Chapter 1 Introduction – what this book is about and how we came to write it

Emotional labour names the energy and effort a person expends in managing and adjusting their own feelings to engender positive feelings in others. It is largely unseen but performed in many areas of everyday social life and, increasingly, required as a core element of many jobs. American sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) first coined the term to describe the work performed by US flight attendants in suppressing or inducing feeling 'in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others – in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial place' (Hochschild 1983, 7). The flight attendant is required, as a part of her job, to smile and make this seem effortless, disguising and detaching herself from her own feelings of fatigue and irritation which might damage customer contentment (1983, 7-8). Emotional labour has since been extensively used in academic as well as more popular texts to describe key elements of working in occupations such as nursing, health care, child and elderly care, social work, teaching, hospitality, community work, advocacy, public administration and law. Those performing emotional labour in these occupational contexts tend to be those with less power: women, people of colour and working-class people.

We are all capable of moderating, disguising or suppressing our feelings and do this much of the time to varying extents (Hackman 2024, 55). In everyday settings and social relations, this emotion work may be reciprocal. But when subordinated populations disproportionately bear the burden of being attuned to and prioritising other people's feelings over their own, performing emotional labour is about the exercise of power and works to perpetuate inequalities (Hackman 2024). Whilst there is nothing inherently wrong with performing emotional labour or the empathy involved in recognising and responding to another's emotion as part of a job, there is a problem when this work is under-acknowledged, under-valued, under-compensated and, on top of this, utterly draining. Those required to perform emotional labour repeatedly throughout their working hours are often left feeling stressed and exhausted.

What does this have to do with oral history research? Scholars argue that those conducting qualitative research on sensitive topics also engage in extensive emotional labour through

close personal interaction with research participants (Carroll 2013; Dickson-Swift et al. 2009). In this kind of inquiry, researchers may listen at length to narratives of pain and loss, prioritising the feelings of participants and moderating their own (Hughes et al. 2023; Dickson-Swift et al 2008, 2009; Sampson et al. 2008; Bloor et al. 2007). In sensitive interviewing, the researcher is expected to be highly 'emotionally attuned' to both her own emotions and the needs of the participant (Carroll 2013, 548). Feminist research methodologies emphasise the centrality of the researcher's lived experience, emotions and self-reflexivity to the processes of data collection and analysis and, therefore, knowledge production in sensitive research (Calabria and Bailey 2023; Calabria 2019; Carroll 2013; Stanley and Wise 1983). This kind of emotion work may be very good for research, but it may also take a heavy (often hidden) personal toll on the researcher (Waters et al 2020; Fenge et al. 2019; Dickson-Swift et al. 2008, 2009; Sampson et al. 2008; Bloor et al. 2007). The exercise of power is also a feature of emotional labour in research, although it may work in more complicated ways.

Researchers using oral history as a methodological approach often investigate difficult and sensitive topics and may work with vulnerable and/or marginalised groups. Their work involves negotiating unequal power relations and positionalities over the duration of a project, ethical approval and participants' informed consent, and epistemic responsibilities regarding the subsequent representation of participants' accounts. Researchers work at sustaining empathy throughout an interview, monitoring and managing their own bodily and emotional expression to foster an atmosphere conducive to another (possibly vulnerable) person talking about intimate experience. Researchers must deal with the possibility that their questioning might unsettle interview participants, causing them to relive painful and disturbing memories. Managing emotion in such circumstances, comporting oneself sensitively and professionally, can demand a huge amount of focused attention, effort and energy. Interviewers may absorb and sometimes feel overwhelmed by the distressing content and affective intensity of the stories they hear. Participants' accounts may trigger the researcher's own painful remembering. The researcher may sometimes need to manage and suppress their own feelings in the face of hostile and abusive (sexist, racist, heterosexist) comments and threats of violence directed at them. After the interview, when the researcher listens back to a recording, they may reexperience the affective intensity and impact of its

content, sometimes more acutely. We argue that such practices, integral to oral history methodology and other forms of qualitative research, involve a great deal of unrecognised and often unanticipated emotional labour, which can be profoundly taxing and even harmful for the researcher.

A focus on the implications for the researcher of performing emotional labour may alarm some oral historians. Afterall, a basic assumption underpinning much oral history is that the interview participant, their thoughts, feelings and wellbeing should be paramount, and that oral history research should serve and contribute to the increased visibility and empowerment of (often marginalised and vulnerable) participant communities. Yet, assuming responsibility for countering power imbalances and ensuring that communities are represented in ways that they find acceptable and meaningful may in turn bring pressure and an additional emotional load to bear on the researcher. Further, researchers' positionalities are more complex and tentative than might sometimes be assumed, as they are shaped and constrained by the structures, conditions and ideological contexts in which they are operating. Many researchers, early career and more mature, find themselves working in highly competitive and uncertain times, sometimes precariously, and often lacking adequate institutional support. They may feel constrained from voicing their own emotional struggles and experience a sense of relative powerlessness. Also, the research participant's capacity to exercise agency in the research encounter should not be overlooked.

Undoubtedly, research participants engage in a great deal of emotional work in narrating (often painful) aspects of their lived experience and may be greatly troubled by this. This point is widely acknowledged and routinely receives detailed attention in research design and planning. Our argument, however, is that the researcher's experience also requires urgent and careful consideration. It is, after all, a vital element in the relationality of the research encounter and co-production of oral history. We need to attend with care to the feelings, thoughts and welfare of all those contributing to oral history research.

Qualitative social researchers have long discussed the consequences of conducting research that is emotionally engaged and demanding, which may put the researcher at risk of emotional harm, and sporadically called for measures to mitigate potential hazards (Skinner et al. 2023a, 2023b; Hughes et al. 2023; Williamson 2020; Sampson et al. 2008; Bloor 2007).

More recent discussion, at conferences and in meetings rather than in published literature, has focused on 'researcher vulnerability' and emphasised the need for care and systems of support for researchers working on sensitive topics.

[1] Emotional labour and emotion work have been discussed explicitly by social researchers in relation to research on sensitive topics and/or involving marginalised groups (Waters et al. 2020; Fenge et al. 2019; Dickson-Swift et al. 2008, 2009; Sampson et al. 2008; Bloor et al. 2007; Hughes et al. 2023). However, emotional labour is rarely mentioned in the oral history literature.

Oral historians have begun to consider researchers' potential exposure to danger and harm in fieldwork and interviewing (Strong 2021; Jessee 2019; Bryson and Jessee 2018). Liz Strong (2021, 196, 199) argues that oral history practice can be 'emotionally and mentally draining' and that interviewers may be at risk of 'vicarious trauma, burnout and compassion fatigue', especially when interviews cover topics such as 'violence, addiction, illness and abuse'. But, whilst oral history research is often emotionally charged, researchers may be reluctant to talk about the emotional impact of their research on themselves and/or struggle to be heard if they do speak out (Strong 2021). Erin Jessee (2017, 325) argues that the potential for harm to the researcher is often dismissed out of fear that it deflects attention away from more vulnerable research participants and that admitting to 'our own mental health challenges' may have negative consequences: for example, social stigmatisation and reputational and socio-economic harm to ourselves. We suggest that researchers may find it hard to admit to feelings of vulnerability and distress, as these (and indeed any feelings) may be regarded as inappropriate, unprofessional, and shaming. This predicament is only made worse by the highly competitive and individualistic oriented climate that currently prevails in universities and other organisations across the globe.

The marketisation of the higher education sector in the UK and many other countries has brought a sharpened focus on productivity, efficiency and competition with specific implications for academic workers. Individuals, departments and universities are pitted against each other in ever tighter competition for income and resources in the form of student enrolments, appointments and promotions, as well as research funding. The academic workforce has been gradually casualised, with increasing numbers employed on a

short-term or casual basis while community-based oral historians are typically employed for the limited duration of a specific project. Insecurity and uncertainty weigh heavily on researchers who feel anxious about the future, sometimes leading them to overwork and often exacerbating the burden of emotional management.

In such a climate, researchers (especially those at the start of their academic careers) may feel the need to conduct 'high-stakes research' to 'stand out in today's competitive jobs market', putting themselves in potentially hazardous situations and compromising 'their physical and mental wellbeing' (Jessee 2017, 327). In addition, institutional and disciplinary pressures to recruit more PhD students may lead to students embarking on researching difficult topics without sufficient scrutiny and support structures in place. In some instances, researchers may find themselves alone in the aftermath of emotionally charged encounters, confronted with an unresponsive and seemingly uncaring academic environment. We argue that, whilst it is almost inevitable that the oral historian will engage in emotional labour and be affected by the processes of conducting research, the context in which they work contributes significantly to this becoming onerous, troublesome, and at times overwhelming. The emotional burden experienced by researchers may be compounded by lack of preparation and support mechanisms, a situation made worse for an increasing number of academic and community-based researchers using oral history operating in precarious working conditions, on a fixed term or freelance basis (Calabria, Harding and Meiklejohn 2023, 91). Lack of formally recognised outlets for articulating feelings of stress, distress, exhaustion and vulnerability may further engender a sense of chronic personal and professional unease and isolation.

Oral historians are gradually beginning to talk explicitly about conducting emotionally demanding research (Calabria, Harding and Meiklejohn 2023; Strong 2021; Jessee 2017). Nevertheless, we contend that almost no attention is paid in discussion of oral history methodologies and pedagogies to *emotional labour*, how it is performed and its implications for researchers, especially early career researchers and those on temporary contracts. No research has focused directly and in detail on oral historians' lived experiences of performing emotional labour. For these reasons, we decided to embark on new empirical research involving semi-structured qualitative interviews with researchers to further explore

emotionality and emotional labour in oral history research. This work forms the core of *Hidden Toll: Emotional Labour in Oral History Research*.

Our book is unique in several ways. Firstly, it is centred on oral historians' personal accounts of conducting research on sensitive topics and how emotionality arises in the research process. Secondly, it scrutinises the meanings of the term emotional labour and its applicability to the work of the oral history researcher. Thirdly, it examines the various ways in which researchers using oral history may perform emotional labour and highlights the often-hidden emotional toll it may take on the researcher. Fourthly, it considers how the emotionally taxing implications of some kinds of research may be exacerbated or mitigated by the institutional relations and contexts in which researchers are working. Fifthly, it evaluates recommendations from adjacent disciplinary fields for ways of supporting researchers at different stages of their career. It considers how an ethics of care can be fostered in local research environments, putting forward an agenda for addressing emotional labour in oral history research.

Our book is distinctive in offering a detailed response to the collective needs of researchers, from a range of disciplinary fields, using oral history as a main or supplementary methodology. It addresses their demands for better acknowledgement of emotionality and emotion labour in oral history research, its implications for the researcher and researchers' needs for individual, peer and institutional support.

HOW WE CAME TO WRITE THIS BOOK

We are both seasoned oral history researchers, who have worked together for over five years. Our collaborative work grew from our association as Trustees of the Oral History Society (OHS) and members of the OHS Higher Education Special Interest group, a forum for university staff and postgraduate and doctoral students to engage in critical conversations about oral history theory, methodological and research ethics.[2] We have also worked together with other colleagues over the last decade to provide education and training courses for doctoral and early career researchers using oral history in their research. During this period, we became increasingly concerned about the extent to which many doctoral students seemed unprepared for and unsupported in using oral history as well as an apparent lack of

oral history expertise in their academic departments. Academic oral historians were (and continue to be) thin on the ground and often employed on temporary and short-term contracts, with oral history as a discipline more adversely affected than others by the increasing casualisation of the academic workforce (Smith 2022, 109), despite a growing interest among doctoral students in using oral history in their theses (Calabria, Harding and Meiklejohn 2023). This led us to conduct a small research project in 2021, funded by Nottingham Trent University, to investigate the extent to which UK doctoral students were using oral history methodologies in their studies, their research and educational needs and how these were being met (Calabria, Harding and Meiklejohn 2023). As part of this pilot research, we carried out a series of focus group interviews in which we invited participants to respond to two main questions: 1) What are the most important aspects of oral history to teach PhD students, and why are they important? 2) What are the main issues encountered by doctoral students using oral history?

In response to the first question, a good deal of discussion focused on ethics, power and emotion in oral history. Researchers were highly critical of ethics review processes in their universities, suggesting that they were often 'bureaucratic box-ticking exercises' that envisaged research proceeding in a linear fashion. Such processes were, they said, insufficiently attuned to the needs of oral historians researching sensitive topics and/or working with marginalised groups, where complex and unforeseen issues may arise during the research process and the researcher may be unsettled by the emotional demands of such research. Participants indicated a need for a more 'actively deliberate and iterative process of assessing and reassessing issues as they arise' (Brown, Spiro and Quinton 2020). Oral history researchers also discussed power dynamics in the interview encounter and the need for researchers to reflect on their own positionality in the research, expressing unease about their relative power and privilege in relation to narrators from marginalised populations. They were concerned about managing a potential tension between criticality and empathy, taking care of narrators and doing justice to their stories in their interpretation and representation of interview material (Calabria, Harding and Meiklejohn 2023).

In responding to the first question, focus group participants paid particular attention to narrators' feelings. In responding to the second question, their thoughts shifted to the

emotional experience of the researcher conducting research on sensitive topics and/or with marginalised groups. Significantly, they spoke at length about the emotional labour involved in oral history interviewing and the analysis and representation of oral narratives and not being adequately prepared for or supported in this. The term emotional labour was spontaneously introduced by one participant and enthusiastically explored by others in our first focus group, leading us to introduce this topic in subsequent focus group interviews. Discussion of emotional labour in all focus groups left us feeling that there was much more to explore regarding the implications for researchers of conducting emotionally demanding research and so we decided to embark on a second project, which we discuss in this book.

In 2023, we conducted in-depth interviews with thirteen researchers at different stages of their careers, some based in universities and others working on community projects, which inform this book. The interviews focused on their experience of emotionality in research and how they handled this. All had conducted research on topics which could be considered sensitive, such as abuse and addiction. All recounted listening to painful and troubling stories, while some talked about how interviewing had provoked them to remember difficult experiences in their own pasts. Indeed, readers may find aspects of our discussion in later chapters of our participants' accounts distressing and possibly triggering.

Drawing on anonymised interviews in this book, we consider what makes some kinds of research sensitive and emotionally demanding, how researchers engage in managing (their own and others') feeling and are affected by this work, and how their affective experience may be moderated by context. Although drawing on a relatively small number of interviews, we are able to illustrate in detail a range of significant problems encountered by oral history researchers, as well as some helpful ways of addressing them.

Throughout the book we consider whether researchers are sufficiently equipped to embark on the often arduous and draining work of being an empathic listener. As we continue to listen compassionately to disturbing stories, are we sufficiently supported (in an ongoing way) in voicing and processing the impact this may have on us? Whilst many of us may feel that our attention and capacity to listen with empathy and energy is what is rightly owed to our participants, this does not mean that we should overlook the consequences of this emotional

labour for our own mental and emotional wellbeing. In short, this book shifts attention on the researcher, whilst acknowledging that the emotional experience of the research participant is vitally important and should be carefully considered at all stages of the research design, training and ethics review processes. We highlight issues particularly affecting PhD students and early career researchers as well as those working in precarious conditions. Although we focus on the experiences of those using oral history methodologies, the issues we address are also encountered by many other qualitative researchers.

This book critically appraises the many complex ways in which emotion features in oral history research and its specific implications for the researcher. It builds on discussion among qualitative researchers on the role of emotion in the research process and extends this through examining the distinctive work of oral historians. We contextualise our research by critically engaging with the turn to emotion in the humanities and social sciences, the emergence in sociology of the concept emotional labour and the impact of neoliberal ideas and policies on the higher education sector.

THE STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF THIS BOOK

In addition to this introductory chapter, the book includes eight further chapters. Chapters Two and Three review the theoretical and political arguments for acknowledging the role of emotion in academic inquiry and taking account of the researcher's emotional experience. Chapters Four to Eight outline the findings from a thematic analysis of the interviews we conducted with oral history researchers, and Chapter Nine summarises the books' overall arguments and discusses their implications, including recommendations for mitigating the impact of emotional labour on the researcher. We commence by situating our work in relation to an emotional turn in the social sciences and humanities, which began in the 1970s and quickly gathered momentum thereafter.

Chapter Two provides an overview of the turn to emotion and affect as a context and platform for this book. A turn to emotion describes the actions of scholars who started to press the case for acknowledging the role of emotion in knowledge production. The chapter examines the challenges posed to positivism by feminist and poststructuralist theorists, who vigorously critiqued its underlying principles: namely, the assumed primacy of reason and its

capacity to produce objective, reliable and universal understandings of reality, and the idea that emotion is antithetical to reason and likely to subvert inquiry (Harding and Pribram 2009, 4). It considers how scholars critiqued the opposition of reason and emotion, along with its role in the exercise of power, and made a robust case for legitimising the place of emotion in knowledge production. It highlights some differences in disciplinary approaches to studying emotion that proliferated from this time, focusing on examples of work by scholars in sociology, history and oral history. It discusses the emergence of the concepts 'emotional labour' and associated 'feeling rules' in sociology and their adoption in other disciplines. The chapter critically examines social constructionist approaches to emotion before going on to consider the turn to affect as a response to the limitations of social constructionism. It concludes by outlining the relational and contextual approach to understanding emotions adopted in this book.

In Chapter Three we engage critically with Arlie Hochschild's conceptualisation of emotional labour and consider its applicability to important, though often largely unseen, aspects of the researcher's work. We situate this discussion in the context of the emotional turn and arguments for acknowledging emotion as both a legitimate source of knowledge and key element in the research process. The chapter draws on literature from qualitative social research and oral history to examine how and when researchers may perform emotional labour over the course of a research project, especially when working on sensitive research topics and/or with marginalised groups. We examine how and why researchers might experience emotional labour/work as burdensome and even harmful in certain circumstances. As part of this discussion, we analyse understandings of sensitivity in research, sources of emotional harm, empathy, positionality, responsibility and reflexivity.

Over the course of this chapter, we outline our own approach to understanding emotional labour in the research process as a platform and framework for subsequent chapters, in which we discuss our recent interviews with oral history researchers. Our approach assumes the central importance of relationality, context and power relations in shaping performances of emotional labour and their consequences. We understand emotionality, sensitivity and intersubjectivity as emerging through the dynamic relationality of the research process and its context.

In Chapter Four we introduce the empirical research we conducted in 2023, consisting of thirteen in-depth interviews with oral historians working in academic and community settings on the emotional demands of conducting research on sensitive or difficult topics. We outline the context and themes discussed in the interviews and examine the meanings of emotional labour for our research participants. We analyse participants' accounts of managing feeling, through the processes of conducting interviews and negotiating the representation of oral narratives. We focus in detail on participants' reflections on listening to stories of often painful and disturbing experience. We discuss how our interview participants reported being affected or unaffected by interview exchanges, how they actively noticed and endeavoured to manage their emotions, and how they were surprised by and sometimes overwhelmed by feeling. We go on to discuss how some researchers experienced secondary trauma, through listening to stories which reverberated with aspects their own past and the opportunities available to them for dealing with emotions in the aftermath of interviewing.

In Chapter Five we examine the relationality of the interview exchange, focusing on the positionalities of both the researcher and the researched and how these may shift and change over the course of the encounter. We examine the processes of negotiating empathy, rapport and trust before, during and after the interview. We analyse interview participants' accounts of moments of closeness and distance, resonance and dissonance, comfort and discomfort in research encounters, the affective impact of such moments and the kinds of understandings they produced. We review the pressures on researchers to attend to how they conduct themselves to present 'the nicest possible version of' themselves to participants during interviews. We also consider the emotion work performed by researchers in negotiating responsibilities for participants' welfare and representation of their accounts and how this may be experienced as emotionally burdensome. We examine instances where researchers encountered sudden danger in their oral history fieldwork and its aftermath, for which they were completely unprepared and often received no support.

In Chapter Six we review the contexts in which researchers were working, focusing on their relations with supervisors and co-investigators, research leads and managers, and sense of belonging to a research community. We consider the extent to which the oral historians we

interviewed were prepared for and supported in dealing with the emotional labour involved in conducting their research on sensitive topics and its impacts. We discuss how many felt isolated and disregarded, lacking a sense of connection with others (supervisors, mentors, colleagues), which made it harder for them to manage the emotional toll their research sometimes took. We consider how some had gradually come to engage in self-care practices and others had initiated support networks involving researchers beyond their departments and institutions. We locate researchers' embodied emotional struggles, often ignored and largely hidden, within the problematic structures of the contemporary neoliberal academy (Smith and Ulus, 2020; Hurd and Singh, 2021; Sai and Gao, 2024).

In Chapter Seven we explore further how oral historians' performance of emotional labour, and its consequences, is affected by the contexts and conditions in which they work. We focus on oral history researchers' subjective experience of insecure, unpaid or under-compensated, employment, often in the hope of securing a better future in work, and the anxieties this brings. We consider how anxieties about the present and the future centre on finding work, earning sufficient income, meeting the expectations of others (participants, co-workers, employers and stakeholders). We link individual oral historians' accounts of precarity and hope labour in research with the broader conditions of contemporary neoliberal work and employment, and the gradual casualisation of the academic workforce in universities in the UK and many other countries. Drawing on individual accounts, we consider how precarity adds to the burden of performing emotional labour and exacerbates its adverse consequences for the researcher.

In Chapter Eight we extend our discussion on the influence of research contexts and institutional environments on researchers' working lives through a focus on time. We consider how the adoption of neoliberal policies in higher education has brought a focus on increased competition, productivity and individualism and, with this, the speeding up of academic life and a perceived lack of time. We examine the affective implications of these processes for researchers, especially when performing emotional labour in their research, as well as opposing calls for slowing down, working collaboratively and fostering caring relations. We consider how the impact of performing emotional labour in oral history research may be aggravated by a perceived lack of time, which may result in less space for planning,

preparation, collection, interpretation, dissemination, dialogue and reflexivity. We argue that time is an important aspect of the contexts and felt environments in which researchers operate and a perceived lack of time profoundly affects the quality of their research and their personal wellbeing.

In Chapter Nine we review and summarise the arguments made over the course of the book. We highlight the emotional burdens researchers may experience and how they may be exacerbated by the structures and affects constituting the neoliberal university. We consider how individualism, isolation, anxiety and atmospheres of carelessness in work environments encountered by researchers might be challenged, resisted and changed. We explore concepts of care, a feminist ethics of care and care cultures as well as practical ways of engendering collegiality, collaboration, and more supportive research environments. We review recommendations for mitigating the potentially adverse consequences of performing emotional labour in oral history research and identify priorities for dealing with emotional labour in oral history research.

We care deeply about the issues discussed in this book and hope that our work will be helpful to others involved in oral history and other qualitative research on sensitive topics and those engaged with vulnerable and/or marginalised groups, in various capacities and at different career stages. We hope that our book will stimulate further discussion on the meanings and consequences of emotional labour for researchers and prompt careful reflection on how to better support researchers and create research environments conducive to both high quality research and researcher security and contentment. We are hopeful that readers will join us in reflecting critically on what it means to be a successful researcher and how we (researchers) could make more time for each other to foster solidarities and ways of working together, pushing back against neoliberal structures and affects.

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[1] The University of Bath (UK) held a Qualitative Research Symposium on 'Researcher Vulnerability' on 2 February 2022. Available at: https://www.bath.ac.uk/events/qualitative-research-symposium-2022/ (Accessed: 7 June 2024). The Oral History Society Higher Education Special Interest Group (UK) meets regularly to discuss care for researchers working on sensitive topics. Members of The Oral History Society's Regional Networkers Group have met to discuss the wellbeing of oral historians conducting interviews involving sensitive and traumatic memories, time-pressures and lack of systems of support (January 15, 2022).

[2] https://www.ohs.org.uk/higher-education/