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# Memory-Work: The Method

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*Memory-work is a social constructionist and feminist research method that was developed in Germany by Frigga Haug and others explicitly to bridge the gap between theory and experience. It provides a way of exploring the process whereby individual women become part of society, and the ways in which women themselves participate in that process of socialization. It is a group method, involving always the collective analysis of individual written memories. It is feminist in being explicitly liberationist in its intent. The use of memory-work as a method in feminist social research has become well established in Australia and New Zealand. Increasingly, its use as a qualitative research method has come to challenge conventional mainstream research practices. However, for feminist researchers too, the method brings with it many fascinating dilemmas and issues of both a theoretical and methodological nature. This article identifies some of those issues.*

Memory-work was developed by German feminists and socialists Frigga Haug and others and published in *Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory* (1987). The members of the collective had a history of involvement in the Women's Liberation Movement with Frigga Haug among the founders of the Socialist Women's Association (*Sozialistischer Frauenbund*). The women also worked with the independent Marxist journal *Das Argument*. An achievement for the women at *Das Argument* was the establishment of an autonomous women's editorial board as a result of their concern at the few women contributors to the journal and the tangential way in which women's issues had been addressed. The women's aim was that of "reconstructing scientific work along feminist lines, and that of remodeling Marxism to open up a place within it for issues concerning women" (Haug et al., 1987, p. 23).

The collective's first attempts at memory-work are presented in Volume 1 of *Frauenformen* (Women's Forms) where the group researched feminine socialization. This work continued with further research into sexuality as a form of socialization. The latter, *Sexualisierung: Frauenformen 2*, published in 1983, is the original German version of *Female Sexualisation*. The English translation was published 4 years later, with Frigga Haug as principal author. Haug also discussed the method in *Beyond Female Masochism: Memory-Work and Politics* (1992).

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In the mid-1980s, Haug spent some time at Macquarie University in Sydney as a visiting scholar and introduced the concept of memory-work. During that time, a number of women became very excited about the potential use of the method and began to try it out. In particular, June Crawford, Susan Kippax, Jenny Onyx, Una Gault, and Pam Benton, also known as the SPUJJ collective, conducted a 4-year study of the social construction of emotion, using the method, resulting in the book *Emotion and Gender* (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, & Benton, 1992). In the process, they developed, modified, and documented the method further. This group was more explicit in the procedure of the method than Haug et al. (1987) had been. It seems that most of those in Australia and New Zealand who have used the method have, in addition to referring to Haug et al. (1987), turned to the rules/guidelines as presented by Crawford et al. (1992).

Crawford et al. (1992) explained, "The underlying theory is that subjectively significant events, events which are remembered, and the way they are subsequently constructed, play an important part in the construction of self" (p. 37). The construction of self at any moment plays an important part in how the event is constructed. Because the self is socially constructed through reflection, Haug et al. (1987) used memories as their initial data, hence the name of the method. Memory-work has the benefit of enabling the researcher to tap into the past. As Haug et al. argued, "everything remembered constitutes a relevant trace—precisely because it is remembered for the formation of identity" (p. 50). Crawford et al. (1992) referred to this act of reflection as one's self engaging with one's memories, having a conversation with them and responding to them. As argued by Shotter (1984), it is through memory that "past specificatory activities are linked to current specificability—which makes for intentionality, and gives a 'directionality' to mental activities" (p. 208). Shotter's argument for human agency is based on the ability of humans to reflect. To quote Haug et al. (1987),

The very notion that our own past experience may offer some insight into the ways in which individuals construct themselves into existing relations, thereby themselves reproducing a social formation, itself contains an implicit argument for a particular methodology. If we refuse to understand ourselves simply as a bundle of reactions to all-powerful structures, or to the social relations within which we have formed us, if we search instead for possible indications of how we have participated actively in the formation of our past experience, then the usual mode of social-scientific research, in which individuals figure exclusively as objects of the process of research, has to be abandoned. . . . Since however we are concerned here with the possible means whereby human beings may themselves assume control, and thus with the potential prospect of liberation, our research itself must be seen as an intervention into existing practices. (pp. 34-35)

The method is thus explicitly liberationist in its intent. Haug et al. (1987) stressed the active participation of individuals in the "socialization" process. They emphasized, "The question we want to raise is thus an empirical one; it

is the 'how' of lived feminine practice" (p. 33). In the process of answering that question, it is possible to reassess and reconstitute the feminine self within current social practices.

Memory-work is a feminist social constructionist method in that it breaks down the barriers between the subject and object of research. Everyday experience is the basis of knowledge. Crawford et al. (1992) explained, "This collapsing of the subject and object of research, the 'knower' and the 'known', constitutes or sets aside a space where the experiential can be placed in relation to the theoretical" (p. 41). The academic researcher positions herself with the group and becomes a member of the research group. The researched became researchers, thus eliminating the hierarchy of "experimenter" and "subject." Haug et al. (1987) referred to the participants as *coresearchers*. They defended their commitment to subjectivity against criticisms that such findings cannot be generalizable.

Since it is as individuals that we interpret and suffer our lives, our experiences appear unique and thus of no value for scientific analysis. The mass character of social processes is obliterated within the concept of individuality. Yet we believe that the notion of the uniqueness of experience and of the various ways in which it is consciously assessed is a fiction. The number of possibilities for action open to us is radically limited. We live according to a whole series of imperatives: social pressures, natural limitations, the imperative of economic survival, the given conditions of history and culture. Human beings produce their lives collectively. It is within the domain of collective production that individual experience becomes possible. If therefore a given experience is possible, it is also subject to universalization. What we perceive as 'personal' ways of adapting to the social are also potentially generalizable modes of appropriation. (Haug et al., 1987, p. 43)

## THE METHOD

There are 3 phases of the method in its basic form. In *Phase 1* the individual's reflections indicate the processes of constructions. *Phase 2* involves a collective examination of the memories in which the memories are theorized and new meanings result. The essence of *Phase 2* is the collective searching for common understanding, with the method allowing for the social nature of the construction of the memories to be realized. These first two phases reflect a duality of process such that

The two foci of memory-work capture something of the duality of self. The self talking with itself is phase 1 and responding to itself as others respond to it is phase 2 (Crawford et al., 1992, p. 40).

However, the order of the two phases do not imply that the individual construction is logically or temporally prior to the social. At all times the interpretation of meaning is neither subjective nor objective but *intersubjective*.

Human agents are also social beings, persons. Indeed, their agency depends on them being social beings as Crawford et al. (1992) explained,

The meanings of actions are not found in the actor's head but in the common meanings which she/he negotiates in interaction with others—both then at the time of the episode and now in reflection. The memories of events are collectively reappraised. Memory-work makes it possible to put the agent, the actor, back into psychology—in both method and theory—without falling into psychological individualism. (p. 53)

The following is a description of the procedural steps as used by Crawford et al. (1992). The procedure has been subsequently adopted by most, but not all subsequent work in Australia and New Zealand.

*Phase 1* concerns the writing of a memory. The five basic rules (from Haug et al., 1987) are as follows:

1. Write 1 to 2 pages about a particular episode, action, or event (referred to by researchers as a *trigger* or *cue*).

The writing of the memory has a number of benefits. It provides a discipline for the group, the group remembers more through writing and it gives the everyday experiences of life a status, which is considered of particular importance for women.

2. Write in the third person using a pseudonym.

The advantage of writing in the third person is that the participant can create personal distance, and view the memory from the outside. This helps to avoid justification of the experience.

3. Write in as much detail as possible, including even what might be considered to be trivial or inconsequential.

By asking for the trivial, it is hoped to avoid an evaluation by the participants of what was important or unimportant. Such an evaluation might well be socially defined.

4. Describe the experience, do not import interpretation, explanation, or biography.

Interpretation smoothes over the rough edges and covers up the absences and inconsistencies that are crucial elements of the analysis. The selection of a suitable trigger topic is vital, but difficult. In particular, a conventional topic is likely to produce a conventional, well-rehearsed response. The trick is to produce the more jagged stuff of personal lived experience.

*Phase 2* also proceeds through a set procedure (as identified in Crawford et al., 1992, p. 49):

1. Each memory-work group member expresses opinions and ideas about each written memory in turn.
2. The collective looks for similarities and differences between the memories. The group members look for continuous elements among the memories whose relation to each other is not immediately apparent. Each member should question particularly those aspects of the events that do not appear amenable to comparison, without resorting to biography.
3. Each member identifies clichés, generalisations, contradictions, cultural imperatives, metaphor, etc. This is one way of identifying the markers of the “taken-for-granted” social explication of the meaning of recurring events.
4. The group discusses theories, popular conceptions, sayings, and images about the topic, again as a way of identifying the common social explication of meaning around the topic.
5. The group also examines what is not written in the memories (but that might be expected to be). Silences are sometimes eloquent pointers to issues of deep significance but are painful or particularly problematic to the author.
6. The memory may be rewritten.

This collective analysis aims to uncover the common social understanding of each event, the social meanings embodied in the actions described in the written accounts, and how these meanings are arrived:

The collective reflection and examination may suggest revising the interpretation of the common patterns, and the analysis proceeds by moving from individual memories to the cross-sectional analysis and back again in a recursive fashion. . . . In this way the method is reflexive. It generates data and at the same time points to modes of action for the co-researchers. (Crawford et al., 1992, p. 49)

In *Phase 3*, the material provided from both the written memories and the collective discussion of them, is further theorized. This phase is essentially a recursive process, in which the insights concerning the “common sense” of each set of memories is related back to the earlier discussions and to theoretical discussions within the wider academic literature. *Phase 3* is usually done by one of the coresearchers as an individual (academic) exercise, though with drafts of this process subject to further discussion by other members of the collective.

## RECENT APPLICATION OF THE METHOD

Memory-work is growing in popularity as a research method by those seeking a method that fits with a social constructionist, feminist paradigm. Some have taken it further into a postmodern paradigm. Although aware of the method’s use in the United States (e.g., Kaufman, Montgomery, Ewing, Hyle, & Self, 1995) and Europe (e.g., Laitinen & Tiihonen, 1990; Schratz, 1996; Schratz, Walker, and Schratz-Hadwich, 1995; Sironen, 1994) as well as the original work in Germany, the focus here is on developments in Australia and

New Zealand. Those using the method come from diverse disciplines and fields of study, such as sociology, psychology, education, nursing, tourism studies, leisure studies, management, and marketing. The method has primarily been used in higher degree research, most notably, doctoral work, although some women have used the method in nondegree research and a handful have employed it for teaching purposes.

The following indicates the broad range of subject areas in which memory-work has been employed in Australia and New Zealand: emotion and gender (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault & Benton, 1990, 1992; Kippax, Crawford, Benton, Gault, & Noesjirwan, 1988) as previously discussed, the experience of women leaders (Boucher, 1997a, 1997b; Boucher & Smyth, 1996), body/landscape relations (Davies, 2000), subjectivity (Davies et al., 2001), silence and gender (Davies et al., 1997), women's sexuality (Farrar, 2000), consumer service encounters (Friend, 1997, 2000; Friend & Rummel, 1995; Friend & Thompson, 2000), leisure experiences (Friend, Grant, & Gunson, 2000; Grant & Friend, 1997; McCormack, 1995, 1998), tourist experiences (Small, in press), use of memory-work to enhance student learning (Friend, 1999; Grant & Friend, 1997; Rummel & Friend, 2000), student assessment process (O'Connor, 1998), experiences of casual ESOL teachers (Granwal, 1998), women's writing (Gannon, 1999; Kamler, 1996), emotion and gender and learning (Ingleton, 1994, 1995); study of economics and gender (Ingleton, 1997), emotion and mathematics learning (Ingleton, 2000; Ingleton & O'Regan, 1998), women and mathematics (Johnston, 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 1998d; Webber, 1998 [informally circulated in 1991]), menstruation (Davies, 1994; Koutroulis, 1996a, in press), profeminist subjectivities among men (Pease 2000a, 2000b), women's speaking positions and feminine subjectivities (Stephenson, 1996, 1997, 2001a, 2001b, in press-a; Stephenson, Kippax, & Crawford, 1996), women and AIDS prevention (Kippax, Crawford, Waldby, & Benton, 1990), HIV treatments (Stephenson, in press-b), older women, health, and relationships (Mitchell, 1991, 1993, 2000), heterosexuality and desire (Davies, 1994; Rocco, 1999), and critiques of memory-work (Koutroulis, 1993, 1996b; Small, 1999; Small & Onyx, 2001).

While the above researchers have been committed to the basic ideology and tenets of memory-work, the various disciplinary bases, subject areas, and approaches of the researchers have meant various adaptations of the method. One such variation is collective biography. Davies et al. (2001) explained the term *collective biography* as follows:

It is "biographical" in that it draws on memories of the lives of particular individuals. It is "collective" in that the process through which the stories are told and written and analyzed is one which reveals the ways in which we were (and are) collectively produced as (sometimes) coherent subjects, experiencing ourselves as "individual" and "autonomous." Through the processes of talking and listening, of writing and rewriting, the edges that mark off the texts of ourselves, one from the other, are blurred. (p. 169)

Haug et al. (1987) have avoided a method that is “autobiographical” or “biographical” considering such an approach implies a logical development of the individual from childhood into adulthood, however, others have found the term useful. Gannon (in press) explains,

The term, “collective biography” is useful because it both describes the method of working with personal stories and the oxymoronic implication of the phrase foregrounds the tension between the individual and the collective that is both the crux of the method and the source of its dilemmas.

In her alternative theorizing of collective biography, Davies (1994) has developed four phases. Preceding the collection of the written memories, is a phase in which the group chooses a topic and then discusses it in terms of everyday “cultural knowledges” and personal remembered stories. In this first phase of “talking story,” submerged or forgotten stories and details often emerge through the process of the collective oral storytelling. Often these stories, those which take the teller by surprise, subsequently become the written memories rather than those familiar ones that were initially recalled.

Haug et al. (1987) acknowledged, in the original text, that memory-work could be/should be developed further.

The diversity of our methods, the numerous objections raised in the course of our work with the stories, and the varied nature of our attempts at resolution, seemed to suggest that there might well be no single, “true” method that is alone appropriate to this kind of work. What we need is imagination. We can, perhaps, say quite decisively that the very heterogeneity of everyday life demands similarly heterogeneous methods if it is to be understood. (p. 70)

## SOME ISSUES

The above outline of the method itself glosses over the many issues that arise in its use. Some of these were explored in detail by Haug et al. (1987), or by the SPUJJ collective (Crawford et al., 1992). Other issues have become more problematic in subsequent applications of the method. These have led to other modifications in the method.

The method requires the active engagement of all members of the group. As Haug et al. (1987) noted, “Indeed memory-work is only possible if the subject and object of research are one and the same person. Even notions of ‘subject’ and ‘object’ had to be problematized in our work, amongst other reasons because they posit both as fixed and knowable entities, neither of which is subject to change” (p. 35). The process of research is a collective one, with joint and collective responsibility for the outcome. However this collective process creates several dilemmas.

One dilemma concerns the paradox of the uniquely personal written memories that are nonetheless “potentially generalizable modes of appropri-



ation." It raises the question of the status of the individual's construction when that is challenged and reconstituted by the collective analysis. Must there be a consensus in *Phase 2*? If the author of the memory refuses such intersubjective analysis of her experience, how is the collective to handle such refusal? More important, the issue is that of respecting diversity in the social construction process, as well as commonality (see Stephenson, 2001a; Koutroulis, 2001). Stephenson (2001a) is concerned that the emphasis on the "collective subject" has led to an "overemphasis on identifying commonalities between group members' positions and ideas, at the expense of interrogating difference."

The collective process that assigns joint responsibility for the outcome, itself has clear roots in the feminist admonition against the objectification of women's experience, and the appropriation of that experience by male researchers. However, the very act of requiring joint "ownership" of the process, also places potential limits on its effectiveness as a research methodology. In the work of Haug et al. (1987), all members of the collective were social researchers, professionals, or students. The women had come to *Das Argument* either through the Socialist Women's Association in Germany or through courses on Marx's *Capital* at the Free University in West Berlin. Thus they were all highly educated and politically active women. Similarly, the SPUJJ collective consisted of highly educated Australian academic women. The SPUJJ collective did, in addition to its own work, facilitate the establishment of other memory-work groups, for the purpose of incorporating those memories and collective discussions into *Phase 3* analyses. However, the question remains: To what extent is it possible for a group of nonacademic women to meaningfully share ownership in the process? And what if one of those women (as in Frigga Haug's case) claims authorship of the resulting publication?

In practice, it is usually one particular researcher who uses the method for purposes of gaining a qualification, or in order to publish a paper. There is a host of practical, theoretical, and ethical issues attached to this situation. What then is the motivation of other members of the collective? If they are trying to "please the researcher," does this affect the quality of the material? How is their contribution adequately represented? If the material is genuinely collective, how can one person claim ownership as a necessary condition for the award of a research degree? If the individual researcher is primarily involved at *Phase 3*, how does she integrate the material from *Phases 1 and 2*? (See for example, Cadman et al., 2001; Ingleton, 2001). Gannon (in press) created new poetic texts to resolve the methodological dilemma.

The method relies on memories. Memories are notoriously unreliable. This has been pointed out as a major methodological flaw, by positivist researchers. Those using the method are less concerned about this charge. As Crawford et al. (1992) note,

The memories are true memories, that is, they are memories and not inventions or fantasies. Whether the memories accurately represent past events or not, however, is irrelevant; the process of construction of the meanings of those events is the focus on memory-work. (p. 51)

Although the product of memory-work is clearly "subjective" rather than "objective," the collective process of analyses ensures that the meanings derived are "intersubjective." Although the intersubjective analysis of memories may be fully justifiable within a postmodern or social constructionist paradigm, the arguments are not so convincing to positivist or traditional editors and reviewers. What is the appropriate format and arena for the publication of memory-work studies?

Other issues have emerged as the method is transposed to other contexts and used for other purposes. Some of these issues have both practical as well as theoretical importance. For example, how can/should the method be used with participants of different ages (Small, 2001), or with working class women or with women from different cultural backgrounds? Does the method work differently for feminist and nonfeminist groups of women? Does the method always have the potential to liberate? How do the group dynamics affect the collective theorizing? Can men use the method as effectively as women, and if so, are we still talking about a feminist method? Is there a limit to the kind of trigger that can be used in eliciting memories? Are there dangers in using memory-work with highly sensitive material, or traumatized individuals? Farrar (2001) in particular, identifies the limits of deconstructing painful and personal material.

The development of memory-work was specifically liberationist in its intent. That is, it provides the opportunity for women to "refuse to understand ourselves simply as a bundle of reactions to all-powerful structures" (Haug et al., 1987). Yet, the method itself has generated a set of rules of application. Johnston (2001) explores participants' layered memories, which represent what she calls "the texture of the everyday." She claims that "Many of these layered stories can be seen as evidence of the everydayness of crisis, and of the frightening power of 'the general training in the normality of heteronomy'—the normality of external control, of other people's rules" (p. 36). She sees a possible contradiction in how we go about doing memory-work with its own set of rules and the strength of the method that is supposed to help us explore the normality, including other people's rules. Perhaps we are simply exchanging one form of heteronomy for another.

We would argue that memory-work, the method, has demonstrated considerable strength and application in a range of research sites well beyond its original focus. The method has matured to a point at which a critical reflection of its strengths and limitation is needed. Those who have chosen to use the method have been constantly challenged by the very principles that underpin it. Cadman et al. (2001), a collective of 11 women who employed memory-work to study memory-work, highlighted how they managed the key princi-

ples of memory-work and explained their uncertainties and dilemmas as evidence of their own subjectification.

In dealing with these issues, those who have employed the method have at times modified the method's use but always come to a deeper appreciation of its potential. This potential can perhaps best be summarized in the words of Davies (1994). In memory-work, researchers "spin the web of themselves and find themselves in the act of that spinning, in the process of making sense out of the cultural threads through which lives are made" (Davies, 1994, p. 83).

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