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Authors	Powell, Roslynn A;Knollenberg, Whitney
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# **A Proposed Examination of the Emotional Labor of Tour Guides Who Interpret the History of Enslavement**

## **Introduction**

Enslavement played an essential role in the history interpreted at a myriad of historical sites (e.g., historic homes, plantations, industrial sites, etc...) (Gallas & Perry, 2015). Millions of domestic and international travelers visit American historic sites and participate in cultural and/or heritage activities (ACHP, n.d.). By supplying a comprehensive portrait of enslavement, historic sites hold the potential to shift human consciousness and help their visitors understand that the institution of slavery was the cornerstone of the nation's economy and society, whose legacy is present today. Historic sites are not merely tourism destinations intended for education and entertainment but also cultural centers where their guests can visit, ground themselves, and contemplate their identity. There has been a recent societal shift to investigate the enslaved's lives more holistically (Alderman, Butler, & Hanna, 2016). However, this change directly impacts docents, adding difficulty to their already emotional laborious jobs (e.g., visitor backlash, racial anxiety) (Benjamin & Alderman, 2018; Gables, 1996; Knowles, 2019).

As tour guides at historic sites interpreters, or docents, are drawn to this field by a passion for connecting with people using history, use their own emotions to create visitors' desired feelings (Tyson, 2008; 2013). Although working on the public history frontlines is emotionally fulfilling, it is also emotionally exhausting, impacting the historic site's productiveness and staff's personal and professional happiness (Tyson, 2013). Interpreting enslavement may be particularly emotionally challenging for docents because they are likely to struggle with the same conflicting narratives and racial baggage as visitors (Gallas & Perry, 2015), have to compete with visitor misinformation about slavery, and engage with the difficult topic of enslavement multiple times a day (Tyson & Dungey, 2014). Despite this significant threat to the well-being of front-line employees in a crucial element of the tourism industry, there has been very limited examination of the emotional labor that historic site docents contend with when interpreting enslavement. This lack of knowledge threatens the individual health of the docents, the operational capacity of the historic site, and the overall sustainability of tourism at historic sites (Tyson, 2013). This proposed study utilizes oral histories to investigate the emotional costs of interpreting enslavement to improve docents' working conditions and give docents the confidence and skills to present emotionally evocative narratives that depict enslaved people as active historical agents (Gallas & Perry, 2015).

## **Literature Review**

Researchers have examined the emotional labor done by various service workers in the tourism industry (tour guides in South American (Carrillo et al., 2020); tour guides in Taiwan (Wang & Wong, 2009); guides at Werribee Open Range Zoo in Australia (Van Dijk, Smith, & Cooper, 2011); whitewater guides in South American (Mackenzie & Kerr, 2013); Chinese tour guides (Yim, Cheung, & Baum, 2018). However, there has been little research on the docents and other frontline employees at historic sites (Modlin, Alderman, Gentry, 2011; Potter, 2016; Tyson, 2008; Tyson, 2013;). This research works to add to this body of knowledge. Docents, like other tour guidess outside historical interpretation, serve a vital function in the tourism industry. They

play a significant role in maintaining long-term relationships between the organization and visitors (Darvishmotevali et al., 2018), are the face of the organization in the eyes of visitors (Groth & Grandey, 2012), and play a fundamental role in customer experience (Mak et al., 2011). Despite their essential function, they often face complaints and frustrations from customers, low pay, and seasonal work, making their employment unstable and leaving them feeling easily replaceable (Groth & Grandey, 2012; Tyson, 2013). Tour guides' job requires significant emotional labor performance (Wong & Wang, 2009).

The need for understanding the emotional labor of tour guides is essential as the tourism industry strives to be sustainable, this includes the fundamental human right of providing sustainable employment (Baum et al., 2016). One of the critical components of sustainable human resource management is maintaining employee health and safety, including emotional and mental health (Baum, 2018). In its most general sense, emotional labor is a term for managing emotions for a wage (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labor involves employees enhancing, faking, or suppressing emotions to moderate their emotional expression (Grandey, 2000; Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Gross, 1998;). This modification is due to the display rules or the organization or job's expectations for emotional expression (Grandey, 2000). Employee's mental health can be significantly affected by emotional labor (e.g., increased unhappiness, diminished motivation, task-related stress, and emotional exhaustion (Alola et al., 2019)). Emotion regulation can also take physical toll on one's health (e.g., putting a strain on the cardiovascular system and nervous system, and suppressing the immune system (Grandey, 2000)).

Research that studied environmental justice in the context of tourism focuses on whether tourism impacts are distributed equitably across social groups (e.g., race, gender, income) (Lee & Jamal, 2008). A component of environmental justice is environmental equity, which refers to the fair and impartial distribution of environmental risks across population groups and our policy responses to these distributions' (US EPA, 1992: 2). For docents, environmental equity refers to an uneven distribution of risks associated with enslavement interpretation. Docents and other frontline employees take on a large amount of the burden (e.g., dealing with visitors' complaints, helping visitors cope with their internalized racism, building Black self-esteem and balance answering questions while also keeping guests comfortable). Another component to environmental justice in tourism-related equity is fair compensation, referring to transactions between tourists and environmental tourism practices that generate fair exchanges of goods and risks (Whyte, 2010). Providing training and support systems to lessen emotional labor's negative impacts is one method that offers fair compensation for docents. Further exploration of the emotional costs of interpreting enslavement may reveal how docents can balance presenting the narratives of enslaved people with empathy, humanity, and individuality while maintaining their mental and physical health and uphold many heritage sites' mission of heritage sites.

## **Methods**

Oral histories of docents at heritage sites that interpret enslavement will be conducted to address this proposed study's purpose. Employing a qualitative data collection method is crucial because the study aims to gain a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of docents' work experiences and the impacts those experiences have on them as a whole person. Oral histories are being used because they allow people to speak expansively about their stories in their own words, with their

own voices, through their own understanding of what happened and why without restricting them with specific questions and continuous interjection by an interviewer (De Caro, 2012; Dougherty, 1999).

Professional networks and chain-referral sampling will be employed to recruit participants. These sampling techniques will allow for collecting oral histories of docents that work at various sites and come from diverse backgrounds. Docents will then be categorized by the type of historic site they work at (e.g., who runs the historic site, location, the history of the site, the framing of enslavement, and the interpretation style). Participants will also be categorized by their employment status (e.g., full-time, part-time, volunteer) and other factors like gender, race, educational background, creative freedom at work, etc... This will allow for a comparison of how these variables may influence the emotional labor of docents who interpret enslavement. Docents will be invited by email to participate in an interview that will be recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis will then shed light on themes that arise from the docents' experiences interpreting enslaved Africans' lives.

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