

MEANING-MAKING: ISSUES OF ANALYSIS IN MEMORY-WORK

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ABSTRACT

At the core of memory-work is the making of meaning from a collective reading of the memories of individuals' lived experiences. Memory-work enables many voices to be heard in the understanding and theorising of the cross-woven threads of embodied experience. The methodology, however, confronts memory-workers with the complexity of moving between the subjectivity of their collective experiences, emotions and interpretations, and the more academic and distanced processes of theorising the meaning of those experiences. In that process, the particular voices of participants are often felt to be vulnerable or lost in the final analysis. This paper focuses on the challenges of making transparent and convincing processes of analysis, given the collectivity of the endeavour and the subjective nature of the methodology.

INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines the theoretical and methodological frameworks underpinning the memory-work projects I have undertaken, and illustrates some of the complexities encountered in achieving credibility in analysis. For research on the interaction of emotion with learning in education settings, memory-work is very successful as a methodology. It enables access to people's experiences of emotion in rich and rewarding ways. Once the data is amassed, however, the complete process of analysis poses questions and challenges that require some resolution. The interpretation of experience in order to understand how we participate in the shaping of our lives, and the theorising from that experience is still experimental and in need of debate.

THEORISING FROM EXPERIENCE

Theorising from experience has developed from many perspectives. Most influential in my work has been the work of Haug and her co-researchers (1986, 1999), who have striven for a critical methodology from a Marxist feminist perspective, and that of psycho-therapists Epston and White (1992) who have theorised meaning-making from a critical-constructionist or 'constitutionalist' perspective on the world. The latter work on the premise that

'lives are shaped or constituted through *the very process of the interpretation of experience* within the context of the stories that we enter into and are entered into by others' (81 my italics); '...persons' lives are shaped by the meaning they ascribe to their experience by their situation in social structures, and by the language practices and cultural practices of the self and of relationship...' (122).

They adopt Jerome Bruner's image of stories as representing 'dual landscapes' (Bruner 1986: 123), a 'landscape of action' where events are linked through time, and a 'landscape of consciousness' which is characterised by perceptions, thoughts, speculations, realisations and conclusions. This concept lends weight to memory-work in which these landscapes can be accessed through a focus on the writing and discussion of specific memories. Both Epston and White's and Haug et al's work support the reshaping of persons' lives from a critical perspective so that participants can gain more conscious control over aspects of their lives.

Epston and White's work deviated from the dominant structuralist and functionalist perspectives of psychotherapy just as Haug's group deviated from the prevailing psychological paradigm. Both have taken a critical perspective in theorising from experience so that their research and practice 'might have practical political impact' (Fay 1987:2). In addition, Haug's group was avowedly feminist, and like other feminist work such as Reinharz's (1983), took a critical feminist perspective that encouraged methodology that is 'non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian, [and] non-manipulative' that can be undertaken in an environment of equality, sharing and trust (Reinharz 1983:174). Both claim that the integration of theory and practice is made possible by there being no power differential between researcher and the researched, where the participants themselves are researchers, and the process itself enlightens the participants. Reinharz also claims that experiential research has three purposes: it should represent growth and understanding in the arena of *the problem* investigated, *the person(s)* doing the investigation, and *the method* utilised' (174). Further, she stresses that the prime criterion of data analysis is that it 'draw heavily on the language of the persons studied, i.e. that it is grounded' (183). The emphasis on both experience and language invites a range of approaches to analysis depending on the researcher's interest or discipline.

Memory-work has strong roots in feminist, critical, and social constructionist views of the world. The methodology is powerful in accessing memories, experiences and emotions ranging from the pedestrian to the extraordinary, from daily acts of socialisation to incidents of crisis; from shared histories to the never-before-spoken-about. By foregrounding experience as the focus of research, memory-work evokes strong emotions and closely held interpretations of participants' life stories. One of its central principles, however, is that participants are subjects in the process, not objects, and that the researcher, as a social being and therefore a participant in socialisation processes, cannot avoid being a subject as well. Haug *et al*'s principle of the 'collapse of subject and object' confronts memory-workers with the complexity of moving between the subjectivity of their own experiences, emotions and interpretations, and the more distanced and academic processes of collectively theorising the meanings of those experiences.

Haug *et al* make clear from the outset that, in challenging the separation of scientific knowledge from everyday experience, they are not only disrupting a whole academic canon, but inviting enormous disrespect by demanding 'the right to use experience as a basis of knowledge' (1987:34). To earn respect, qualitative researchers need to support their claims for integrity by explicitly establishing their foundations for procedure and analysis. However, Haug *et al* state that there is no 'true method':

New modes of analysis suggest themselves continuously. ...The diversity of our methods, the numerous objections raised in the course of our work with the stories, and our attempts at resolution, seem to suggest that there might well be no single, 'true' method that is alone appropriate to this kind of work (Haug *et al* 1999:70).

The original memory-workers were not in search of normative guidelines, but they did set out some steps towards the goal of achieving an understanding of 'our active participation in subordinating ourselves to social structures' (58). Their first step in analysis was that all of the group should express their 'opinions, knowledge and judgment', deliberately 'slash[ing] through the horizontal seams that traditionally keep domains of experience separate' (1999:60). The approaches they considered most useful in uncovering women's active subordination to social structures include comparison of experiences and their assessment of particular events. In such comparisons the physical and emotional aspects of emotion can be linked with the rational aspect, in which judgments and decisions are made directly from the emotional experience itself (Barbalet, 1998; Scheff, 1997). The unravelling of meanings hidden behind clichés and silences or the murmurings of 'mmmm', help bring to the surface taken-for-granted ways in which we construct our active involvement in the socialisation process.

The systematic reading of the memories and their discussion includes comparison, the deconstruction of clichés, the questioning of silences and absences, and reinterpretation, so that subjective experience and theory begin to be seen in a 'reciprocal and mutually critical relationship' (Crawford, 1992: 42). The principles underlying the achievement of this relationship through memory-work are collectivity, the collapse of subject and object, the analysis of memories, and ultimately the theorising from experience. It is the task of analysis to remain focused on ways in which subjects actively participate in acts of their own subordination, and to achieve that mutually critical relationship between theory and practice. In my experience as a memory-worker, however, the task is in danger of being diminished by the questioning of the academic credibility of the subjectivity of the process.

The Haug collective has given us a number of analytical tools which proved effective for them over two or more years of working together on their projects. Short term researchers could find that the convenience of adopting the tools gives the illusion of having a 'true method' rather than that interplay among the Haug group which was made possible by working through trial and error. A true procedural method is no more available than a true method of analysis. The choice of approach to analysis is as political and personal as it is academic, and will vary accordingly. But because experiential research does not have the respectability of traditional paradigms, memory-workers' methods of analysis are sharply scrutinised, and need to prove themselves to be both transparent and convincing.

ANALYSIS

The following discussion illustrates some of the dilemmas and pitfalls of the analytical process experienced in my own use of memory-work in four projects undertaken from 1993 to the present. The projects were:

- (1) *Gender, Emotion and Learning*, with two groups of women,
- (2) *Why do so few women do Honours Economics?* with one group of women and two of men,
- (3) *Recounting Mathematical Experiences* with three mixed groups, and
- (4) *Succeeding as Postgraduate International Students* with one mixed group.

In each project, I followed the 'classic' steps for writing as summarised by Crawford *et al* (1992) but diverged from that model by placing less emphasis on joint theorising for three main reasons:

- (a) the participants and I did not share the same academic goals of thesis-writing or publication;
- (b) the length of time we spent together was short (from three to five meetings);
- (c) the groups were interested in the sharing and understanding of experiences, and less academically prepared for theorising at an abstract level.

The groups theorised at what Koutroulis (1993) has called the first level of analysis, conjecturing about some general principles of explanation of our experiences as we discussed issues before and after writing. On rare occasions the written narratives were rewritten, but less for analytical reasons than for following the rules. The second level of analysis has involved the drawing together of the work of more than one group on the same topic, or even on different topics, thus creating an overview that is not available to participants until later, if at all. The groups were therefore not involved in this second level of theorising, although they had the opportunity (albeit rarely taken up) to respond to my drafts. A third level of theorising has been the development of new theory emerging from the overview of the first project and its elaboration in subsequent projects.

The development of new theory emerged after the meetings of the two groups in my first project. At that stage I recognised the pervasiveness of shame in our memories of learning in schools (Ingleton 1995; Ingleton and O'Regan 1998), and began to theorise the gendering of shame and pride through socialisation and power relations in classrooms (Ingleton 1999). Shame and pride in learning have continued to be themes in my research, an interest which has emerged over time from varied teaching experiences - in schools, community education, adult literacy, post-secondary and tertiary education, and currently, learning and teaching support for university academics. In particular, I have long been curious about the emphasis on the rational intellect in educational research, when it seems obvious that social, cultural, and emotional factors can heavily outweigh one's intellectual capacity to learn.

Theorising links between emotion and learning is made complex by the difficulty of quantifying and verifying emotional factors, as recently pointed out by Meyer and Boulton-Lewis (1999) in their attempt to submit to complex statistical testing certain categories of conceptions of learning derived from a range of recent phenomenographic studies. They concluded that 'conceptions of learning ... are associated with culturally and experientially based factors [that need a] more sensitive appreciation of what has influenced [a particular conception of learning]' (1999: 301). It is clear that there is still a yawning gap between the conclusions derived from quantitative and qualitative research, despite attempts to strengthen the credibility of the latter's claims by association with the former. Memory-work has the potential to bridge the gap, but credibility is a sticking point as so many choices are available to the participants throughout the process. To publish in refereed journals seems to require the defense of the respectability and credibility of qualitative work. The following examples illustrate how the analytical processes I have undertaken in my second and third levels of analysis appear to diminish the outcomes despite the

potential of memory-work to reveal so much. To sort and discuss the data clearly, and to make a logical argument, I have taken two approaches, one based on the selection of themes from the data, the other using the data to illustrate a model of emotion and learning.

USE OF THEMES

In 1993, I formed two groups of women for the purpose of undertaking research for my Master's dissertation. One group comprised six professional peers invited to take part in my project. Not all were known to me or each other initially. The second group asked if they could participate. They consisted of five friends in a long-standing women's group of which I had been a member for twenty-four years. The groups met five and four times respectively over three months. We began with the general topic of 'emotional experiences in learning', and the discussions before writing raised a number of recurring themes such as:

self-identity formation through schooling;

authority figures as parents;

shame;

emotion in decision-making;

contradiction between achieving and being liked, and competing and being nice;

schooling as being more about relationships than knowledge.

An outcome of the first level of analysis by the groups, was our decision to write on the following topics:

Group One

Being chosen

Being included

Comprehending the rules

Group Two

Being exposed

Being different

Mother's expectations

Combining the work of the two groups in the final writing up for the dissertation, I decided to focus on the themes *shame; identity; moral decisions; time* (ie the power of memories over time to bring the past into the present). These themes formed the subheadings of the final analysis, with written narratives and excerpts from the discussions selected to illustrate the themes. Later, the same work was further refined for a paper published for a higher education audience (Ingleton 1995). I now used the following three themes as major headings: *shame; caring and competitiveness; compliance and rebellion*. Written narratives and discussions were selected to illustrate these themes and place them in a theoretical framework of the social construction of emotion and gender. I concluded with a discussion of implications for classroom practice.

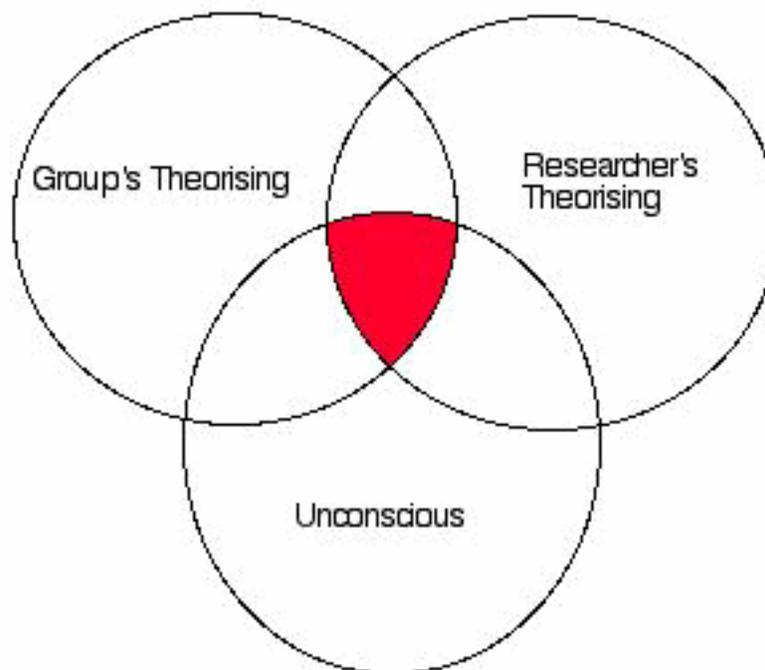
In the process of selection and thematisation, there has been a paring down and concentration of focus which has inevitably whittled down the voices of the groups. In moving from the very voices I wanted to represent; I perceive a loss of integrity in presenting the data through an attempt to thematise the analysis and condense the written output. This process raises a number of questions. By what choices do we censor, delete or approve for inclusion the stories, discussions, similarities, differences and conclusions from our shared work? Whose voices are heard or silenced in the final production of individual research outcomes from a collective process? The actual focus of the groups' discussions is swayed by many factors: the choice of trigger, sometimes the researcher's, sometimes the group's; by dominant and silent voices; by specific issues raised; and by judgments made by individuals or the group during discussion. In

the writing-up process, other voices and choices may be decisive – those of the writer, her supervisor or the thought of the potential examiner; those of referees and editors; and the influence of current popular discourses. Each memory-work project begins with a dynamic process in which individuals become a group generating unique and unexpected outcomes. Memories are stirred, experiences shared, insights gained and perceptions changed, long after the last meeting has been held. But when the project develops into a product for publication, some of these vital signs are lost.

THE UNCONSCIOUS

There is, however, a more intangible process at work in the choices and interpretations made in the process of memory-work analysis at all levels. The features that make the methodology so attractive – the access to experience through memories - are the very features that make transparency impossible. Just as disciplinary borders are crossed, so are the hidden borders between the conscious, the subconscious and unconscious. Throughout the process and analysis of memory-work, judgments are made beyond our level of conscious awareness. As we draw on memories, often re-experiencing the emotions they evoke, and select what we recall or are prepared to discuss, we are drawing on the sub-conscious and unconscious. I am suggesting that the small shared space where all three areas of the Venn diagram overlap could represent the full extent of our collective and transparent theorising.

Figure 1 The area of collective theorising

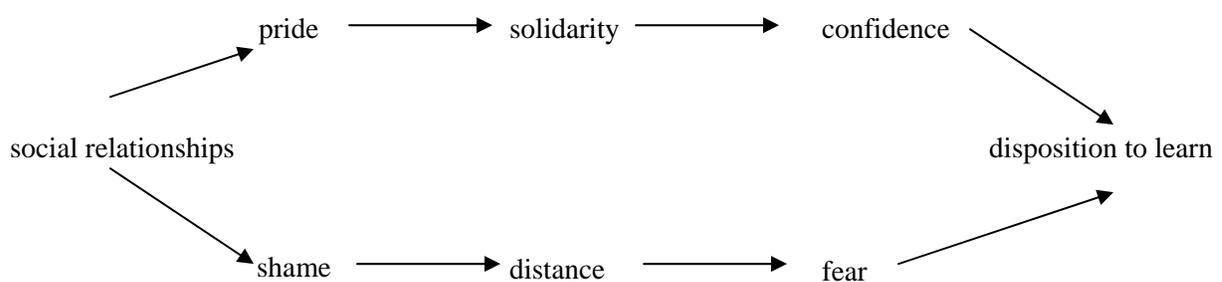


All sources are drawn upon but because not all are conscious, we may see or choose specific themes from the data due to our own significant or unresolved issues or unawareness. Through memories, we are working in dimensions of both time and consciousness. Even at the most analytical level, in our perception of what is significant, it is probable that some of the choices we make are neither transparent nor collective and must necessarily be tentative. How do we know when (not if) we are projecting onto the data our own issues? The methodology forces on us an honesty that is generally unquestioned in methodologies that are ostensibly objective and rigorous. It also requires memory-workers to explore how we are to deal with the levels of unawareness we inevitably bring to interpretation and analysis both as we work collectively and as we present our work to the academic world.

USE OF A MODEL

To minimise the apparent haphazardness of choice and interpretation I introduced a model of emotion and learning (Ingleton 1998, 2000). The development of new theory began well after the meetings of the two groups in my first project (Emotion and Learning) were over. The pervasiveness of shame in the memories of learning in schools was outstanding. Of forty-one memories of emotion in learning situations in the classroom, thirty-nine included the expression of emotions ranging from embarrassment to utter shame (Ingleton 1995). I theorised the gendering of shame and pride through socialisation within the power relations in the classroom. Building on Salzberger-Wittenberg's observations of inservice teachers' reactions to being in her classroom, (Salzberger-Wittenberg 1983), and theories of emotion, (for example Barbalet, 1998; Kitayama, 1994; Scheff, 1997) I focused on the relationship between pride, shame and learning, incorporating the place of pride and shame in developing self-identity as a learner, illustrated as follows:

Figure 2 Emotion and learning



The model became the theoretical basis for the analysis of the project, 'Recounting Mathematical Experiences' (Ingleton and O'Regan 1998). The feminist, social constructionist and critical

theoretical perspectives I was engaged in suggested that analysis of data ‘draw heavily on the language of the persons studied [and that] the language practices and cultural practices of the self and of relationship’ may be examined through written narratives (Reinharz 1983: 183). To create a transparent means of analysis, I used the following headings loosely based on Fairclough’s construct of Discourse Analysis (1989:17):

description: how vocabulary and grammar are used to represent the writer’s experience;

interpretation: how the activity, topic and purpose in the written narrative describe the subjects of the story and their relationships;

explanation: how social relationships and practices produce confidence and fear, based on the model of emotion and learning described in Figure 1.

The analysis focused on how the socio-cultural contexts of the broader society, the institutional setting and the situational setting within that, can affect emotional processes in specific learning situations, in this case the learning of mathematics. The analysis was placed within a theoretical framework of emotion and identity formation in instances of mathematics learning. I selected written narratives that illustrated the theory as presented in the model in Figure 1, and analysed each written narrative with reference to the Fairclough structure, as indicated below.

This narrative is written by Anne Marie (pseudonym) who has a BSc, and is undertaking a Graduate Diploma in Education in order to teach mathematics at secondary level.

Being encouraged in maths learning *Anne-Marie*

Anne-Marie was in year 3 at a very small Catholic Primary school. She was seven years old, nearly a year younger than the other students in Year Three. Mrs Elton, the teacher, had designed a star system for times tables - you got tested at saying a particular times table (of your choice) and if you said it correctly, a coloured star would go on the chart under your name. For every fifth time you said a table correctly you got a silver star, and then every tenth time a gold and some House points. At the end of the week, House points were tallied up and the leading House announced at assembly. Every student had pride in their House and every student wanted to win, so it was a great feeling for Anne Marie to be able to cheer when the rest of her House came top.

In the classroom, Anne-Marie practised her tables until she was confident at saying them with no mistakes and volunteered to be tested on them (this was the normal procedure). Butterflies would creep into her stomach and nervousness swept over her as she walked to the front of the class. The rest of the class were not interested in what Anne Marie was doing or whether Anne Marie passed, because they were preparing for their test.

Once at the teacher's desk, Mrs Elton would ask Anne-Marie what table she was going to do today.

'Fours', Anne-Marie answered on this particular day. She'd been home the night before and interrupted her Mum's bath to be tested, and felt confident, except for the butterflies!

'OK, off you go', said Mrs Elton.

'Once four is four ... ,' recited Anne-Marie and got them all correct despite the shaky voice.

'Excellent, Anne-Marie!' exclaimed Mrs Elton. The praise brought a huge smile to Anne Marie's face and she beamed as the star was put up against her name.

A number of social practices were identified and discussed in the memory-work group:

- (1) elementary schooling in the Catholic system;
- (2) the primacy of mathematics teaching in the curriculum;
- (3) the competitive House system;
- (4) a star reward system for rote learning;
- (5) the practice of teaching numeracy;
- (6) student-teacher relationships.

Interpretation focused on the extent to which learning was in Anne-Marie's control, and the emotionally charged nature of her learning and testing through the emotive language, for example: 'Butterflies would creep into her stomach and nervousness swept over her'. Explanation drew links between the social organisation of the school, the House system, the classroom, the teaching practices, and the family, and how the individual was placed in a learning climate of potential pride or shame through the weekly, if not daily practices of winning and losing. A broad conclusion posed the constant risk of being exposed, of being right or wrong in front of the teacher and the whole class. The risks are 'ever-present in the classroom, but perhaps never as frequently as in mathematics classes, where one can be judged right or wrong every step of the way' (Ingleton and O'Regan 1998). Despite my seemingly transparent approach to analysis, a critical friend and colleague responded to a draft with, 'The principles of analysis are not made clear'; 'the issue of transparency in analysis is pressing'; 'seems to be impressionistic and rather opaque analysis'. And from a referee: 'The analysis needs to be deeper and more insightful ... [The authors] do not represent the depth of the potential analysis offered through the method and the theory.' The critical friend is a linguist and the referee a mathematician.

CROSSING DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES

Memory-work has taken me into the fields of education in mathematics and economics. One of the problems here is the crossing of disciplinary boundaries with their different research protocols. The methodology of memory-work is unrecognisable to some disciplines, and assaults those based on quantitative enquiry. In the discipline of economics for example, qualitative research is gaining some acceptance, but qualitative methods are still expected to be described in terms that are familiar to quantitative readers. For publication in an economics journal (Ingleton 1997), my method of selection of memory-work groups had to be described as 'an opportunistic rather than a random statistical sample' which epitomises the differing epistemologies of research traditions. And yet, as a critical researcher, I want my findings to be made known in a

range of disciplines with the intention of encouraging pedagogical change. As I also work with concepts and literatures in education, and social psychology and psycho-analytic, psycholinguistic, feminist and social-constructionist theories, many borders are crossed and depth is consequently lacking.

CONCLUSION

As with other qualitative methodologies, integrity is open to scrutiny at each stage of the analytical process in the new ground that is continually broken in the bridging of experience and theory. The exciting potential of memory-work to explore and to validate experience as a legitimate site for research beckons us to create ways to communicate our findings with confidence and clarity. There are strong theoretical underpinnings for theorising from experience, and many means to the analytical process. While we can explain and justify a range of approaches, such as using themes, models and discourse analysis, we will always have to work at communicating why we make our choices, for what purposes, and whose interests they might be serving. Much of the subjectivity of the process may be beyond reasoning because of our levels of unawareness, making analysis in memory-work complex and always open to question. How well we can clarify exactly what we are doing, and how successfully we can create acceptable tools of analysis for those outside our methodology, are challenges for further research and discussion among memory-workers.

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