Abstract

Terms such as “affective labor” and “emotional labor” pepper feminist critiques of the workplace. Though there are theoretical nuances between the two phrases, both kinds of labor involve the management of emotions and are deemed to be feminized; some acts associated with these constructs involve caring, listening, comforting, reassuring, and smiling. In this article I explore the different ways many of us are called to provide emotional labor in our discipline. My goal is to investigate the various dimensions of emotional labor that fashion our engagement with it in the context of academic mathematics. In particular I surmise that mathematical communities and mentoring structures such as EDGE help diminish some of the negative aspects of such labor while also accentuating the positives.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics puts both “diplomat” and “mathematician” in the “professional” category, yet the emotional labor of a diplomat is crucial to his work whereas that of a mathematician is not.

Arlie Russell Hochschild

*The Managed Heart*, page 148.
1 Introduction

Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild launched the term “emotional labor” into the mainstream with her 1983 book *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Inspired by Hochschild, and the large literature on emotional labor following her seminal work (see, for instance, [14] for a careful review of this work up to the end of the twentieth century, or [5] for a more recent volume), in this paper I will define emotional labor as any labor that involves the management of emotions, of the self or of others. For some nuances that might help the reader engage with contemporary literature on this theme, see Section 2.

No matter how we define emotional labor, according to Hochschild, whom I will unashamedly call “the mother of emotional labor”, the job of a mathematician is quite independent of this kind of labor (as per the epigraphed quote). Indeed many mathematicians enter this profession with similar illusions. For some it is even an appealing factor that the human contact required in many other professions would not be relevant. For some others, emotional labor is a non-issue; we at some point decide we love and cannot live without mathematics, or we decide math is something we can do well enough to feed ourselves and our loved ones, and the emotional dimensions of the labor market do not come into play in our internal negotiations about future career plans.

However many mathematicians, especially those who work in the academic context, quite quickly find that their job entails emotional labor even if it is not part of the explicit job description.\[1]\] In this article I explore the different ways many of us are called to provide emotional labor in our discipline and investigate the expectation and reward structures that fashion our engagement with this kind of labor.

To this end, in Section 2 I review the literature on emotional and affective labor and tease out a framework that will help aid us in the rest of the paper. In Section 3 I apply this framework to the specific contexts of teaching, academic service, and academic research. In Section 4 I zero in on the mathematical context and identify the kinds of emotional labor mathematicians are called to do, adapting the framework of Section 2 and the examples of Section 3 into the mathematical sciences. In this section I also begin to answer, if only partially for the time being, the related question: “Who hears the call to emotional labor?” In Section 5 I finally address this question head on, and then start to explore how if at all mathematical communities and mentoring structures (such as EDGE) may help diminish some of the negative aspects of such labor while also accentuating the positives. Section 6 wraps up this article, with a few brief remarks.

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\[1\] Here for reference is the official job description the United States government provides: mathematicians “conduct research in fundamental mathematics or in application of mathematical techniques to science, management, and other fields”, see [https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes152021.htm](https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes152021.htm), last accessed on August 8, 2018.
A Framework for Emotional Labor

Theorists of labor have explored various types of work through the last century. Manual / physical labor, that is, work that engages the human body in the production of commodities, has been central to most labor movements of the twentieth century. Intellectual / cognitive labor is of interest to many living in today’s “post-industrial” “knowledge economy” environment. This paper is about a third type of labor, which as Hochschild put it bluntly, has been “seldom recognized by those who tell us what labor is” [8, page 197]. Indeed emotional labor is often viewed to be feminine and thus “less-than”. In this paper we take any labor that involves managing the emotions of the worker or of those they interact with to be emotional labor. Some acts associated with this kind of labor include, but are not limited to, caring, listening, comforting, reassuring, and smiling. However there are two distinct components here: the self-management component remains internal, while the outward management of the emotions of the other (the client, the patient, the passenger, or, in the classroom setting, the student) is often more explicitly delineated and externally monitored by the employer. Even though both kinds of emotion-related work were labeled emotional labor by Hochschild in her [8], today these two are typically analyzed under different terms.

In most contemporary scholarship, work that entails the monitoring and managing of the emotions of the laborer is called “emotional labor”; see for example, [10], as well as the many articles in [13]. Work that entails the creation or management of emotions in a designated other (or a designated group of others) is called “affective labor”, after [6]. These terms and analysis engaging with them are not uncontroversial; see for instance [11] for a critique of how the phrase “affective labor” might be used to create a gendered hierarchy of labor. Nonetheless a conceptualization of labor involved in managing emotions is of value to the project of understanding the character, values, and boundaries of a mathematical life in the academy. In the following, therefore, I will use the term “emotional labor” to capture both types of emotion work, pointing out explicitly the distinct aspects of different types when needed.

A formal framework to conceptualize the type of emotional labor involving the management of the emotions of the laborer is presented in [10], where four dimensions are proposed:

(a) self frequency of appropriate emotional display,

(b) self attentiveness to required display rules,

(c) self variety of emotions required to be displayed, and

(d) self emotional dissonance generated as the result of having to express organizationally desired emotions not genuinely felt.

The authors then argue that “although some dimensions of emotional labor (e.g., variety of emotions that are displayed) are likely to be associated with higher emotional exhaustion, it is mainly emotional dissonance that is likely to lead to lower job satisfaction.” Some of what follows will have resonances with this perspective; see in particular Section 5.
In order to reach a comprehensive framework for our analysis of emotional labor in the context of academic mathematics, we also need to consider the dimensions of the type of emotion work that involves the creation and management of desired emotions in designated others. Analogous to the dimensions above, I propose the following:

(a) \textit{others} frequency of instances of management of the emotions of designated others,
(b) \textit{others} attentiveness to designated others’ current emotions,
(c) \textit{others} variety of emotions one is required to engender or sustain in designated others, and
(d) \textit{others} emotional burden generated as the result of having to focus on designated others’ emotions at the expense of other priorities or personal values.

To the above eight dimensions, we will add a ninth that does not require the management of displayed emotion and yet is very much related to internal self-directed emotion management:

(e) \textit{self} internal self-management of emotion required to continue to perform effectively in the job.

This dimension of emotion work is typically not monitored by the employer and yet is absolutely crucial to the employee’s performance and sustained effectiveness.

3 Emotional Labor in the Academy

There are many ways of doing emotional labor in the academy. See [15] for a “contemporary account of what it means to experience and feel academia, as a privilege, risk, entitlement, or failure” [page 1]. Bellas in [1] offers a critique of the rewards system within the academy that values the “masculine” aspects of the job (research and administration) over the “feminine” aspects (teaching and service). However she also points out that emotional labor plays a significant role in all these areas of academic work. In the rest of this section we explore some examples of the emotional labor involved in the trifecta of teaching, research, and service in terms of the nine dimensions described above.

3.1 Emotional dimensions of teaching

During the academic year, professors typically meet their students in the classroom a few times a week ((a)\textit{self}). During these regular sessions, they often aim to display effortless expertise, enthusiasm for the discipline, and joy of teaching ((c)\textit{self}). These impressions are not always easy to sustain, and for those instructors who are traditionally underrepresented in the professoriate, they may be somewhat difficult to sustain simultaneously. (“She is so bubbly enthusiastic about her topic! She must not really know what she is talking about.”) Thus the professor must often pay close attention to carefully balancing the displayed emotions ((b)\textit{self}). This balancing act is often difficult. Too much enthusiasm might be counterproductive. One must be perceived as professional and yet friendly, charismatic and yet not too distant, and so on.
This delicate performance aspect of teaching might be additionally difficult for the typical introvert academic, who might be exhausted by putting on a show for the students every other day.

During office hours, the professor regularly interacts with students and needs to manage their feelings ((a)\text{others}). She needs to attend to feelings of helplessness, distrust, and apathy, and find ways of supporting students’ confidence, interest, and enthusiasm ((b)\text{others}; (c)\text{others}). She may often need to turn on this others’-feelings focus, day after day, even when she is not feeling emotionally healthy herself or when she has other needs of her own ((d)\text{others}). Beyond the standard requirements of office hour performance, occasionally professors find themselves in the role of therapist, or of mother, or of wise aunt, where they are expected to help students process and manage their emotions about all sorts of life issues.

Let me note that I am intentionally focusing here exclusively on the burdens that may accrue from the emotional dimensions of teaching. I am not denying that professors also get a lot of emotional satisfaction from teaching, and that for many, teaching is a highlight of their careers that sustains them for years. In fact in Section 5, I will come back to teaching and zero in on some of the positives of the emotional labor involved in this aspect of an academic career.

### 3.2 Emotional dimensions of academic service

Student advising and committee work are among the main components of internal service in the academia.

Emotional labor related to student advising is much akin to the emotion work a professor does during office hours, even though often the others’-feelings focus is even more dominant in advising. The advising professor must remain in tune with the student’s emotional needs and general emotional condition in any advising session ((b)\text{others}). Furthermore, she should preserve her “caring professional” presentation ((b)\text{self}).

In faculty committees, which involve work on the emotions of both self and others, professors often meet regularly to discuss matters that are either too small or too large to be resolved by said committees. The frequency of these meetings ((a)\text{self}; (a)\text{others}), especially if in inverse proportion to their actual effectiveness, may lead to burnout and sometimes apathy. However the main emotional dimensions of this kind of academic work involve interpersonal relations between colleagues. One should, for instance, make sure to help others feel good about themselves or at least not offend their sensibilities too much ((b)\text{others}; (c)\text{others}). One should also attend to seeming interested and competent ((b)\text{self}; (c)\text{self}). Faculty can feel emotionally burnt out if they find themselves assigned to committees whose work does not interest or challenge them, or if they alternatively find themselves on committees where their contributions are not valued. If they want to be good team players, they still feel the pressure to seem interested or at least act as if they care, all the while not feeling that way at all ((d)\text{self}). If on top of all this, their fellow committee members are high-maintenance folks who need some emotion management, those professors who feel obliged to perform said management may be additionally burdened ((d)\text{others}).
I should stress that some faculty find academic service outlets that are emotionally very fulfilling for them. Above I once again focused exclusively on the negative dimensions of emotion work related to service. In Section 5 I will come back to service and zero in on some of the positives of the emotional labor involved in this aspect of an academic career.

### 3.3 Emotional dimensions of academic research

Certain types of research, in particular social science research which involves issues of personal relevance to the researcher, challenge the researcher to remain neutral and objective, or at least conscious of their biases; this might be emotionally challenging \((e)_{\text{self}}\). This, together with the expectation of neutrality in the presentation of the final product of the work, might lead to emotional dissonance \((d)_{\text{self}}\). In qualitative or empirical research work, one might still find emotional labor lurking in the background. If research involves interview or experiment participants, then the researcher may need to manage the emotions of said participants \((b)_{\text{others}}-(d)_{\text{others}}\). In all work, researchers need to remain vigilant against wishful thinking and overly optimistic interpretations of experimental results and other data \((e)_{\text{self}}\). If the research involves other researchers, such as training assistants, then the researcher once again will need to manage emotions of others, and this time probably at regular intervals \((a)_{\text{others}}-(d)_{\text{others}}\).

When submitting work for publication or proposals for grants or presentations, researchers need to present themselves as competent and confident, though they may not really feel that way \((b)_{\text{self}}-(c)_{\text{self}}\). They may need to attend to how the audience may view them during a conference talk and make sure to present a professional and yet interesting persona \((b)_{\text{self}}-(c)_{\text{self}}\). If said work is rejected in a dismissive or rude manner, one should nonetheless pretend to be mature and generous and graciously take the given feedback no matter how inane, instead of cursing at the editor and the referees and their whole families \((d)_{\text{self}}\).

### 4 Emotional Labor in Mathematics

When we became mathematicians, we knew that our jobs would not involve much manual / physical labor. If we did think in terms of labor economics at all, we probably assumed that we would be part of today’s knowledge economy, where we would be contributing to the production and dissemination of mathematical knowledge. But what may not be obvious to a naive observer is that both research and education are a part of what is called the “service-providing sector”. And this sector is today, possibly even more so than it had been during the writing of [8], the largest sector that demands emotional labor from its participants.

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2 This is not to claim that we are disembodied workers. When I had a minor shoulder injury and had visions of not being able to use the chalk board for several weeks, or during that stressful time when I lost my voice unexpectedly, I very clearly noted the physical aspects of my role in the academy.

3 See for instance the classification offered by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, available at [https://www.bls.gov/iag/tgs/iag07.htm](https://www.bls.gov/iag/tgs/iag07.htm), last accessed on August 10, 2018.
In Sections 3.1-3.3 we explored specific ways in which the three main parts of an academic career (teaching, research, and service) might involve emotional labor. In this section we look to see if we can say anything more concrete when we restrict ourselves to the context of the mathematical sciences.

Perhaps it is natural that teaching mathematics is intrinsically emotional [2]. Students come into our classrooms with many emotions about mathematics. Some have math anxiety, some have self-doubt, some have a level of confidence which may not serve them well in their next course. Students also bring along non-mathematical emotions, which contribute in all sorts of ways to how they engage with our content and pedagogy. If they just broke up with a partner, or if they have a sick relative, or if they are anxious about paying the next month’s rent, their classroom participation as well as their learning will be impacted.

Furthermore all mathematics professors can identify several familiar aspects of teaching described in Section 3.1 if not in their own experiences, then in some of their colleagues’. In particular many departments will have that one professor whose office hours tend to turn into what seem like therapy sessions from outside the door. This professor is, more often than not, a woman, and occasionally the only person of color in the department. In particular, the distribution of emotional labor related to teaching mathematics does not seem to be gender-neutral. It is also clear that the amount of teaching-related emotional labor an individual professor takes on, whether willingly or not, is not independent of the identity of that said professor.

In fact perhaps the growing focus on pedagogies that emphasize student voice and action rather than an instructor’s charismatic presentation might be a reflection of the emotional labor of non-dominant groups in this area. Indeed professors from non-dominant groups may find that the “traditional ways of being a mathematics professor” do not work for them. That is, just staring at the chalk board or the sea of nameless faces while delivering a flawless lecture may not be the ideal way for all professors to connect with and teach all students. Thus today’s mathematics instructors, especially those from non-dominant groups, tend toward teaching pedagogies that involve more others’-feelings focused emotional work, possibly thus lightening the self-directed emotional work load and the emotional dissonance that might accompany that kind of teaching.

Thinking of academic research in mathematics, we can see that we will need to move beyond the emotional dimensions already described in Section 3.3. To that end, we can look at Weidman’s list of the four emotional challenges of a mathematical life [16]:

“First of all, the mathematician must be capable of total involvement in a specific problem.” That is, mathematics research often demands full focus for extended periods of time, and this is not only mentally exhausting but also emotionally draining. One might feel that one needs to withdraw from other interests, or else one is not doing enough.

“Second, the mathematician must risk frustration. Most of the time, in fact, he finds himself, after weeks or months of ceaseless searching, with exactly nothing: no results, no ideas, no energy.” A lot of mathematics research work leads to no results of significance. Add to this the challenges of getting published once one does have a
significant result, which, for the not-yet-thick-skinned, can get especially disorienting and discouraging.

“Next, even the most successful mathematician suffers from lack of appreciation.” The mathematics community proudly celebrates its geniuses, but celebrity and genius are fickle [9]. After all, what more can you do once you win a Fields medal? Anything after that will be a let-down. Even those who feel appreciated by their mathematical colleagues may suffer from a dearth of appreciation from family and friends, and the world outside the mathematical one might be totally immune to mathematical glory.

“Finally, the mathematician must face the fact that he will almost certainly be dissatisfied with himself.” Somewhat a corollary of the above, this means that mathematics is huge and each individual mathematician is just a small speck. Whatever we do will be small change when compared to some of the giants.

Weidman’s four challenges all require the mathematician to manage her own emotions. The mathematician who cannot handle all of them at least halfway successfully at least some of the time is bound to be miserable. One might reject some of these challenges as myths and try to disentangle oneself from their hold, but that too takes emotional work as these ideas and ideals are quite solidly built into the culture of the discipline. See [7] for a call for this kind of a rejection.

So far we have explored some specific ways academic mathematicians might engage in emotional labor. Are there any other kinds of emotional labor mathematicians might be called to do? And just who gets to hear that call? What are the consequences of hearing that call? We focus on these questions in the next section.

5 Mathematical Communities, Mentoring Structures, and EDGE

The idea that emotional labor has various human costs is not new; neither is the idea that it is not uniformly a negative for the particular laborer engaged in it, see for instance [17]. In this section we explore some of the positive possibilities related to emotional labor in the context of an academic mathematical life. In particular we reflect upon mathematical communities, mentoring structures, and EDGE.

Since 2008, the American Mathematical Society has supported Mathematics Research Communities (MRC). The MRC is “a professional development program offering early-career mathematicians a rich array of opportunities to develop collaboration skills, build a network focused in an active research domain, and receive mentoring from leaders in that area.” In the last few years, the Association for Women in Mathematics has led or supported research networking conferences for women in various fields. These programs, and others like them, are all spearheaded by mathematicians who feel called to do the work to create networks, connect people, mentor young mathematicians, and make our community a more welcoming and supportive place for more.

\[\text{[4] The quoted text and more information may be found at http://www.ams.org/programs/research-communities/mrc, last accessed on August 10, 2018.}\]

\[\text{[5] See https://awmadvance.org/research-networks/, last accessed on August 10, 2018.}\]
people.

The Mathematical Association of America has two programs for mentoring junior mathematics faculty. “Project NExT (New Experiences in Teaching) is a professional development program for new or recent Ph.D.s in the mathematical sciences” addressing “all aspects of an academic career: improving the teaching and learning of mathematics, engaging in research and scholarship, finding exciting and interesting service opportunities, and participating in professional activities. It also provides the participants with a network of peers and mentors as they assume these responsibilities." The MAA Mentoring Network is another mentoring program “aimed at connecting early career mathematicians with experienced mentors working in mathematics.”

There are many other mentoring structures built around academic mathematics. One might count among these:

1. The e-Mentoring network, hosted by AMS blogs, available at [https://blogs.ams.org/mathmentoringnetwork/](https://blogs.ams.org/mathmentoringnetwork/).
2. The Infinite Possibilities Conference, “a national conference designed to promote, educate, encourage and support minority women interested in mathematics and statistics,”
3. NSF Mathematics Institutes’ Modern Math Workshop at SACNAS, “a pre-conference workshop held at the SACNAS National Conference, intended to encourage undergraduates, graduate students and recent Ph.Ds from underrepresented minority groups to pursue careers in the mathematical sciences and build research and mentoring networks.”

And of course one cannot forget EDGE. “The EDGE Program is administered by the Sylvia Bozeman and Rhonda Hughes EDGE Foundation with the goal of strengthening the ability of women students to successfully complete PhD programs in the mathematical sciences and place more women in visible leadership roles in the mathematics community. Along with the summer session, EDGE supports an annual conference, travel for research collaborations, travel to present research and other open-ended mentoring activities.”

The work involved in each of these programs is varied but there is a definite emotional labor component. The main job is to connect people to one another, and though a lot of the emotion work is distributed over a large number of people, the main program organizers do a large chunk of this work. There is much emotion work that involves the management of the emotions of others; in particular many of the junior

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6The quoted text and more information may be found at [https://www.maa.org/programs-and-communities/professional-development/project-next](https://www.maa.org/programs-and-communities/professional-development/project-next), last accessed on August 10, 2018.
7The quoted text and more information may be found at [https://www.maa.org/news/maa-mentoring-network](https://www.maa.org/news/maa-mentoring-network), last accessed on August 10, 2018.
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10The quoted text and more information may be found at [https://www.edgeforwomen.org](https://www.edgeforwomen.org), last accessed on August 10, 2018.
mathematicians participating might be feeling insecure and lost or at least mildly confused. The emotional labor involved is mainly about making sure these participants feel a sense of belonging, and a sense of confidence and realistic optimism about their future in academic mathematics.

If we dig deeper, we can see the resonances with the types of emotional labor described in Sections 3.1-3.2. In particular the types of work involve teaching and service. However, people involved do the work willingly. They basically self-select into these roles. This is perhaps one of the main reasons why the emotional labor involved, though still highly burdensome in any objective sense of the word, does also help them feel nourished and fulfilled.

However there are two other reasons I believe. First the people who put their time and energy into these programs feel called to do this work because they believe ideologically and philosophically that it is the right thing to do. Their political and ethical framing of the world puts them in the position to value this kind of work, and this in turn makes the work feel more endurable, more meaningful, and even more joyful. “Meaningful work” is a catchy phrase; see [4] for a working framework for it that revolves around three themes (sense of self, the work itself, and sense of balance), and see [12] for more on the benefits of meaningful work for the laborer. But even leaving related scholarship aside, it is easy to understand how meaningful work can transform strenuous emotional labor into pleasurable and desirable labor. Thinking of the nine dimensions we have proposed in Section 2 we see that the dimensions of emotional labor activated mainly involved are (a)self-(c)self and (a)other-(d)other. There is little self-deception or misrepresentation of feelings, and there is more or less no emotional dissonance. So perhaps the individuals are exhausted at the end of the day, but they sleep well. This resonates with the work of [10], who found that emotional dissonance was the main component of emotional labor that led to job dissatisfaction; see the relevant quote in Section 2.

Secondly and perhaps relatedly, there is often a shared identity component to the decision to dedicate time and energy to a program of this kind. This makes the work meaningful and the emotional dissonance minimal, yes, and in all these ways, this reason may seem similar to the first. But what makes this different is how it interacts with the others’-feelings focused labor dimensions (a)other-(d)other. The shared identity makes the emotional labor of managing the designated others’ emotions a lot easier, as the individual has a better understanding of said emotions of those designated others. This of course does not mean that white women necessarily make the best mentors for white women, black men necessarily make the best mentors for black men, and gay Latinas necessarily make the best mentors for gay Latinas. But it is natural to expect that shared identity makes aspects of the involved emotional labor much easier.

6 Concluding Thoughts

So where do we go from here? The EDGE Program is an example of many of these kinds of projects; projects that demand emotional labor but also that significantly contribute to the well-being of both its participants and its leaders and mentors. In fact several participants become mentors and leaders themselves, see [3]. Though
emotionally exhausting, these projects can continue because they fulfill several needs of those that work on them. Instead of expending our energy and emotional well-being on trying to run our departmental meetings smoothly despite colleagues who expect us to make coffee or just smile and nod, we can put our efforts into projects that help us connect with each other, find meaning, and thrive in the academy.

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