feelings did not intrude into sessions. As a result, with the sessions came a spatializing of emotional responses; if there were participants present, one curator stated, 'the mask goes on' (Curator, interview, 2/9/2010).

From emotion work to care?

Hochschild's (1979, 1983) work has prompted much discussion of the slippages between emotion work and care, with many scholars pointing to the deficiencies of theories of emotion work for understanding the complex nature of care (England and Folbre 1999). Hochschild (1979, 1983) argues, however, that there are some lines of congruence between emotion work/emotional labour and caring; she notes that emotion work often goes beyond 'the mask', hence emotion work refers to the creation of emotions as well as their suppression. Furthermore, she argues that it is an almost-inevitable human reaction to begin to care about those we engage with for long periods of time, and that this brings an added layer of complexity to 'emotional' work situations (see also England and Folbre 2005; Erickson 2004; McCreight 2005).

Many of my interviewees used the language of emotion management, or 'the mask' interchangeably with the language of care, suggesting that the two were very often blurred within community engagement settings. In part, this may be because, as one of my interviewees stated, the mask is always 'on' around community engagement participants; however, the processes by which care comes to be given and accepted are always relational, and mediated by various other factors. Some staff said that the amount of time they spent with a given individual or group had a bearing on whether they began to care about them. Others still found the relational nature of much CE work meant that they felt an affinity with some participants, but had difficulty explaining why: 'There's sometimes you just get a "click", you know, and you start to really care about this person and their progress. I often find I have an affinity with the younger participants, for one reason or another' (Curator, interview, 2/9/2010). One curator that I spoke with extensively noted that beginning to care felt like 'a give and take scenario, where you're giving bits of yourself away in order to get something in return [...] a real connection' (curator, meeting 5/11/2010). So whereas the metaphor of 'the mask' implies a surface engagement, or a closing-off of feelings, 'beginning to care' implies an empathetic emotional give-and-take, or a deeper emotional engagement. Bondi (2003: 64) (although writing of a different context) notes

that this kind of engagement entails 'oscillation' between one's own emotional world and the emotional world of another. Bondi's (2003) work details the hard work that goes in to managing complex interpersonal relationships.

What is clear from many of the conversations I had with members of staff involved in community engagement, and from my own time working on the *Curious* project, is that beginning to care about participants brought with it further problems for facilitators. One curator spoke of the trouble that she had when she began to care about participants:

I have recently returned from sick leave [...] [I was doing] work that messed with my head, it was emotionally taxing, made me tearful, put my personal relationships under pressure. Here, it's more like a 9-5, I don't take my work home with me (Curator, interview, 28/6/2010).

In another conversation, this curator noted that the large numbers of people that practitioners are expected to work with, and the quick turnover in community engagement programmes precludes stable relationships with participants, and that this can be hard on practitioners, and often participants too. As Milligan and Wiles (2010) have articulated, much literature on care assumes that proximity and sustained engagement with individuals begets a caring relationship and a sense of responsibility, but that these literatures often fail to account for the often non-linear nature of people's lives; as I have written elsewhere (Munro 2013b) it is clear that both carers and cared-for often expect caring encounters to follow a pattern, and any deviation from that pattern can lead to carers and the cared-for feeling let down. What is notable in many of these accounts is that community engagement is seen as taxing for staff; however, there is little mention of the effects that emotional engagement might have on participants. In the next section I examine the ways in which practitioners speak of the emotional performances of participants in sessions.

Disciplining emotion?

In the context of museums or heritage sites, research shows that certain visitor responses are expected and encouraged, whilst others are unexpected, discouraged and invalidated (Crang and Tolia-Kelly 2010; O'Neill 2002; Sandell 2002; Silverman 2002; Tolia-Kelly 2010). Crang and Tolia-Kelly (2010) note that heritage sites and museums tread a fine line between encouraging emotional engagement and prescribing emotional responses, and there is a large body of work within museum studies that understands the museum as a disciplinary institution (Bennett 1995). Whilst this body of literature has been challenged in recent years by those who problematize the idea that museums explicitly discipline the thought or conduct of visitors (see Trodd 2003), the coercive or 'soft' power embodied by heritage sites and museums remains a concern. To date, however, the authority of the museum has primarily been viewed as located within its displays and exhibitions, with little attention paid to those staff who work in public facing roles.

As I have shown throughout this paper, my time in Glasgow Museums suggested that community engagement relied upon engaging individuals on a personal, emotional level. Community engagement in this context (as in many museum services) is often about getting people to interact with one another, to talk and listen to one another and discuss topics that might range from the banal to the controversial. In community engagement sessions, participants should be encouraged to think relationally about selves and others. Yet based on my observations within Glasgow Museums, I would argue that this mode of engagement makes assumptions about participants that can, potentially, be damaging; in this formulation, desiring or accepting emotional engagement is a pre-requisite for a relationship with – or within – the museum. Those who are not comfortable with this mode of engagement, or those who cannot get used to it within the short periods of time available for community engagement projects may be seen as problematic. This understanding of the potentially disciplinary nature of engagement with museum staff draws my analysis away from the theorizations proposed by Hochschild (1979, 1983) and others, and towards a the more complex and nuanced understanding of the inescapable power relations inherent in 'emotional' work articulated by Bondi (2003) and Bondi and Fewell (2003).

Some members of staff expressed concern that they were acting as an obliquely disciplinary force, privileging certain modes of engagement and ways of communicating. At a conference I attended as part of my fieldwork I spoke with a Glasgow Museums curator about this very topic; the following is taken from my field notes:

She said that most museum services understand communities as groups of people who are “emotionally open and willing to be engaged”. However, she expressed concern that some people might be less willing than others, and that sometimes community engagement projects might open up ‘old wounds’ for them. She worried that she did not engage properly with participants’ emotional responses – often, when these responses were unexpected, or ‘difficult’ in some way, she felt at sea.

This curator’s anxieties about the potentially disciplinary nature of emotional engagement find their echo in much of the work that has been done on the emotional component of social inclusion strategies in other arenas (Burman 2009). Chief amongst this curator’s concerns is that she recognizes that not everyone wants to engage on an explicitly emotional level. However, community engagement is predicated on the idea that people desire emotional engagement, and that emotional engagement is the best way to ‘help’ those individuals who could be considered marginalized or vulnerable. This curator understands that the way that ‘engagement’ is framed within policy is quite specific, and that the range of behaviours that constitute engagement ‘in real life’ do not necessarily map cleanly on to policy ideas around what engagement should look like.

One curator worried that some participants could be hurt emotionally due to facilitators not being aware of their particular backgrounds, and being unable to help in the event of a session taking a wrong turn:

In some cases say we have people who come here as refugees, they have traumatic experiences and sometimes the work that we do can trigger memories they don’t want. What if you don’t know that this person is from a war-torn country and they say something and I find out later where they’re from and I go “Oh, hell” [...] We don’t want to open up new drama, we don’t want to make people vulnerable or hurt them. (Curator, interview, 2/9/2010)

This curator suggests that staff may unwittingly steer sessions towards topics that could be emotionally difficult for some participants, echoing my worries (discussed earlier in the paper) about the *Curious* sessions that I helped to facilitate. This is largely because staff are given little in the way of information on the individuals that make up community engagement groups. On one hand, this is because the way that participants are recruited precludes this – they are recruited based on characteristics that ensure relative homogeneity.

Many interviewees spoke of the importance of managing expectations in participants. Giving participants the wrong idea as to what a session will entail, what kind of relationship they might forge with practitioners or other participants, and what they are likely to get out of the sessions was undesirable. It was important that staff did not make people vulnerable by giving them unrealistic expectations of what might happen as part of the encounter.

We have to be clearer on what they are likely to get out of this, and that can be difficult because of the nature of the whole thing. Most people understand that it’s just a one-off, low-level thing but some people can get quite attached in a way, particularly if they’re vulnerable or maybe they don’t have much else going on. (Curator, interview, 4/4/2011)

Disentangling oneself from the web of relationships forged during community projects was understood as potentially difficult for participants. The flexible nature of community engagement projects meant that there was no standard exit strategy that the museum could deploy when a project had finished – most of the time projects finished on time, but very occasionally they simply petered out and sometimes they were extended. As Silverman (2010) has written, participation in a community engagement project may represent an important opportunity for

sociability, and as this curator notes, some participants may become reliant on these opportunities, and may find it hard to adjust at the end of a project.

The importance of managing expectation was something I experienced first hand as my participation in *Curious* progressed. The following section is adapted from field notes:

Today was incredibly stressful, because we were busy but also because the session threw up different issues for different people. The session was ostensibly about diversity, and about transitioning to life in Glasgow, and most people wanted to talk about their experiences of this. Only a small proportion of the group had negative experiences to share, and most of these wanted to talk about how experiences of being different had affected them. Most distressing was a woman who spoke of how her femininity had marked her out as a victim both in her home country and since her move to the UK. It felt wrong to be concerned with myself whilst she was telling her story, but a part of me just wanted to not hear it. It is impossible not to care, I am really aware that I am not painting on a smile or playing at being concerned. I am not qualified to help these people, all I can do is listen, but they seem to want more than that. This participant wanted an answer, "Why did this happen to me?", "What can I do to forget it?", "Why do people do these bad things?", "Are all Scottish people like this?". I've got no answers for them, and because I don't, I feel like I've failed. I feel like it was my fault that the woman's story came up – I brought all those emotions forward by asking her to tell me about her experiences of transitioning from one culture to another, but then I couldn't help her after that.

In this instance, I felt as though I had brought this woman's emotions forward into the space of the session, but had invalidated her response by being unable to help her in the way that she wanted. We both had different expectations of the interaction, and yet, such was the hectic nature of the *Curious* project, there was not enough time to manage participants' expectations in a way that would have prevented this situation from occurring. On this occasion, I felt I was essentially conveying to the participant which emotional responses were 'good' and which were 'bad', which were 'acceptable' and which were 'unacceptable'. I felt as though I was alone with my anxieties in this respect, until another curator expressed a similar worry during an interview some months later:

The crying ones, they are the easy ones. I know that they are upset and that's an emotion I can deal with. But it's the ones where it's more subtle, I do not have the time or the skills to unpack these [...] complicated emotional responses and so I am guilty of ignoring them, I just pretend nothing is happening. (Curator, interview, 2/9/2010)

In this way, emotional responses appear on a continuum, between those that are 'easy' and 'acceptable' and those that are 'hard' and therefore 'unacceptable'. In this way, the relationship forged between participants and facilitators is, in the end, individualizing for the participant. England (2005) – speaking of a different context, namely formal care settings – suggests that the unwillingness of care-givers to work with difficult emotions may create vulnerability amongst care-receivers, and may rob them of their emotional autonomy. Of course, facilitators' failure to work with difficult emotions might, in exceptional cases such as this, work against the positive impact of emotional engagement.

Bondi (2005, 2008) writes that it is a key tenet of much psychotherapeutic training to learn to be comfortable in the presence of even the most difficult emotions. In this way, even difficult emotions are allowed free rein, and participants retain their emotional autonomy, with no one telling them their emotional responses are right or wrong. One curator explained to me how she attempted to avoid legitimizing some emotions whilst invalidating others, drawing on her experience of counselling training:

She suggested that formal training in counselling might be beneficial. She had undergone basic counselling training as part of a course on eliciting oral histories, and stated that this had helped her a lot in her everyday life within Glasgow

Museums, and particularly, within community engagement. She stated that the person running the training course had made it clear that many people in emotional situations try to “lift” other people’s negative emotions from their shoulders, but that it was important to simply be comfortable in the presence of emotions – positive or negative. The curator suggested that the training had been greatly beneficial, and that she often repeated the counsellor’s words “as a wee mantra”.

This curator understood the power that came with being able to accept or reject emotional responses within sessions, and recognized the danger in rejecting so-called ‘difficult’ emotions whilst engaging with ‘easier’ ones. The way in which she avoided invalidating some emotional responses was to explicitly spatialize emotional engagement within these settings: she states that she is comfortable in the *presence* of difficult emotions, theorizing emotions as active in the encounter independent of the participant (Bondi 2005, 2008; Bondi and Fewell 2003). As Bondi and Fewell (2003) have written, this conceptualization of emotion is relatively common within the psychotherapies, and suggests that there is potentially crossover between the training offered to those in the formal therapeutic sector and those working in emotional arenas within museums.

Conclusions

Community engagement often represents the most radical facet of the drive towards inclusion in museums, and is perceived as a small-scale intervention that potentially has a much wider social impact. Drawing on material collected as part of a research project conducted with Glasgow Museums, I show how, within the museums service, the social impact of community engagement is predicated on the idea that improved individual wellbeing can effect wider social change. Whilst this ‘ripple-out’ effect has been critiqued in recent years it is still a common trope in many discussions of the wider social impact of engagement with cultural institutions, including museums.

Much of the research that exists on community engagement fails to adequately investigate what *actually happens* within engagement sessions. Additionally, much of the research concerning community engagement focuses somewhat narrowly on the impact of community engagement on participants. This is of course an important issue, as there are still questions to be asked about how community engagement can best be practiced such that participants feel able to share their stories freely, and furthermore, are empowered to challenge the authority of museums’ exhibitions and displays. However, our continuing focus on participants means that our understanding of the work of facilitators, and their position as end-stage interpreters of policy, has suffered. Without critical examination of how community engagement is practiced, there is little understanding of what happens in the ‘gap’ between policy directives and community engagement participants.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the role that community engagement practitioners have to play within sessions. The paper shows that community engagement practitioners are tasked with creating a safe and supportive atmosphere within sessions, and with encouraging communication between participants. Within Glasgow Museums, community engagement generally involves bringing small groups of individuals together, often for extended time periods, and encouraging them to talk about topical and occasionally controversial issues. Of course, given this template, community engagement sessions have the potential to be emotional, and facilitators need to be ready and willing to engage emotionally with participants.

Drawing on Hochschild’s (1979, 1983) work, I show in the paper that we can usefully think about facilitators as engaging in emotion work within sessions, meaning that they must manage their emotions in order to fit in with what Hochschild (1983) calls the ‘feeling rules’ of the situation. Community engagement practitioners stated that they found the emotional component of facilitating both rewarding and taxing. It is understood as rewarding, because their emotion work is seen as inextricably linked to community engagement’s potential impact: participants’ raised self-esteem and self-confidence is understood to rely – in part – on the relationships fostered within sessions. However, as I have shown, the emotional component of

community engagement can cause problems for facilitators, in particular, problems arise when the emotional component of engagement is not recognized as such.

The paper shows that the front-line work undertaken by community engagement practitioners is poorly understood, both within Glasgow Museums as an organization, but also within the academic and policy arenas. The paper shows that facilitators feel that the 'emotional' component of their job is not properly supported or valued within Glasgow Museums. Facilitators stated that they received little training in how to deal specifically with emotions (although, of course, Glasgow Museums trains facilitators in how to deal with a range of groups, including young people, the elderly, vulnerable individuals and so on). Facilitators employed a range of metaphors when speaking about their emotion work – some spoke of 'the mask', suggesting that they attempted to mask their own emotions in order to present an approachable face to participants, whilst others spoke of beginning to care about participants, stating that this represented a deeper emotional engagement. Others still were able to outline the tactics that they used in order to ensure the emotional 'comfort' of all involved. All of the facilitators that I spoke to, however, worried that their lack of training meant that they were unsure of themselves when faced with emotional situations, with some interviewees going so far as to suggest that their lack of training could cause 'burnout', or even further compound participants' vulnerability.

Those members of museum staff that I spoke to were clear that further training in how to deal with emotional arenas was necessary. Whilst most staff were clear about the fact that their training within Glasgow Museums was comprehensive, they felt training in how to deal specifically with emotions was lacking. Some staff drew parallels between community engagement and the formal psychotherapies, suggesting that some skills could – and perhaps should – be utilized across this spectrum. Those members of staff I spoke to that had received some training in how to deal with emotions felt that it had been greatly beneficial and it appears to me as though this should be standard practice across those staff cohorts dealing with potentially emotional situations.

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Notes

- 1 Please note: when this research was conducted (between 2009-2012) Glasgow Museums had a dedicated Learning and Access department. In 2013 this structure changed, and those specialist staff employed in Learning and Access are now split across two 'departments': 'Public Programming and Customer Service', and 'Collections and Content Development'. Job roles largely remain the same.
- 2 These are presented in the form of ethnographic vignettes, adapted from my field notes.
- 3 In this instance, this member of staff means 'hysterical laughter'.
- 4 Of course, *Curious* – by taking the ideas of home and belonging as central themes – had the potential to be a particularly 'emotional' project, but as Silverman (2010) has noted (and as I show elsewhere in this paper) even the most 'ordinary' museum settings can be emotional arenas.

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