

Emotional Labour, Gender, and Community-Engaged Historical Research

Katya C. MacDonald

PhD Candidate, University of Saskatchewan
katya.macdonald@usask.ca

Emotional labour and history

In 1983, sociologist Arlie Hochschild coined the term “emotional labour” to describe the unpaid, often unrecognized activities that maintain positive interpersonal relationships in businesses, organizations, and service professions. But emotional labour is also embedded in historical research methodologies: in efforts to undertake reciprocal, decolonizing research, scholars have advocated relationship-building with community members as a vital ethical undertaking.

The behind-the-scenes work necessary to foster trust and relationships is often coded as feminine (see images at right), and is not always visible as a contribution to historical, methodological, and ethical questions. Because emotional labour tasks put community members’ needs ahead of scholarly ones, the work does not necessarily translate directly into scholarly products, regardless of the time and energy that such tasks require of a researcher.

Drawing on my dissertation work on community-engaged oral history projects with two Indigenous communities, I seek to reconsider emotional labour not as optional compassion, nor as a means to a scholarly end, but rather as an under-recognized component of research processes that requires significant resources on the part of the researcher, and that shapes the character of historical arguments.

Emotional labour as workplace labour: the question of resources

Community-engaged scholarship means inhabiting your research.

(Maureen G. Reed, H el ene Godmaire, Marc-Andr e Guertin, Dominique Potvin, Paivi Abernethy, “Engaged Scholarship: Reflections from a Multi-Talented, National Partnership Seeking to Strengthen Capacity for Sustainability” in *Engaged Scholar Journal* 1:1 (2015), 176.)

I found the project fed me, professionally and personally, as we carried on....This made the experience truly joyful, despite the many bumps in the road we encountered.

(Maureen G. Reed, H el ene Godmaire, Marc-Andr e Guertin, Dominique Potvin, Paivi Abernethy, “Engaged Scholarship: Reflections from a Multi-Talented, National Partnership Seeking to Strengthen Capacity for Sustainability” in *Engaged Scholar Journal* 1:1 (2015), 173.)

Community is where we live and make a living, but it is also where we exercise capacity and commitments to

“responsible renewal”...beyond kinship and friendship in recognition and negotiation, confidence building and collaboration...

(Isobel m. Findlay, Marie Lovrod, Elizabeth Quinlan, Ulrich Teucher, Alexander K. Sayok, Stephanie Bustamante, Darlene Domshty, “Building Critical Community Engagement through Scholarship: Three Case Studies” in *Engaged Scholar Journal* 1:1 (2015), 34.)

At times, community-engaged scholarship writes the labour out of emotional labour: researchers do not acknowledge their emotional labour as quantifiable work. This creates particular challenges when working with academic timelines and funding structures, especially those faced by graduate students and early career academics, since the satisfaction or “nourishment,” like that described in the above quotations, that are gained through community-engaged working relationships are not evaluated as a central task of the research process; the time and funds required to undertake it are framed as extraneous rather than necessary.



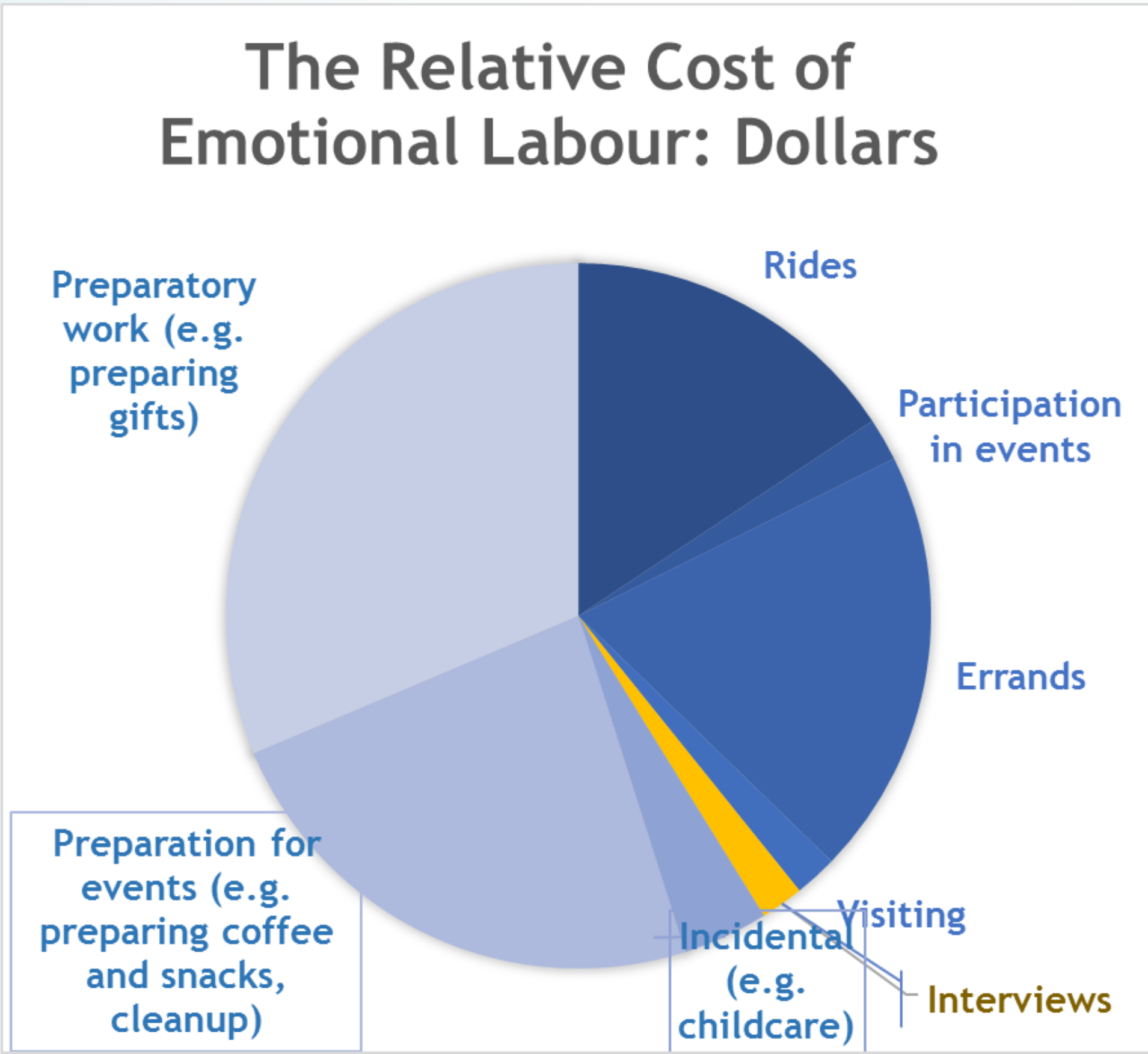
Emotional labour vs. “chopping wood”

Cree scholar Winona Wheeler explains the necessity of relationships in oral history scholarship:

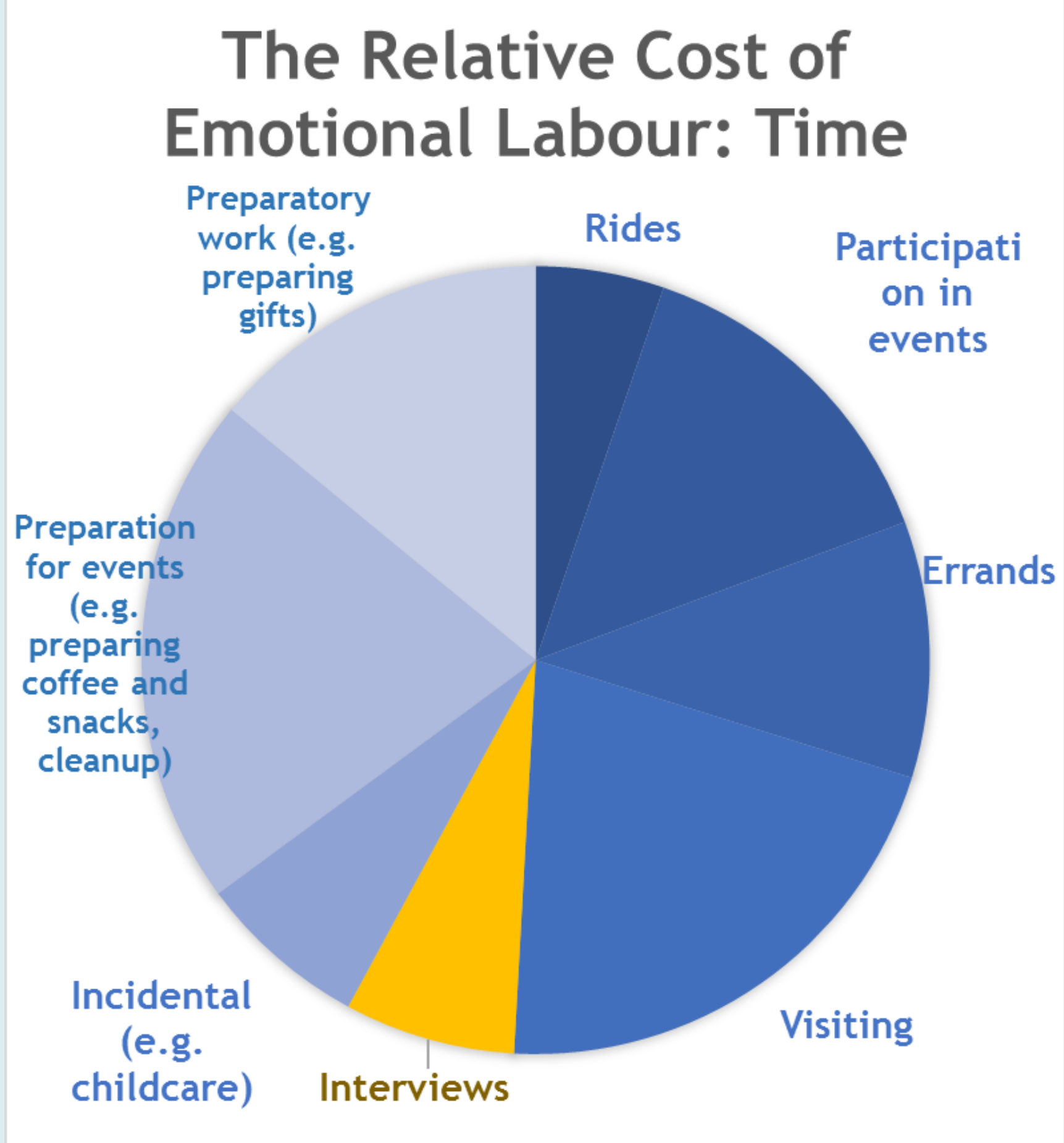
“Maria [Campbell] chopped wood, carried water, drove Mrs. Peemee [the eventual interviewee] to town for shopping. In short, she was friend and apprentice. She not only received the full story...she and Mrs. Peemee collaboratively edited the story for publication.”

(“Social Relations of Indigenous Oral Histories,” in *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal People and Their Representations* ed. Ute Lischke & David T. McNab, Waterloo: WLUPL 2004, 201.)

(Left: Author receiving a bannock-making lesson geared to children and others deemed new to Cree-Metis histories)



Above and left: the relative costs of emotional labour, based on a 3-day sample research trip



Right: picturing gendered emotional labour in historical research

(Clockwise from top left image: using a research notebook for childcare entertainment for community partners’ young relatives; shopping for bingo prizes for a community event; homemade jam to share with community members when visiting their homes)

Scholarly implications of gendered emotional labour

Despite its invisibility, often-gendered emotional labour shapes the nature of relationships we maintain, the scope of the questions we ask, and ultimately the arguments we make: it is emotional labour that asks us to evaluate the forcefulness of our arguments, consider their reach, and gauge how far we can extrapolate from our existing knowledge, in order to maintain the integrity of relationships we have worked to build.



Emotional labour therefore is a workplace, not only a phenomenon that exists in the work place, as Hochschild suggests. While it is the context for relationships that form foundations of scholarly insights, these relationships are not defined by a single scholarly moment such as an interview. Emotional labour, then, can entail significant, often gendered tasks that appear to be “off topic” to a research question, but that are formative in building trust and a sense of context. If a participant has other more immediate interests than a scholarly question, then the emotional labour of maintaining good relationships entails foregoing the scholarly goal at that moment, in favour of making coffee or cleaning the kitchen.

Emotional labour and its gendered components often determine the nature of historical arguments. It has related, but different, implications than the also-crucial “chopping wood” – making one’s reciprocal labour available and becoming familiar with cultural protocols. Emotional labour helps to clarify not only how knowledge is produced and shared in community contexts, but also to make explicit the researcher’s positionality. Emotional labour is directly necessary work, not to be commodified, nor considered peripheral to an interview or to a scholarly project, but rather to be centred and framed as scholarly labour.