



ARTICLE

'These are not just pieces of paper': Acknowledging grief and other emotions in pursuit of person-centered archives

Jennifer Douglas^{1*}, Alexandra Alisaukas², Elizabeth Bassett¹, Noah Duranseau¹, Ted Lee¹, and Christina Mantey¹

¹School of Information, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada; ²Libraries and Cultural Resources, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada

Abstract

This article reports on findings of a series of interviews conducted with 27 archivists on the topic of grief and other emotions in archival work. Centering the words of the interviewed archivists and demonstrating a research ethic of deep listening, this article describes how the interviewed archivists encounter and experience grief and other emotions as part of working with records, researchers, and donors. Interview participants highlighted a lack of preparation for the emotional dimensions of archival work as well as difficulty and damaging silences surrounding emotions in the archival work. This article argues that a first step toward transformative change in the way archival education programs and workplaces address the emotional dimensions of archival work requires sincere and committed acknowledgment of these dimensions and of archival work as person-centered and relational.

Keywords: *Grief; Emotions; Recordkeeping; Archivists; Listening.*

Introduction¹

'I think a lot of us are dealing with these types of things. These traumatic, grief-stricken records are out there. [...] And there needs to be some sort of connection between people dealing with it, to say, "Yeah, we're dealing with the same kind of thing. And it's okay."'

Between May and September 2019, I conducted interviews with 29 archivists and records professionals on how grief and emotions related to grief are involved in and impact archival work. When I issued a recruitment call, I did not expect a large number of responses and was surprised by the high level of interest in the subject. Perhaps I should not have been. As Geoff Wexler and Linda Long point out, although archival theory and professional discourse have tended to avoid the 'negative connotations' of death and dying, the archival endeavor is inherently and 'intimately bound up with these life events'²; the archivists and records professionals

*Correspondence: Jennifer Douglas Email: jen.douglas@ubc.ca

I spoke with acknowledged the frequency with which they encountered grief, the professional silence about it that existed, and the sometimes urgent need to find a space to talk about it.

In this article, I provide an overview of the findings of my research team's analysis of the series of interviews,³ which sought to explore how archivists and others who work with records and archives experience grief during their work, whether it is their own grief or the grief of others with whom they work or interact. I situate this exploratory work within a focus on the emotional dimensions of records and 'records work',⁴ and as such, the interviews also focused on emotions other than grief. As will be explained, the interviews discussed here are part of a larger project that explores grief and other emotions in archives more broadly; my hope is that this ongoing study of grief and emotion in archives will suggest new ways of improving or transforming professional methods for working with records donors, creators, and users, describing records, providing access to them, and contributing to the scholarship and praxis of others who are likewise seeking transformative change. This article, whose aim is to provide an overview of the ways participants described their experiences and encounters with grief and other emotions, suggests that such change should be first and foremost person centered, and that a first step toward change requires sincere and committed acknowledgment of the complicated emotional dimensions of archival work as well as preparation, training, and support for this part of the work.

Grief and emotion in archives: situating the project in the landscape of archival scholarship

In my work on the relationships between grief and recordkeeping, I use Thomas Attig's definitions of bereavement, grief, and grieving: Attig defines bereavement as 'a condition of being deprived or dispossessed of a loved one', grief as 'an emotion, or how we feel the loss', and grieving as a 'process through which we respond to or cope with the loss'.⁵ Grief may be understood as 'a primarily emotional (affective) reaction to the loss of a loved one through death',⁶ though it is also known that people experience grief over other types of losses. As a response to loss, grief is a 'centrally important human experience',⁷ but its impact and the impact of other emotional responses have until quite recently remained mostly unexplored in archival theory. The emotional dimensions of archives are referred to by those who consult them⁸ and are beginning to be more openly acknowledged by the professional archivists who care for them,⁹ but within the archival studies discipline, there has been little direct study of emotions generally or of grief specifically in archives; some notable exceptions¹⁰ include Tonia Sutherland's analyses of the treatment of Black bodies in archival representation¹¹; Ferrin Evans' (2022, pp. 15–29) work on grief and recordkeeping in the context of two global pandemics¹²; Samantha R. Winn's exploration of the anticipatory grief involved in memory work during climate crisis¹³; Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez's account of experiencing 'suspended grief, or grief experienced, witnessed, and re-lived throughout an archive, and the mutual or secondary grief archivists may experience when processing collections about traumatic events and experiences'¹⁴; Gabriel Solis's writings on grief and records of mass incarceration and state violence¹⁵; and the work of scholars like Jamie A. Lee, Michelle Caswell, and Nancy Liliana Godoy (among others) on the affective impact that records can have in communities.¹⁶ My own research has also focused on grief and its implication in and impact on recordkeeping,¹⁷ exploring how recordkeeping is involved in grief work and can function as a means of continuing relationships with those we have lost and of enacting care and love.¹⁸

Much of the recent writing about grief and archives is grounded in or influenced by the archival studies literature on archives and affect. In professional archivy, ideas about how records are created and how they should be preserved originated based on an understanding of recordkeeping in organizational settings and for 'official' evidentiary purposes.¹⁹ As a result of that narrow focus, affect and emotions – including grief – 'largely remain[ed] unacknowledged'

and unexplored in archival theory and practice. As Hariz Halilovich notes, early archival theory, drawing from ‘positivist traditions’, invoked and encoded ideas of ‘objectivity, neutrality, impartiality and personal detachment – that is, everything that is the opposite of subjective, emotional and affective’.²⁰

More recently, however, archival scholars and professional archivists have begun to think about the different types of emotional labor associated with making and keeping records²¹; about the different ways experience and emotion ‘gesture’²² in records; about types of knowledge about records that are lost when affect is not taken into account²³; and about the inherently affective impacts of some types of records on those who use them, work with them, and/or are documented in them.²⁴ Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor suggest that affective labor has always been part of archival work despite its lack of recognition and call for it to be resituated ‘at the center of the archival endeavour’.²⁵ They advocate for an approach to archives grounded in ‘radical empathy’ and an ethics of care that would position archivists as ‘caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility’.²⁶ The importance of radical empathy as an orientation to archival work is evidenced by the number of archivists and archival scholars who are working to further contextualize and extend the work started by Caswell and Cifor.²⁷

In addition to this recent focus on affect and care in archival work, there has been increased attention paid in archival literature to the potentially traumatic nature of records and to effects of trauma and secondary trauma on archivists and other records professionals. Wexler and Long’s discussion of working with dying donors and Judith Etherton’s recognition of the sometimes retraumatizing effects of genealogical research represent early forays into the potentially traumatic aspects of records work.²⁸ Scholars have also begun to study how records of atrocity, genocide, and human rights abuses are treated as evidence and memory, managed within institutions, and accessed and used by survivors and intergenerational survivors.²⁹ In addition to thinking about the creation and management of traumatic records, Nicola Laurent and Michaela Hart reflect on the ‘effects that exposure to records with potentially traumatizing content can have on those working with archival materials’,³⁰ spotlighting archivists’ experiences of vicarious trauma, which were also explored by Katie Sloan, Jennifer Vanderfluit, and Jennifer Douglas through a survey of Canadian archivists conducted in 2016.³¹ In response to the developing awareness of trauma and post-traumatic stress in archival work, archival scholars and archivists, especially in Australia, are foregrounding the importance of trauma-informed archival practices.³² Reflecting on decades’ worth of archival responses to the 1997 *Bringing Them Home Report*, a report of the Australia Human Rights Commission Inquiry that highlighted the roles of records and recordkeeping in the forcible removal of the Stolen Generation, Joanne Evans et al. show how work with traumatic records, when undertaken in trauma-informed spaces with trauma-informed supports, can lead to healing and wellbeing³³; this work, in particular, demonstrates ‘that there is much to be gained in recognising and embracing the archives [sic] role in social and emotional wellbeing’. As repositories of traumatic records, archives are spaces where many complicated emotions may be experienced, but where healing may also be facilitated.

Some of the work cited in this brief literature review was published after the time when the interviews discussed here were carried out; grief, along with other emotional responses to records and recordkeeping,³⁴ has suddenly become a topic about which archivists seem more able to speak, and the euphemism and taboo to which Wexler and Long refer may finally be lifting. As this article will argue, this lifting of the veil is much needed, long overdue, and still only partial; a strong commitment to change in organizational and educational cultures will be necessary to fully make room for grief and other feelings in archival work.

About the interviews

The interviews discussed in this article were carried out between May and September 2019 as one component of a larger project on grief and recordkeeping. This project, titled ‘Conceptualizing Recordkeeping as Grief Work: Implications for Archival Theory and Practice’,³⁵ aims to explore the relationship between recordkeeping and grief work, or the types of activities mourners engage in to help them integrate the loss they experience. Starting with a tentative hypothesis that recordkeeping might be one way of engaging in grief work and of ‘continuing bonds’ between the living and the deceased, the project developed along three main lines: (1) interviews with bereaved individuals creating and keeping records of bereavement³⁶; (2) on-site archival research in collections that have been substantively shaped by their creators’ experiences of bereavement³⁷; and (3) interviews with archivists who experience grief; who work with donors, researchers, or others experiencing grief; and/or who care for bereavement collections.

For these interviews with archivists, participants were recruited via an invitation sent out to archival listservs and circulated on social media. While I estimated I might conduct 8–12 interviews, I interviewed 29 participants, two of whom withdrew from the study after their interviews were completed. This study was approved by the University of British Columbia’s ethics review board,³⁸ and the interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol; a series of questions in an interview script were provided to participants in advance of the interview, but the interview itself was intended as an open-ended conversation where additional related questions could be asked to clarify or add detail. Participants were also welcome to ask questions and to direct the conversation in ways that would help them to talk about their encounters and experiences with grief.

The questions in the interview script were structured in four sections. In the first section, questions asked about the nature of the participant’s work with archives, including the kinds of archival or records work they were involved in, how long they had worked as an archivist or records manager, and who they typically worked with (e.g., particular types of donors, creators, researchers, or communities). The second set of interview questions was more directly focused on how grief was or had been part of their work with archives and records, and included questions about encountering grief in the contexts of working with records, of working with donors, of working with researchers and other users, and of personal grief experienced during archival work. In recognition that grief is not the only emotion experienced by archivists and records professionals and interested in the broader emotional dimensions of records work, the third set of questions inquired about other emotions participants encountered or experienced that impacted their work with/in archives and with those who create and use them. Finally, a fourth set of questions focused on participants’ preparation and training for the emotional dimensions of records work as well as on resources they knew of and found helpful in managing difficult emotional responses and/or resources they wished they had access to.

The interviews were conducted in person where possible and otherwise by Skype³⁹ and involved a commitment to engaged listening, or to ‘listening as a methodology’.⁴⁰ Quoting the theoretical work of Luce Irigaray, Dorinda t’Hart discusses the role of ‘deep listening’ in qualitative interviewing⁴¹; listening deeply, she attests, ‘requires more than hearing [participants’] words but includes a way of “opening ourselves” to the other. It includes a perceptive listening mixed with feeling in which one can hear the emotions of the other’.⁴² Many of the interviews were deeply emotional; participants opened themselves to me and let themselves be vulnerable, and I have considered, throughout this project, how to be attentive to and respectful of that vulnerability.⁴³ As t’Hart notes, ‘when the interviewer has fostered an emotional connection with the participant, she [feels] bound to deal sensitively with the data’⁴⁴; throughout the project, my research assistants and I have continued to attend to our responsibility to *tend* to participants’ stories.⁴⁵

For example, we continued to identify a commitment to listening as part of our research process in our data analysis. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed by me and project research assistants, Alexandra Alisauskas, Noah Duranseau, and Elizabeth Bassett. By doing the transcriptions ourselves, we remained, as a research team, deeply engaged in a listening practice. Susan Tilley argues that although researchers often frame transcription as a mechanical or technical act easily contracted out, the transcriber forms a close relationship to research data and can become emotionally connected to that data in a manner that is similar to the kind of embodied connection Hart describes occurring in interviews.⁴⁶ Transcribing the interviews ourselves allowed us to maintain connections with participants' stories, and to attend to pauses, sighs, laughter, and other emotional and affective cues in the interviews in our attempts to attend to those stories.

Each interview was between 45 min and 2 h long, and altogether we produced over 500 pages of transcription. With an expanded research team that included research assistants Christina Mantey and Ted Lee, every interview was coded by two different researchers using a codebook we developed through an iterative process. We used both structured and emergent coding techniques, identifying some codes in advance of our analysis based on concepts discussed in the interviews or known variables (for example, types of archival work) and allowing others to emerge through our deep listening process. Using NVivo software permitted us to conduct careful within- and cross-code analysis, but we relied heavily on our own capacity to listen to the data and to each other as we met frequently over a period of several months to discuss, define, refine, and review the codes we assigned and our analysis of them. Listening as methodology requires deep attentiveness to words, emotions, voice, and embodiment throughout the entire research process. It involves listening not only *during* interviews but also as we transcribe, analyze, and report findings, and it includes listening to ourselves as we process and reflect on interview data⁴⁷; in this way, listening as methodology understands listening as 'complex web'⁴⁸ connecting all parts of the research process and potentially continuing 'long after research has supposedly finished'.⁴⁹

It should be noted that this type of listening practice and attention to compassionate research⁵⁰ practices can take a toll on the research team.⁵¹ The effects of difficult research on researchers are beginning to receive more attention in discussions about qualitative research; our research team has employed many of the techniques discussed by Smita Kumar and Liz Cavallaro as well as by Kathleen B. Rager, including regular debriefing where we reflected on our experiences, reactions, and feelings; taking breaks whenever needed and regardless of other project timelines; allowing members of the research team to choose not to transcribe or analyze interviews that included content that could be triggering to a team member; balancing the transcription of analysis of 'heavier' and 'lighter' interviews; and keeping lines of communication very open.⁵²

Much of the work of transcribing interviews and analyzing data as well as of trying to write up our findings in research articles was carried out during the COVID-19 global pandemic. As a mother of two young children, my work was interrupted for several months, so that I could provide care and schooling; other members of the research team are also parents and/or caregivers and faced similar constraints on their research time. Teaching (for me) and learning (for the students on the project) online involved a steep learning curve and a significant investment of time and energy, both physical and emotional. We all felt a responsibility to the participants in this project to be able to share their experiences and knowledge in a timely manner, but the work of research analysis and dissemination proceeded far more slowly in 2020/21 than it might have in other years. As well, we felt concerned to take our time with the moving and intimate stories participants very generously and trustingly shared with us. Informing all our work has been a desire to 'do right by'⁵³ the archivists and records workers who participated

in our project and frequently a ‘slow archives’⁵⁴ philosophy determined our pace and focus. In our presentation of findings in this article, we continue to focus on doing right by participants; as part of our commitment to deep listening, we foreground participants’ own words, both by including frequent paraphrasing and quotations and by organizing this first discussion of the interviews in a way that reflects as closely as possible the flow of the interviews themselves.

The participants

We did not gather full demographic information about project participants; however, we did compile basic information about each participant’s career stage (early (1–10 years employed), mid (10+ years employed), and late (20+ years employed)) and whether they worked as an archivist, records manager, or other type of records professional. Participants were almost exclusively employed as archivists, with only three participants identifying other types of positions, and were predominantly at a mid-stage in their careers; we identified four participants as early career, 17 as mid-career, and five as late career.

During our consent process, we asked participants to indicate whether they wished their name to be used in published findings; although many participants indicated it would be acceptable for us to use their names in publications, there were also several participants who chose not to be named. In this article, which focuses on providing summative answers to the questions we asked in the interviews and identifying significant themes that emerged in conversation with participants and analysis of the interview transcripts, we have decided not to include real names; in the future work, where we will focus in depth on some key themes, we are more likely to include participant names as we share more complete participant stories.

Grief in archival work

‘I wrote a paper...where I called the archives a “perpetual flashback” because we just relive and relive the same traumas over and over, with different elements, and involving different people in different contexts. But we just – or I should use I statements, I consistently relived trauma and grieving and had to find a way through my grief while respecting the grief of everyone around me.’

‘Grief courses through archives. There’s no doubt about it.’

These participants’ words describe grief as pervasive in archival work, and while not all participants experienced the same kind of ‘perpetual flashback,’ they all described grief as being implicated in and having an impact on their work to some extent. Even the sole participant to gently push back on the project’s apparent presumption that grief was part of the archival work shared stories where they acknowledged feelings of loss and empathy for another’s grief; in other words, although archivists might not personally experience feelings of grief as part of their work, they are likely to encounter those feelings in the records they care for and/or the people with whom they work. In our analysis of how participants described experiencing grief, we identified different types of grief including empathic grief, personal grief, grief for a loss or change in a community, grief for change in the profession, and grief experienced as a more general sense of loss.⁵⁵ We found that grief was experienced across a range of tasks and functions including appraisal, selection, and acquisition; processing, arrangement, and description; reference and access; outreach and community engagement; records management; freedom of information and protection of privacy (FIPPA)-related work; and work on various special projects and commissions, including work related to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Canada.⁵⁶ As several participants indicated, it is not always easy to

distinguish between types of grief or to strictly delineate when or where encounters with grief will occur:

‘I find [it] hard to parse out where all of this begins and ends, you know, like, working with donors, or working with records, or working with researchers, and my own grief in my own life, and...and what is grief? It’s just all – you’re probably experiencing this, but it’s – there’s a lot to parse out.’

The interview questions we asked ‘parsed’ grief into four types of ‘encounters’: with records; with donors and/or creators; with researchers; and with those who are documented in records. In the next sections, I outline how participants described encounters with grief that occur in the contexts of working with records and their subjects, with donors and creators, and with researchers and users of archives.

Working with records and their subjects

Discussing the ‘unwritten ethical imperative[s] that permeate’ archival work, Catherine Hobbs emphasizes that all records are connected to a life.⁵⁷ Indeed, records are usually connected to many lives; they are created by people and about people and as such have what Genevieve Weber has referred to as an ‘intrinsic humanity.’⁵⁸ Archivists and records professionals interact with records in many different ways, as they process, arrange, and describe records, come to know them by providing reference services, or prepare them for digitization, for example. Many participants we spoke with described feeling like they came to know the people whose records they worked with and/or who were documented in the records through these interactions; some described feeling they were ‘forming a relationship’ with this person about whose life they knew so much. ‘You’re researching somebody’, one archivist explained: ‘You know their life story’. Several gave examples of particularly strong attachments formed with people in the records and explained how these attachments could involve experiences of grief and other emotions. One participant described the experience of a summer student transcribing records:

‘Several years ago we were donated a number of diaries from a family who were dedicated diarists, they wrote every day for years and years and years. And they lived right on the Alouette River and their diaries contained an awful lot of observation information on the state of the river, and the water flows, and whether it was muddy, and how many fish they were catching, which was of great value to our environmental groups. So we were transcribing these records and the older man, his name was Claude Holt and he was quite a character, he had a degree in classics, and he named his chickens things like Clytemnestra, and was quite a person. So the young girl who was transcribing his diaries and got into 1929 and she turned a page and there was a blank page, and that literally had never happened. She turned the page again and someone had pencilled in RIP. And she burst into tears and was inconsolable. I mean you’d have thought her grandfather had just died. She just got so invested so quickly in this man’s life from diving in to his day-to-day existence. So we do get sort of attached.’

Another participant described the bond they developed to a creator as they processed her archives and the corresponding grief that entailed:

‘Like, kind of dealing with my own feelings towards the records and getting to know this person. I experienced grief a lot during the processing of that spiritualist’s fonds. I came into the fonds being super skeptical of the creator but in the process of going through the

very specific and unique way that she framed her life and her own losses, I began to feel like I got to know her and experienced her grief concurrently going through and trying to arrange her records. I would be putting things into acid-free enclosures, and read the notes that she had about death and the afterlife and feel her grief palpably. Other times it would be reading her sheet music or looking at her sketches that I myself began to feel connected to her and mourn her loss. It was like I was getting to know her and she was already gone and it was heartbreaking.’

As well as feeling personal grief while working with records, participants described a kind of empathic grief, or grief felt in sympathy for a record creator or subject who was grieving. One participant described processing a set of records in which ‘you could hear this – the grief pouring out of the writer,’ and confessed it was ‘very painful to read.’ Another participant described working with the records of a creator who had passed away suddenly, saying ‘it’s really upsetting to see a life that was supposed to continue and then just, that’s it, you know?’ Several participants described working with letters sent home by soldiers during the two World Wars and experiencing empathic grief for the families who long ago received them, and for the writers, their lives cut short. Participants who worked with the records of residential schools in Canada described a deep empathic grief for children who died and/or were abused and mistreated; these participants described the importance of finding a way to experience and acknowledge this type of empathic grief, while respecting the very different and more immediate type of grief experienced by the children’s family members, other Survivors and Inter-Generational Survivors of genocide.

One participant who worked with records of residential schools wanted to talk, too, about ‘what it was like to physically handle those records’, about ‘the grief that is embedded in the physicality of the records’, and about the possibility that records themselves grieve:

‘So, this is going to sound, maybe, really weird, but I believe that the records grieve. You know? That there’s something about objects that are sacred. And, um...I don’t know that I’ve formulated that into a language yet, but...in the context of working with the records, for me, it wasn’t just about working with them, it was about the records themselves. Like, every time I went through those quarterly returns, listing all the students hundreds, maybe thousands of times. And you know, I watched as, you know... even the finger prints on the edges of the page have that...kind of build up...every time I went through them there were new, kind of, dents in the pages....Or when we unwound the tapes, the magnetic tapes, and even the sounds that those – like when we did a reel-to-reel film, the sound of the film coming off, and even rubbing against – it almost sounded like crying. Like screaming. And again, I’m a very highly sensitive person, both emotionally, but also kind of spiritually. And so, there was something about the sounds, and the formats, and the physicality of the records, that I believe even the records grieve.’

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that although grief was not *always* a part of working with records, it was also *not unusual* for participants to experience grief, both personal and empathic, as they processed and handled the records in their care. Participants connected the ubiquity of these types of feelings to their recognition that behind every record and ‘bound up’⁵⁹ with it lies a human life: ‘you can’t’, one archivist began, ‘you can’t, even if you’re sitting in the stacks processing records, and never talking to another person, you can’t separate the human element. [...] Humans grieve, and that’s part of it’.

Working with donors and/or creators

When archivists work with donors and creators over a period of time, they can develop lasting relationships, and as in other types of long relationships, they might witness difficult events and changes in the lives of creators (e.g., illness, loss of work or community, and death).⁶⁰ The participants in this project described this type of witnessing, which could bring up many emotions. They also described experiencing their own grief when a donor or creator died. ‘There’s grief from actual death’, one participant asserted, ‘for sure. For sure. For sure’. Participants talked about how it took them by surprise the first time, to realize a donor they had developed a relationship with would die, and even to be involved to some extent in those deaths, visiting death beds, and working to complete a donation and to be certain of a creator’s wish for their records.

‘I don’t know why, it just never occurred to me that I would be sitting and holding hands with someone who’s skin and bones, and on morphine, and looking at me with those big eyes and talking about their life, and it’s an amazing place to be and to be witness of that and witness to their process and to honor them while they’re there as opposed to waiting until they’re gone. It’s an amazing thing to be able to do and it’s so great that I’ve been able to do that for more than one person. But I did not expect that, those really real encounters. But of course it makes sense that it would be that way. Records don’t change hands without some kind of trigger. And often those triggers are not necessarily happy ones.’

Participants described going to memorials as well as helping loved ones prepare for them by going through a creator’s fonds to find records to be used in ceremony. The kind of grief archivists experienced for a creator is particular in some ways: ‘You actually know them more than they know you because you’re also in their papers, right? It’s more of a one-sided relationship’, one archivist who worked in an academic archives explained. ‘I mean if I died, I don’t know if they’d feel that badly, right? I know them better than they know me’. The one-sided nature of donor relationships could compound both the loneliness of grieving and the feeling participants sometimes described of not knowing whether they were entitled to grieve.⁶¹

Participants also discussed working with donors who were themselves grieving the loss of a loved one; donating records can be part of a personal grieving process, and participants described sometimes playing a kind of ‘therapist’ role, trying to help a donor process their loss. Archivists might also play a kind of ‘therapist’ role for creators/donors who are dying. Some participants explained how, for some dying donors, the relationships with ‘their’ archivist can be an important one. One archivist described being invited for breakfast at a donor’s house shortly before he died; ‘all he did was sit there and talk to [me], about all these stories, stories when he was [redacted for privacy] and so on...And I knew he was hoping...that somewhere, like I would be able to take this and put it in his papers’.

Participants also described working with donors and creators who were grieving other kinds of losses, including the end of a career or the loss of a particular job or community. Grief, as one participant put it, ‘courses through’ aspects of all donor relationships in archives:

‘In fact, what we were really doing was dealing with people’s grief, because they were losing their jobs. These records were the last embodiment of their workplace. Or in private records, you’re taking away the last bit of the body of the person. You look at what these records mean to people at different stages in the archive world, and you do have to know what you’re doing. You have to understand the power and meaning of records before you can do this role.’

Working with researchers

Participants pointed out that not all researchers are like the imagined researcher presented to them during their archival education: a ‘removed’ historian or other academic researcher. On the contrary, researchers might have intimate relationships with records and react to them in highly emotional ways: ‘when it connects to something that’s personal to them, and that’s high stakes for them, then you can expect there to be an emotive response’. Participants described working with researchers who were trying to find information about their own past or about a deceased family member’s or loved one’s past, often involving some kind of trauma, including time spent in residential schools or in other forms of institutional ‘care’, violent crime, war, and white supremacy. In line with Judith Etherton’s observation that not all family research is happy research,⁶² participants explained how genealogical research could sometimes trigger trauma and grief responses; researchers looking for biological family members or discovering uncomfortable or distressing secrets might experience complicated and difficult emotions, and these can be heightened when the researcher is also the subject of the records.

One participant described how, in their experience, researchers might be hoping for closure, but instead find that working with records re-opens wounds, or they might find that there are no records that answer their questions. This participant, who described reviewing and making government records available as part of FIPPA requests, explained:

‘I found, for a lot of ... a lot of records for people who later [died by] suicide, the relatives are looking for an answer that is never going to be in any file. Like, of course, and this is understandable, you want to know why your relative got to that point... [...]. No one ... no one can answer that, and I think sometimes there’s a lot of anger, as well. Because they’ll receive the records that they requested, and the ... the information they want isn’t in there, and it kind of comes back, ‘Well, this isn’t what I wanted. What more do you have?’ None of our records will ever be able to answer those kind of questions.’

Sometimes the reference process is less devastating, but grief still ‘courses through’. For example, participants talked about experiencing a kind of ‘happy grief’ as part of the reference process, when they were able to help a researcher make a connection to a lost loved one. One archivist described working with a woman who had never seen a photograph of her father:

‘I was able to pull those for her based on the information that we pieced together and I sent her those. So there’s one phone call where I was dealing with somebody crying, which in this case it was very positive...it was a very positive experience but it clearly made an impact.’

Another archivist describes helping an Indigenous researcher who had come in with a group to work with government records that documented their community:

‘They came in to look at these specific records, but then we were able to find other records relating to them, as well. And we have a large oral history collection, and we found a recording of this man’s father. And, this man was hard of hearing and wore hearing aids, so he was already quite loud when he spoke. And then he went, and we put on the big headphones. [...] And he started listening, and he just shouted across the room to one of his daughters, “I ... I can hear him! I can hear his voice!” [...] And he was so excited. And he later said, you know, he hadn’t heard his father’s voice in twenty years.’

As these two examples show, grief is not always a negative emotion, and archives can facilitate positive connections between people and their deceased loved ones.⁶³

Other emotions in archival work

As explained above, our project focused on grief as a particular emotion, but we were not interested only in grief, especially knowing that grief does not occur in isolation from other emotions and feelings like love, sadness, anger, and guilt. Participants shared feeling a range of emotions other than grief, including anger, boredom, frustration, guilt, shame, hope, inspiration, joy, happiness, loneliness, pride, sadness, and reverence.⁶⁴

The most commonly discussed emotions other than grief were sadness, anger, joy, or happiness; guilt or shame; and pride or reverence. Sadness was often distinguished from grief as a less intense feeling, and as something that was felt ‘not so much in the big kinds of loss, but in the small[er] things’, such as when observing visible signs of aging in donors or as revealed in their records, or listening to donors tell stories about their own experiences of grief, loss, and sorrow. Several participants discussed the sadness they experienced working with creators and/or donors at the ends of their careers or lives or when an organization or association to which a donor belonged was closing its doors. One participant discussed this feeling in the context of women’s organizations like the International Order of the Daughters of Empire (IODE) falling out of fashion: ‘That one makes me sad’, they said, ‘because you think, “you’re still here”... with somebody who’s passed away, it’s sort of done for them, but these people have to orchestrate the closure of their organization, and to me that’s actually a little more melancholy’. Participants remarked that it could be difficult to separate grief from other emotions, and sadness was often felt in conjunction with different degrees of grief; for example, when archivists were involved in helping to sort and clean out an office space after the death of a donor or working with the living relatives and friends of a recently deceased donor they might feel a combination of grief and sadness.

Anger was another recurring emotion described by several participants. When anger was felt, it was often in response to reading records that evidenced mistreatment of others (records creators or records subjects, for example). Anger was invoked in discussions about records related to residential schools in Canada, with participants describing feeling angry about the abuse experienced by Indigenous children as well as anger at policies and conditions that made it difficult to produce records for the TRC or to respond as an institution or profession to the TRC’s Calls to Action. With respect to feeling anger, one participant raised an interesting aspect of temporality. Archivists, they explained, might experience strong emotional responses to records long after any incidents documented in the records occurred, which might leave them feeling isolated and uncertain about their reactions:

‘Even though some of those things might have happened a long time ago, and – and maybe the donor themselves, the recordkeeper themselves might have worked through these things, for me I’m seeing it for the first time. And so I’m back with experiencing the ... the anger. And I haven’t worked through to the point that they might have.’

Anger combined with frustration was felt, too, by some participants when they felt unable to respond adequately to the needs of donors, creators, and researchers because of constraints on their time and other resources in their workplaces. In their work on neoliberalism and archives, Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee discuss ‘adoption of market language’ in archival institutions alongside emphases on ‘cost efficiency’, ‘customer service’, metrics, and measurable outcomes; they argue that efficiency-based initiatives such as the ‘More Product Less Process’ approach to arrangement and description position archivists as ‘workers on an assembly line aiming for standardization, ever-greater amounts of linear feet processed, and at increasing speed’, at the cost of care for records and the people involved in their creation, preservation, and use.⁶⁵ Though participants did not specifically refer to the adoption of neoliberal policies

– or of MPLP specifically – the increased strain that large backlogs and scarcity of resources creates was evident, as was the perceived impact this strain had on workers’ ability to respond fully and sensitively to the needs of records’ creators, subjects, and users.

Linked to this type of strain, participants also discussed feeling guilt at work. Some expressed feeling guilty at not being able to ‘keep up’ with their work, about the backlog and work left undone or done less fully than they would like, as, for example, when time pressure meant a finding aid would necessarily need to be completed more quickly and with less detail than they would prefer. ‘There was just such a backlog’, one participant who worked with sensitive records recounted, ‘and it was just me, and...and it did feel like this kind of, I don’t know, emergency management, triage kind of thing, where I just...[sighs] – there was a lot that just didn’t get done, or didn’t get done, you know, as well as I could’.

Another participant expressed guilt about seeming ‘cold’ in their interactions with donors and in their descriptive work; this participant and several others expressed concern for ‘doing right by’⁶⁶ the people who created or were documented in records. These archivists experienced guilt tied to their feeling of being responsible for representing the lives of others in appraisal reports and finding aids and of having to balance this responsibility against other demands on their time and resources as well as with efforts to be professional and ‘objective’:

‘I do think that guilt about not doing things as well as I could, or – but you also try and balance, and the idea of trying to balancing it with a more objective tone, and trying to point to the records always, and express what’s in the records, rather than what the record might mean to that individual... Yeah, I think – and sometimes, maybe, coming across as cold – I don’t know, I feel guilt about not being able to do the best job that you can do, and not knowing enough about the particular histories in the different countries of origin of many of our donors. Also, you hear that, you know, victims of trauma, and also especially child survivors, people who didn’t have families and always have holes in their hearts that are unfillable. And then I feel like, a lot of, uh ... you can’t fill a hole. Then that’s kind of ... [short pause] um, you know, sad. But it’s not my job, either, to do that.’

Participants spoke, too, of being inspired by the lives and stories documented in the records they cared for as well as by the spirit of optimism that might be seen to underpin a decision to preserve personal records. One participant who had worked with AIDS activists and their records identified how the personal relationships they formed were intense: both heartbreaking and inspirational. Another participant described working with the records of a woman ‘who was very involved in the labour movement and the Winnipeg General Strike’:

‘It wasn’t that she had done anything astounding, or, you know, been really in the public eye. But she had felt that she had worked really solidly behind the scenes for over fifty years, and really made a difference. And I read that one day, and I went home on the bus, and I thought, That’s really inspiring. Like, you know, someone who – yeah, lots of people don’t know her name, but she could see that she had contributed, and felt a lot of pride in that.’

The kind of inspiration that participants described can also be connected to a feeling of pride in their work, and especially to a kind of pride that comes from being in the privileged position – as many described it – to care for the records and stories of these inspirational lives.

While the focus of this research project on grief might suggest to many that the emotions discussed would largely be sad or difficult, joy and other positive emotions were frequently discussed. As mentioned above, participants discussed a kind of ‘happy grief’ or ‘positive grief’, where feelings of happiness resulted from being able to help a researcher or donor connect with a loved one through their records. One participant highlighted the ‘joy and hopefulness’

of archival work over sadness and grief, calling attention to the ‘inherent optimism in preservation and the act of keeping stuff’,⁶⁷ and to the kind of ‘second life’ that records preservation permits, discussing this ‘second life’ in the context of a creator whose own research was not completed, but whose research files are now being used by others:

‘People are now coming who are interested in the history of those events to look at the records and it’s fantastic, I’ve been seeing them popping up, I saw them at a gallery show in town. So it makes me very happy, because it’s this whole other life, and it’s a level of acknowledgment that I think he would’ve appreciated, because he was always looking for that. He always wanted to be known. It’s quite lovely, actually, to know they have that second life.’

Preparation for the emotional dimensions of archival work

In the fourth set of questions we asked participants, we inquired whether they felt their education and training had prepared them for the emotional dimensions of archival work as well as what types of resources and/or practices had been helpful to them, and whether there were any resources and/or practices they had not yet encountered but felt would be helpful in dealing with grief, loss, and other emotional experiences in archival work.

Overwhelmingly, participants reported that their formal education and professional training had not prepared them for the emotional dimensions of archival work; in fact, many of them laughed when asked, suggesting how truly far from prepared they felt. Participants reported being unprepared for ‘the intimacy’ of some types of records as well as for being ‘emotionally involved with people’ who were also ‘very emotional about their records’. Participants also described being unprepared for working with donors or creators at the end of their lives or even on their deathbeds, for the grief counselling that seemed required in working with friends and family of deceased creators as they negotiated donation of records, and for working with people who were trying to access distressing information from records. ‘In the research room’, one participant explained, ‘there’s a different kind of counselling that goes on...and often we don’t feel equipped to do it’. As another records worker put it, ‘I don’t think we’re always prepared to talk about someone’s mother’s coroner’s report’.

Participants talked about how in their formal education there had been a focus on care for materials rather than care for people:

‘There was a lot of focus during my studies on how to maintain the *information*, which clearly is invaluable and the majority of my job, but not so much a focus on donor relations, or subject relations, not on the emotional impact that a collection will have either on the archivist or researchers or users or what have you.’

Participants further reported feeling that in school, they had learned they were supposed to be an ‘objective observer of the records’; out in the working world, they remained uncertain if they were ‘allowed to feel anything’ and so when feelings did assert themselves, internal conflict or tension could arise. One participant explained: ‘I didn’t know what I was doing. [...] I knew what I had been taught to do...and that was in pretty supreme conflict with...with my humanity, really. Nobody was talking about it. And if they were, it was still very much, “You leave your feelings at the door”’. Sometimes this type of conflict could lead to an archivist feeling as if they were failing to meet professional standards. For the participant quoted above, the conflict between what they ‘had been taught to do’ and their ‘humanity’ left them

feeling that they were ‘a bad archivist’. This participant added, ‘I took it as, you know, I just need to pull my socks up. I just need to go to more therapy. Like, I am the problem. Not the profession. It’s me’.

Some participants raised concerns that their lack of training and preparation for the emotional dimensions of archival work led them to make mistakes, especially in interpersonal relationships: ‘I just wonder’, one participant mused, ‘how I might have responded differently if I had had some other formation’. They added:

‘That was a big reason I wanted to be in this study, because I do think we have to find a way to get people ready for it. I think it will just help us work better with the records, and I think it will help us work better with people who are creating these kinds of records and witnessing them. Even if we’re not there with them when they witness it, we need to understand how they might react to it and be prepared. Yeah, and I don’t think we are. Not really. You might have some individuals because of their own experience, but I think across the board, we’re not really ready for it.’

When participants did express feeling some type of preparation it was not provided through their formal education or professional training. A few participants indicated feeling prepared for the emotional dimensions of archival work because of personal experience of grief and loss, while a small number indicated that aspects of previous (non-archival) jobs had provided them with useful experience.

Resources

We asked participants about resources that existed and which they found helpful and made use of as well as about resources they *wished* existed. The most frequently discussed existing support mentioned was other people, specifically colleagues with whom participants were able to discuss and debrief. As one participant put it, ‘Creating community amongst ourselves is... one of the ways that we support each other in a de facto way. And just by having a chat’. The importance of being able to ‘have a chat’ was brought up by several other participants, but it was also recognized that not all workers have access to such support on the job: ‘What does one do’, someone asked, ‘when there isn’t an obvious place to go for that?’

More formal supports and resources existed for some participants. As in the survey conducted by Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, participants in this project were more likely to have access to formal supports such as counsellors and employee wellness programs when they were employed on projects or in institutions where records were expected to include traumatic content (for example, records related to residential schools and Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and records related to the Holocaust and to other atrocities).⁶⁸ Participants who worked at academic archives were also more likely to report having access to wellness programs through the academic institution, as well as workshops on what one participant called ‘the soft skills, people skills’, for example, related to management styles, or on how to work with people who are distressed and on de-escalation. ‘Cultural awareness’ or cultural competency training was only reported by one participant, working outside Canada.

While some participants could identify resources to which they had access, others expressed feeling like they were not well supported in their workplace and were not sure where to look for other resources. One participant, who works doing FIPPA review, said: ‘I’ve never seen anything that really laid out, like, it’s normal to feel like this. These are some coping strategies’. This participant was careful not to blame the lack of support on their workplace, or more specifically, to stress that the lack of support was not a deliberate choice; their employer’s

oversight was not surprising to them in a field that has not more widely acknowledged that these types of supports are necessary.

Some participants talked about the problem with relying on family members and friends outside their workplace as support. The participant quoted above who works in FIPPA told us: ‘It’s hard to take it home, you know? I have a partner who works in a pretty light, happy industry. And, you know, I’ll come home and we’ll be eating dinner, and he’ll say, “Hey how was your day today,” It’s like, “Well, you probably don’t really want to know what I was reading about”’. This sentiment was expressed by other participants, who, in addition to feeling their work was too ‘heavy’ to discuss at home, also noted that privacy concerns often meant that even if they wanted to talk at home, they were not always able to do so.

When we asked participants if there were resources or supports that they wished were available to them, training by professionals in other fields was frequently mentioned. Participants suggested that skilled professionals from fields like social work and psychology could provide training to help develop active listening skills and on how to support people going through difficult experiences as well as training for archivists to manage their own emotional responses. Participants also called for more research and writing from within the archival profession on donor relations, including writing that is accessible outside of academic journals. Participants wanted to hear more ‘just of what we’re doing every day, and how we’re feeling about it’, and they stressed that while they appreciated scholarly writing on topics like secondary trauma and emotion in archival work, ‘it often requires reading long articles and doing self-reflection, and if you’re already at capacity, well you just don’t have the bandwidth for rigorous academic reading at the end of the day’.

Several participants suggested there could be more opportunities for archivists and records professionals to share stories with colleagues, describing support networks that might take the form of group blogs or online networks, where people could say: ‘This is the case that I’m up against, or even just like, Hey this is what I had to deal with today’. Participants identified the role that professional associations could play in making some of these types of spaces available:

‘...we have a lot of archival associations. We should think about running workshops and seminars. Where people can come and get information and share their experiences, maybe somebody’s had an experience and you can learn from it. And it’d be kind of nice I think to meet people who maybe have had a similar experience to yours and you can talk to them about it and feel like, oh god okay, I’m not weird, this happens.’

‘What would it be like’, one participant asked, ‘to have a special interest section, or a group... just, for people to be able to bring situations, bring experiences, bring, god forbid, feelings that they’re having to a group that is safe and knowledgeable?’

This desire for an online network or larger support group indicates the need for conversations that can happen ‘in the shop’ to also be brought into ‘interinstitutional spaces’.⁶⁹ The participant’s stress on spaces that are both safe and knowledgeable is important and tied to the sense that records professionals have a good deal to learn from other professionals who are explicitly trained in trauma-informed practices and harm reduction. Participants stressed the need to be able to connect with peers *and* with professional help: ‘I needed a safe space. But I also needed people with good foundational knowledge, as well’.

When describing wished-for resources and supports, participants noted the need for a shift in professional and organizational culture to prioritize care for employees: ‘Having therapy, or other sort of mindfulness and wellness things, baked into your institutional support. I feel like an emphasis on that, even just from the profession itself, is something that would be really

important'. Participants suggested that workplaces could consider providing extra sick days and/or holiday time, checklists with links to accessible resources, and even employee low-stress team-building activities; one participant talked about how when they worked in another field, there was a sports day where 'you take a day and you just goof off together' and how helpful that was for employees' physical and mental health.

Precarious work conditions were cited as a barrier to accessing existing supports, and this concern will also need to be addressed by a shift in employment culture. As Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas found,⁷⁰ participants worried that admitting to struggling emotionally could negatively impact their employability, especially if they were currently working on short-term contracts or were in the early stages of their career. Archivists on short-term contracts reported feeling isolated, and job instability contributed to all other stresses; as Sajni Lacey explains, 'existing within an uncertain work cycle can cause anxiety [and] stress' and can lead to a variety of 'health consequences', including but not limited to exhaustion, emotional strain, and burnout.⁷¹ High turnover due to the prevalence of short-term contracts also contributed to the strain of working in emotionally demanding positions, while some of the same stresses reported due to precarity were also attributed to the effects of working with a shrinking or small archives staff and high workloads. Participants expressed the importance of archival work and the weight of responsibility they felt to do it well; because archivists are often highly dedicated,⁷² they may be likely to work in precarious positions for a long period of time, and as Ean Henninger et al. report for library workers,⁷³ archival workers in precarious jobs are less likely to have benefits to cover counselling and other wellbeing supports.

Towards person-centered and acknowledging relational archival work

The conversations with archivists discussed in this article highlight different ways that grief is, or can be, part of many different types of archival work. Significantly, it was acknowledged by participants that grief – and other emotions – arises because archival work involves not only records but also people; a pervasive theme of the interviews relates to participants' understanding that archival work should be far more explicitly focused on the persons connected in and through archives. Overwhelmingly, the interviews included discussions about the ways that records are intimately related to people and/or that records work involves forming and maintaining relationships. Participants not only highlighted the responsibility they felt as caretakers of records but also stressed that this role involves not only care for records but also care for – and accountability to – the people who create and/or donate records, who are documented in them and who consult and use them.

In their influential work on radical empathy and a feminist ethics of care in archival work, Caswell and Cifor outline a series of care-connected relationships archivists have as a result of the nature of their work: relationships with creators, relationships with records subjects, relationships with users, and relationships with communities.⁷⁴ One participant, who worked in a provincial archives, described how they think about this article every day:

'They talk about the four types of people connected to the records, and I just think about that all the time. That there is – we're so deeply connected to other humans at every stage of the work that we do in archives, we can't separate that human element... You can't, even if you're sitting in the stacks processing records and never talking to another person, you can't separate the human element.'

Describing the fundamental way that all records are inherently connected to a person(s), this archivist – and others we spoke with – advocated for a person-centered approach in archival

theory and practice that recognizes that even as we work with records, we work in relationship with people and must learn to center and tend to those relationships.

Participants discussed the centrality of people to records work in a variety of ways. For example, they connected archives, as material remains, to the lives of those who created them. 'The records aren't just, you know, dispassionate records to these people. They are intricate parts of their lives', one archivist commented, adding: 'these are not just pieces of paper for these people. These are very important parts of their life, or their parents' lives, that they're handing over' to the archives to care for. Another participant, facing the loss of records during a digital migration, lamented, 'it's not data, it's people'. This type of recognition was echoed by several other participants, one of whom described the connection between records and their creators as a kind of 'continuity of humanity'.

The archivist who was so impacted by Caswell and Cifor described an interaction with Indigenous researchers who reminded her not only just how intimately connected archives are to the lives they document but also how awareness of that connection can guide the archivist. 'These boxes', she was told, 'these are people... These are the people that experienced going to [residential] schools, and being in these mission communities, and they are here, and you know, as long as you remember that these are people that you're dealing with, then it'll make it easier on you'. In this conversation, the researchers were reminding the archivist that focusing on the people in the records would help the archivist make the right decisions about how to treat the records and should guide the archivist in their interactions with the records; in other words, it was not by following archival theory that they would find answers but rather by attending to the lives, experiences, feelings, and needs of the people connected to the records.

The inability and/or failure of existing archival theory and methodology to acknowledge the centrality of people to records and recordkeeping was noted by several participants. As one participant explained,

'I think in some ways when we deal with donors, while we try to be sympathetic and alleviate their concerns about, you know, where the material's going, how it's going to be handled, I don't think we really acknowledge the whole concept of people giving up something that sort of formed part of their identity. And I think we don't validate the importance of that.'

Participants discussed how policies focused on the preservation of records without full consideration of the people connected to those records impede efforts to 'do right by', to treat people 'respectfully and ethically', and can result in harm. The archivist quoted earlier in this article who described themselves as a 'bad archivist' noted that they most often felt this way when they prioritized 'people's humanity' over established archival policies and procedures: 'every time I did one of the things that addressed peoples' humanity, and addressed their grief, and addressed my own grief, in my mind I just said, "Well, hashtag-worst-archivist," or "hashtag-bad-archivist"'. This archivist, who felt the record-centric nature of traditional archival theory as an impediment to compassionate practice *and* as a judgment on their attempts to enact compassion, wished for a way to nuance the 'integrity' of their archival training, wondering, 'How can we not baby and bathwater, just throw out our theory and practice, but do it in a way that recognises humanity? Both my humanity and the humanity of the people in the records, the donors...that would be what I really wish for'.

Quoting work by Ellen Ramvi and Linda Davies, Douglas, Alisauskas, and Mordell suggest that archivists share similar experiences and characteristics with 'occupational groups like social workers, nurses, and teachers...i.e., professionals who work in close contact with other people and for whom empathy and the ability to build relationships are crucial'.⁷⁵ Douglas, Alisauskas, and Mordell argue that the 'relational work' of archivists has remained 'more hidden

than it should have',⁷⁶ and this argument is borne out in the interviews we conducted for this project, where participants clearly articulated the relational quality of their work as well as the lack of acknowledgment of and support for it. Participants felt unprepared for, sometimes overwhelmed by and alone and unsupported in facing the relational work of archives. The strangeness of this absence in archival curricula was noted, when, as one archivist put it:

'People are centric to what we do. Because we're not a warehouse, right? If it was [just] about the records, we'd just be warehouses, wouldn't [we]? But it's about getting it back out to the community, what, you know, depending on how you define your community. And, taking it from your community, so, that's all people.'

The lack of acknowledgment participants felt for people (including archivists as people) and their emotions is important for the archival profession and for archival educators to attend to; despite the increase in scholarly and professional writing on grief and trauma in archives, silences abound in archival education programs and job sites. In several of the interviews for this project, participants told me that they were opening up for the first time about their experiences of grief or of secondary trauma and had been moved to participate in the project because of the need they identified to be able to speak and the difficulty of finding spaces where they felt safe to do so.

One archivist who was an early public speaker on secondary trauma in archival work shared that, 'When I started to write and speak publicly about it, there was certainly an outpouring of, "Oh my god, me too," and "I didn't know what to do," or "I'm going through that right now and I don't know where to turn"'. Another participant shared their experience of having attended a panel on intimacy, trust, and care in archives where participants engaged in discussions about the emotional dimensions of archival work; they described feeling, as they listened and shared with others, like 'Oh man, I'm so not alone in...in dealing with this, whether it's working with material that has this burden or whether it's working with researchers or donors. It was hard to go to the panel', they went on, 'but at the same time, I was just like, man, we gotta talk about this. Because, yeah, it's a big thing'. One participant described themselves as 'maybe just...absorbing a little bit too much of this on my own' and recognizing that 'maybe there's some things I have to do in terms of self care', but also that 'that's something we're not really taught in archives school'. 'Maybe', they suggested, 'there's aspects of that that can be talked about more'.

Participants raised the need to talk openly about the emotional dimensions of archival work in archival education programs as well as in workplaces. As one put it, 'It would just be nice if there were – if it was somewhere stated, like when people are hired, that it's something – maybe even acknowledged or noted that, you know, we work with records, and this can happen. You're not alone'. Another participant stressed that 'we should start talking about it *everywhere*, at sort of every level'. They added:

'I think there should be more discussion among colleagues, more discussion at the managerial level...But I also think we need to talk about it at the national level, as well...These traumatic, grief-stricken records are out there. And there sort of needs to be some sort of connection between people dealing with it, to say, "Yeah, we're dealing with the same kind of thing. And it's okay."'

Conclusion

As the last quotation urges, there is a real need to acknowledge the emotional work of archivists and other records professionals. By providing an overview of conversations with archivists

about how grief and other emotions are implicated in and impact archival work, this article is part of a growing response to this need. More research is necessary before new practices can be identified and implemented, but the exploration of archivists' experiences recounted in this article suggests that grief and other emotions are a prevalent part of archival work, that these emotional dimensions of archival work need to be fully and widely acknowledged, and that theory, training, and support for person-centered archival approaches and methods must be developed. Our hope as a research team is that this research adds weight to the increasing emphases in archival discourse on person- or human-centered theory and practice. Calls for and explorations of person- or human-centered recordkeeping approaches are not new but are mounting in frequency and volume. New focuses⁷⁷ on trauma-informed archival practices⁷⁸ and on 'human-centred participatory' recordkeeping for care-experienced people,⁷⁹ for example, emerge at least in part out of over a decade's worth of a shift in archival discourse to the pursuit of social justice⁸⁰ and the development of community-led,⁸¹ reparative,⁸² and liberatory praxis.⁸³ The voices heard in these interviews provide another lens through which to consider the urgency of this shift.

As discussed in the methodology sections of this article, the research design for this project centered a continuing process of deep listening. A focus on deep listening was also frequently flagged by participants, who stressed the importance of listening to donor relations, to working with researchers and to working with records. As one participant explained:

'Understanding how to listen is a huge skill to learn. And I think of it not only terms of listening to donors in that moment where I'm encountering the donor, but also listening to the records when I'm processing them and what are the records trying to say to me, and how can I describe them adequately enough that, you know, these records can speak to other people? So, it's that whole process of trying to honour through – not just through the first donor encounter, but through the whole process of processing.'

This participant's commitment to listening, and their view of listening as a way of honoring a donor or records creator or subject, is echoed by another participant who emphasized that listening is an important part of 'getting it right' in archival work. The interviews conducted for this project are also deserving of deep listening, not just by me and my research team, but by archival scholars, educators, employers, managers, and colleagues. 'Getting it right' in archival education and training, and in on-the-job support, requires taking seriously the feelings and experiences participants shared. 'Getting it right' will require changes to archival curricula, to professional development programs, and to organizational cultures that are beyond the direct scope of this article, but which must begin, as I hope this article has made clear with sincere and committed acknowledgment of the complicated emotional dimensions of archival work that is person-centered and relational. We 'can't separate the human element'; in a person-centered field, archivists are people, too, and care, and attention must be paid to their experiences, their needs for connection, and their support. Grief – and other emotions – 'course' not only through archives but also through archival work. They demand that we learn to listen.

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Notes on contributors

Jennifer Douglas (she/her) is an associate professor at the School of Information at the University of British Columbia, on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam people, where she teaches courses on archival arrangement and description, personal and community archives, and research methodologies. Her research is focused on the intimate and emotional dimensions of recordkeeping, and she is most interested in what records do in people's lives and what people do with their records.

Alexandra Alisaukas is a Learning and Engagement Librarian at the University of Calgary and a recent graduate of the MAS/MLIS Program at the School of Information at the University of British Columbia, pursuing the First Nations curriculum concentration. Alex also holds a PhD in Visual and Cultural Studies from the University of Rochester and was previously an arts writer, researcher, and educator. Her current research explores contemporary art, artists' and writers' archives, and person-centered approaches to library, archival, and information services. She lives as a grateful guest on the traditional territories of the people of the Treaty 7 region in southern Alberta.

Elizabeth Bassett holds a master's degree in English from the University of Victoria as well as dual master's degrees in Archival Studies and Library and Information Studies from the University of British Columbia. Her research interests are focused on personal archives and literary archives. She is currently working as Digital Access Librarian at the West Vancouver Memorial Library.

Noah Duranseau (they/them) is a Digital Collections Specialist and Researcher at the Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre. They have a Master of Archival Studies from the University of British Columbia School of Information, where they specialized in community archives and records accessibility. Noah is grateful to live and work on the ancestral and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tseil-Waututh people.

Ted Lee is a doctoral candidate at the University of British Columbia's School of Information where he studies how different discursive communities within archivy have affected the development of archival professionalism and how archivists view their own professional identities and their work.

Christina Mantey completed the dual masters degree in Archival Studies and Library and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia. As a registered nurse with a background in patient care, she is interested in how archivists engage with and are affected by interactions with donors, researchers, and family members. Christina currently works in the children's section of her local library.

Notes:

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2. Geoff Wexler and Linda L. Long, ‘Lifetimes and Legacies: Mortality, Immortality, and the Needs of Aging and Dying Donors’, *The American Archivist*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2009, p. 478.
3. The research team I refer to in this section includes graduate research assistants who worked on this project between 2018 and 2021 and who are listed as coauthors. This team contributed significantly to the design of the interview protocol, interview transcription, and data analysis. Although, in this article, I frequently use the first person as the principal investigator on the project and the writer of this article, and for simplicity and clarity in writing, the first person is always informed by the team. ‘We’ is used when discussing decisions made or actions taken by the research team together.
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5. Thomas Attig, *How We Grieve: Relearning the World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, pp. 32–33; Douglas, Alisaukas and Mordell, 2019, p. 89.
6. Margaret S. Stroebe, Robert O. Hansson, Wolfgang Stroebe and Henk Schut, ‘Introduction: Concepts and Issues in Contemporary Research on Bereavement’, in Margaret S. Stroebe, Robert O. Hansson, Wolfgang Stroebe and Henk Schut (eds.), *Handbook of Bereavement Research: Consequences, Coping and Care*, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 2001, p. 6.
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8. See, for example: Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2002; Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan (eds.), *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 2008; Maryanne Dever, Ann Vickery and Sally Newman, *The Intimate Archive: Journeys through Private Papers*, National Library Australia, Canberra, 2009; Victor Rosenberg, ‘The Power of a Family Archive’, *Archival Science*, vol. 11, no. 1, January 2011, pp. 77–93; Jacqueline Z. Wilson and Frank Golding, ‘Latent Scrutiny: Personal Archives as Perpetual Mementos of the Official Gaze’, *Archival Science*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2016, pp. 93–109; Lynette Russell, ‘Affect in the Archive: Trauma, Grief, Delight and Texts’, *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 46, no. 2, 2018, pp. 200–207; Jessie Loyer and Darrell Loyer, ‘Talking With My Daughter About Archives: Métis Researchers and Genealogy’, *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.18357/kula.140>.
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12. Ferrin Evans, ‘Love (and Loss) in the Time of COVID-19: Translating Trauma into an Archive of Embodied Immediacy’, *American Archivist*, vol. 85, no. 1, 2022, pp. 15–29.
13. Samantha R. Winn, ‘Dying Well in the Anthropocene’, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v3i1.107>; Sam Winn, ‘Our Monstrous Archives: Memory and the End of Time’, *Medium*, 2021, available at <https://medium.com/on-archivy/our-monstrous-archives-memory-and-the-end-of-time-d439359ca5f2>, accessed 14 February 2022.
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 27. See articles in the special issue of the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* on 'radical empathy in archival practice' edited by Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly Smith.
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 34. In the same year I conducted these interviews, Wendy Duff and Cheryl Regehr also gathered information about 'emotional responses in archivists' through an initial survey and then a series of semi-structured interviews; when a first article reporting on their findings was published, this article was under review. See Cheryl Regehr, Wendy Duff, Henria Aton and Christa Sato, "'Humans and Records Are Entangled": Empathic Engagement and Emotional Response in Archivists', *Archival Science*, 2022 (online first).
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 36. Findings of this phase of the research project are reported in Douglas and Alisauskas, 'It Feels Like a Life's Work', 2021.
 37. Findings of initial exploration of bereavement collections are reported in Douglas, Alisauskas and Mordell, 'Treat Them With the Reverence of Archivists', 2019.
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 39. The interviews were conducted prior to the start of the COVID-19 global pandemic and the ensuing ubiquity of Zoom as a communication platform.
 40. Charishma Ratnam, 'Listening to Difficult Stories: Listening as a Research Methodology', *Emotion, Space and Society*, vol. 31, 2019, pp. 18–25.
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- On deep listening in qualitative research, see also: Susan Gair, 'Feeling Their Stories: Contemplating Empathy, Insider/Outsider Positionings, and Enriching Qualitative Research', *Qualitative Health Research*, vol. 22, no. 1, January 2012, pp. 134–143; Sara I. McClelland, 'Vulnerable Listening: Possibilities and Challenges of Doing Qualitative Research', *Qualitative Psychology*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2017, pp. 388–352. For a model of deep listening in archival practice, see Rachel Tropea and Geogina Ward, 'Fierce Compassion and Reflexivity: Transforming Practice at the University of Melbourne Archives', *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, vol. 3: *Radical Empathy in Archival Practice* (pre-prints), October 2021, available at <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/121>, accessed 18 February 2022.
42. 't Hart, n.p.
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 44. 't Hart, n.p.; see also Pranee Liamputtong, *Researching the Vulnerable: A Guide to Sensitive Research Methods*, SAGE Publications, London, 2007.
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 46. Susan A. Tilley, "'Challenging" Research Practices: Turning a Critical Lens on the Work of Transcription', *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2003, pp. 750–773.
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 48. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
 49. Katy Bennett, Allan Cochrane, Giles Mohan and Sarah Neal, 'Listening', *Emotion, Space and Society*, vol. 17, 2015, p. 12.
 50. Ellis, 2007; Ellis, 2017; Sexton and Sen, 2018.
 51. Ratnam discusses the impact on the researcher of embedded and engaged listening to difficult stories. See also articles in a special issue of *Emotion, Space and Society*, 'Researcher Trauma: Dealing with Traumatic Research Content and Places', Danielle Drozdowski and Dale Dominey-Howes (eds.), vol. 17, 2015.
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 53. On 'doing right by' in archives, see: Catherine Hobbs, 'Personal Ethics: Being an Archivist of Writers', in Linda M. Morra and Jessica Schagerl (eds.), *Basements and Attics, Closets and Cyberspace: Explorations in Canadian Women's Archives*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, ON, 2012, pp. 181–192; Heidi A. McKee and James E. Porter, 'The Ethics of Archival Research', *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 64, no. 1, September 2012, pp. 59–81.
 54. Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson, 'Toward Slow Archives', *Archival Science*, vol. 19, no. 2, June 2019, pp. 87–116.
 55. For a typology of grief experienced, see our project website: Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisaukas and Elizabeth Bassett, 'Talking to Archivists (6): Defining Grief', *Hard Feelings* (blog), 6 October 2021, <https://blogs.ubc.ca/hardfeelings/2021/10/06/talking-to-archivists-6-defining-grief/>.
 56. See some initial exploration of the types of work where grief presents on our project website: Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisaukas and Elizabeth Bassett, 'Talking to Archivists (7): Grief at Work', *Hard Feelings* (blog), 29 October 2021, <https://blogs.ubc.ca/hardfeelings/2021/10/29/talking-to-archivists-7-grief-at-work/>.
 57. Hobbs, 2012, p. 184.
 58. Genevieve Weber, 'From Documents to People: Working Towards Indigenizing the BC Archives', *BC Studies*, vol. 199, Autumn 2018, p. 97.

59. Wexler and Long, p. 478.
60. Wexler and Long's article includes a detailed description of this type of long-term, personal relationship with a donor.
61. This echoes findings from Sloan, Vanderfluit and Douglas's research on archivists' understanding of and experience with secondary trauma, where they found that some archivists questioned whether they were entitled to feel upset or traumatized by the records they worked with when they were not directly experiencing the events documented in the records. See Sloan, Vanderfluit, Douglas, 2019.
62. Etherton, 2006.
63. On how archives can facilitate relationships, or continuing bonds, between the living and their lost loved ones, see, for example: Douglas, Alisauskas and Mordell, 2019; Jennifer Douglas and Alexandra Alisauskas, "It Feels Like a Life's Work": Recordkeeping as an Act of Love', *Archivaria*, vol. 91, June 2021, pp. 6–37.
64. On emotions and their uses in archival work, see Michelle Caswell, 'Feeling Liberatory Memory Work: On the Archival Uses of Joy and Anger', *Archivaria*, vol. 90, November 2020, pp. 148–164.
65. Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee, 'Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field', *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2017, <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/10/4>. See also Caswell and Cifor, 2016.
66. Hobbs, 2012.
67. On optimism in archives, see Rebecka Sheffield, 'Archival Optimism, or, How to Sustain a Community Archives', in Jeannette A. Bastian and Andrew Flinn (eds.), *Community Archives, Community Spaces, Facet*, London, 2020, pp. 2–20.
68. Sloan, Vanderfluit and Douglas, 2019.
69. Laurent and Hart discussed the creation of one such interinstitutional space as an online community of practice. See Laurent and Hart, 2021, on the creation and fostering of a trauma-informed archives community of practice.
70. Sloan, Vanderfluit and Douglas, 2019.
71. Sajni Lacey, 'Job Precarity, Contract Work, and Self-Care', *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2019, n.p. (online).
72. The idea that archivists are highly dedicated and often treat their job like a kind of vocation was voiced in several interviews. Fobazi Ettarh explores the concept of 'vocational awe' in librarianship; this concept could be seen in the interviews discussed here as well and will be discussed further in future work. Fobazi Ettarh, 'Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves', *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, 10 January 2018, available at <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>, accessed 14 February 2022.
73. Ean Henninger, Adena Brons, Chloe Riley and Crystal Lin, 'Perceptions and Experiences of Precarious Employment in Canadian Libraries: An Exploratory Study', *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2019, n.p. (online).
74. Caswell and Cifor, 2016.
75. Douglas, Alisauskas and Mordell, 2019, pp. 117–118. See also Ellen Ramvi and Linda Davies, 'Gender, Mothering and Relational Work', *Journal of Social Work Practice*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2010, p. 445.
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77. The works cited in this sentence are a small fraction of the research and writing on these topics. See also a forthcoming special issue of *Archivaria* (Fall 2022) on person-centered archival theory and practice.
78. Wright and Laurent, 2021.
79. Shepherd, Hoyle, Lomas, Flinn and Sexton, 2020.
80. David A. Wallace, Wendy M. Duff, Renée Saucier and Andrew Flinn, *Archives, Recordkeeping and Social Justice*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, New York, NY, 2020.
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83. Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*, Routledge, London, New York, 2021.