IF PARTIES ARE BATTLES, WHAT ARE WE?

PRACTISING COLLECTIVITY IN MEMORY-WORK

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ABSTRACT

Memory-work was original devised by Haug and others (1987) who explained the method to an English speaking audience in *Female Sexualization: A collective work of memory*. In this paper, I consider the rationale for and the explanation of the "collective subject" in memory-work. Undertaking memory-work can involve a tension between exploring and eliding difference in the group. However, the implications of Haug's particular understanding of collective subjectivity are an overemphasis on identifying commonalties between group members' positions and ideas, at the expense of interrogating difference. Adopting Haug's approach to collective subjectivity entails the risk that persistent divisions between people will be understood in terms of individual ignorance or personal instabilities. I propose an anti-foundational understanding of collective subjectivity (Butler, 1992). This doesn't mean negating the importance of collectivity. Neither does it mean assuming that it will emerge, nor explaining its absence in terms of the group's or an individual's failure. Rather, an anti-foundationalist approach involves questioning the emergence of collective subjectivity. I conclude by reflecting on the implications of my discussion of collective subjectivity for analysing the discussions produced in memory-work.

INTRODUCTION: WHY TALK ABOUT WE?

In a letter to her friend and benefactor, Evelyn Scott, Jean Rhys wrote:

> *Parties are battles (most parties), a conversation is a duel (often)... I admit that the properly adapted human being enjoys the battle, I even admit that it can all be done charmingly wittily and with an air ... But I do not admit that because I am badly adapted to these encounters I'm therefore a mental deformity ...*
> (1984, p. 30-1)

Evelyn Scott had organised a party for Jean when she visited New York. The evening was spectacularly unsuccessful. In Jean's own words, she "went off the deep end" when faced with another guest's unnecessary dissension. Jean writes to Evelyn apologising - "I should have waited till I got home like nice people do" (p. 31).

It sounds like the episode Rhys is writing about was a lot worse than anything that has occurred in the memory-work groups I have organised and participated in. But as I've spent hours listening to and transcribing tapes of group discussions, and pouring over the transcripts, I have, on occasion wondered what people felt like or said or thought about when they got home.

It may already be evident that the work I am discussing here, diverges both from the memory-work originally devised by Haug and others (1987) for the purposes of researching female sexualisation, and from the way in which memory-work was taken up and used by Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault & Benton (1992) to study the social construction of emotion (see Johnston

[this collection] for an interesting discussion on the need to take account of the political background of Haug et al.'s original work, and the ways in which the political context of each new memory-work group diverge from this) . I am basing my reflections in this paper on two projects. One involved researching people's experiences of adhering to complicated medical regimens for the purposes of treating HIV (Stephenson 2000), and the other was my doctoral work on women's experiences of conversation (Stephenson 1997; Stephenson, 2001a; Stephenson 2001b). In both cases any sense of undertaking "collective research or analysis" was confined to the group discussions of the memories, because I organised the groups and undertook to further analyse the memories and the group discussions and write-up the research (see Koutroulis [this collection] for an account of some of the particular difficulties "solo" memory-work researchers can encounter). It is an odd thing analysing a conversation you have been a part of. One of the questions it has raised for me was whether the divisions in the groups were deeper than they had felt like, to me at any rate, at the time. Maybe in my eagerness to understand what was being said, or to get a word in edgeways, I had devoted less thought to what was being "done charmingly wittily and with an air". Although I would argue that this is an issue for memory-work groups which do undertake collective research, perhaps the fact that I was analysing the memories and discussions on my own, as opposed to collective analysis, has enabled me to revisit this question of division in memory-work groups.

INTERPRETATION AS A WAY OF UNDERSTANDING OR ELIDING DIFFERENCE?

Rather than go into the details of any particular group divisions which have arisen in the research I have undertaken, in this paper I want to consider the implications of differences within memory-work groups more generally. But it may help to ground what I'm saying if I give an example of a particular disagreement, described by the group which devised and instigated the use of memory-work as a method of undertaking politically charged social research (i.e., Andresen, Bünz-Elfferding, Haug, Hauser, Lang, Laudan, Lüdenabbm Neur, Nemitz, Neihoff, Prinz, Räthzel, Scheu and Thomas). What follows will illustrate a tension between exploring and eliding difference in memory-groups. In a chapter about "the slavegirl project", Andresen, Haug, Hauser and Niehoff describe how the group had been writing about the objectification and commodification of women's bodies. They discussed the skill women (are expected to) develop - an ability to tread a fine line between being sexual beings but not "going too far". They decided to write about this issue. One woman returned to the group with a glowing description of herself working in a bar on a hot day, she was the only woman in the company of male customers. She decided to play some music and started to dance. In the written memory, she describes herself as a sexualised barmaid, dancing "excessively, ecstatically", happily ignoring (or bearing) the way "all eyes. were turned in [her] direction" (1987, p. 149-50).

On first reading of the memory, the other group members were appalled. Although described in terms of pleasure, the incident resonated with other women's ideas and experiences of objectification; it could be read as an unambiguous account of going too far. But the author refused to subscribe to such an interpretation, insisting that her memory was about the pleasures of transgression. Her position was not dismissed outright by the rest of the group. Rather, it lead to a discussion about how, like Freud, they had thought that "[t]he liberty of the individual is no gift from civilisation. It was greatest before there was any civilisation" (quoted in Haug, 1987, p. 151). The group could then understand the author's interpretation in the light of the connection between individual freedom and transgression. Once they had articulated a notion of sexual freedom in these Freudian terms, the group could question it, and so question the author's

interpretation of her memory. Instead of thinking of freedom, or sexual freedom, as something which we once possessed and have lost, they discussed the importance of the relationship between experiences of freedom and "our knowledge of a system of rules by which we are enabled to move within particular limits" (p. 152). The problem with the author's initial interpretation was then cast as a problem with the way in which freedom is represented as isolation.

I wonder what the author of the barmaid story thought of this new reading. If she had any lingering attachment to her first interpretation, it is subsumed by the use of "we" in the written account of the group discussion. Maybe she simply accepted the new reading of her story, or maybe she felt that she had shared a pleasurable moment without expecting to have it returned as a deeply problematic moment, or maybe she felt misunderstood, or worse. We can't be sure, but reading the account of this collective analysis raises questions about how we is understood and practiced in memory-work.

Haug writes that "[t]he aim of the group discussion [is] to uncover new linkages, and to give encouragement to the writer to remember more precisely" (1987, p. 56). We might consider that the group's role in interpreting the memory is to undertake "the slow exposure of the meaning hidden" in the memory (Foucault, quoted in Scott, p. 411). If so, it would follow that we can approach the above discussion, about the need to rethink any notion of freedom as a state of isolation, asking whether it gave the author the adequate prompts to remember more precisely. However, if we were to take into account the fact that interpretation can be "the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend [humanity] to a new will, to force its participation in a different game", then the political, as well as theoretical, importance of considering difference within the group is immediately evident (Foucault, quoted in Scott, p. 411).

THE SUBJECT OF MEMORY-WORK, GIVEN OR CONSTRUCTED?

I am interested in using memory-work as a method for developing an understanding of the psychological aspects of experience. If we take it that "[i]t is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" (Scott, 1993, p. 401), there is a risk that psychological research on the individual will end up contributing to an image of the person as fixed, unitary, bounded, self-knowing - i.e. a phallocentric subject (cf. Shotter, 1984; Irigaray 1985). The strength of memory-work is that it can be a means of subverting phallocentric subjectivity to the extent that the process avoids casting experience as a fixed property of the individual (Stephenson, Kippax & Crawford, 1996). Furthermore, memory-work can offer a way of thinking about how we become who we are which doesn't reify subjectivity in the process. By that I mean that the method allows researchers to maintain a focus on becoming - or unbecoming (Michaels, 1990) - as opposed to being. In memory-work, instead of taking experiences as evidence, experience becomes the thing to be investigated - "that which we seek to explain, that about which knowledge is produced" (Scott, 1993, p. 401).

In developing memory-work, Haug et al. found that "[e]ven the notions of 'subject' and 'object' had to be problematised" in order to avoid casting them "as fixed and knowable entities neither of which is subject to change" (1987, p. 35). From a methodological perspective, one way in which taking part in memory-work challenges the rational, unitary, fixed subject is that a co-researcher is not automatically credited with the ultimate powers of interpretation over her own experience. This is evident in the example given above, of the "slavegirl" discussion.

Furthermore, experience isn't thought to *make* the subject in any kind of deterministic, linear fashion. Haug explicitly opposes such a view when she argues that

> [t]o view childhood and adolescence simply as causal phases of today's person is to assume that actions follow one another logically, that adult human beings are more or less contained within children ... Diversity is compressed and presented as unified evidence that we have "always" been hindered in our development by this or that person, this or that circumstance. (1987, p. 46-7)

This quote captures a lot: as well as suggesting that biography can render experience seamless, here Haug describes a non-unitary, fluid approach to subjectivity, emphasising the importance of trying to engage with diversity within experience.

But sometimes another notion of the subject is evident in Haug et al's writing. Talking about written memories, Haug repeatedly argues that they have the potential to reveal "the ways in which individuals construct themselves into existing structures" (1987, p. 41 and again on p.52). This suggests that the subject exists (in some sense) *before* the process of its social production. That is, the subject is being cast as ontologically prior to her own construction (Grosz, 1994). Is pointing to this being petty? Perhaps this kind of description is simply a result of using a grammatical expression that is difficult to avoid, or maybe something got lost in translation. But, reading on suggests otherwise. In her chapter on "Sexuality and Power", Hauser (in Haug et al, 1987) argues that the problem with refusing to grant the subject ontologically prior status (i.e., a discursive or Foucauldian approach to subjectivity) is that "it involves negating the importance of the" subject (p. 204). When she writes, "Foucault's major flaw is the absence of subjects" (p. 205) she is concerned with the question of agency, figured as an individual capacity. I would agree that *some* work being done under the rubric of Foucault/discourse analysis does little in the way of helping us to understand the subject as anything other than an end product of discourse. But this problem is by no means unique to a researcher's drawing on discourse (for example, see Watson's (1998) use of grounded theory to approach men's ideas of health, in which men's interpretations of their experiences are implicitly characterised as determined by discourse.) However, we need to consider both the challenge posed by Foucauldian approaches to the role of the subject and its implications for empirical research on experience. It is worth making a distinction between throwing the baby out with the bath water (Hauser's criticism, in Haug et al, 1987) and asking how come it is always a *baby* in the bath water.

Questioning the giveness of the subject doesn't have to amount to "negating" the subject. It can involve taking a step back, and asking what is at stake when we invoke the subject as a starting point. In taking this latter position, Butler writes that:

> To refuse to assume … a notion of the subject from the start is not the same as negating or dispensing with such a notion altogether; on the contrary, it is to ask after the process of its construction *and the political meaning and consequentially of taking the subject as a requirement or presupposition of theory*. (1992, p. 4, emphasis added)

If I turn to the practice of memory-work, asking "what is at stake when memory-workers take the subject as a given?", at least one very good answer springs to mind. Such invocations function to allow memory-workers to claim privileged self-knowledge and enable group members to resist others' interpretations of their writing. Discussing the practice of memory-work, Haug et al. stress that, although an author isn't *necessarily* best placed to interpret his or her own memory,

bringing the memory to the group isn't simply a matter of accepting any interpretation offered by the others (the above example of their work does not serve as an example of this). So although memory-work subverts the idea that "I" can know myself" (e.g. through the practices of writing in the third person and taking the gaps and absences in memories as objects for analysis) it simultaneously allows the claim "I know myself". In thinking about the practice of shifting between these two positions, Stephenson, Kippax & Crawford (1996) talked about the latter move in terms of "biographising", and argued that rather than interrupt the "pure" practice of memory-work, the tension created by the way memory-workers move between positions actually fuels the group discussion. So, there are at least two answers to my question, "what is at stake when Haug et al. refuse critiques of ontologically given subjectivity?" Firstly, there is a need for memory-workers to be able to defend themselves, and secondly, the tension between different notions of "the author" produces useful discussion in the groups. The situation is more complicated when we turn to practicing we in memory-work groups - that is, collective subjectivity.

COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITY - ELIDING DIFFERENCE

Being part of a group or collective is never a straightforward affair. How then, do we experience, talk about and theorise the collectivity of memory-work groups? Its importance is underscored by Haug. Memory-work involves analysing the workings of oppressive "existing structures", looking at experience to reveal

> the ways in which individuals construct themselves into existing structures, and are thereby themselves formed; the way in which they *reconstruct* social structures; the points at which *change* is possible, the points where our *chains* chafe most, the points where *accommodations* have been made. (Haug, 1987, p. 41, emphasis added)

The point of memory-work, is to find the times and places where there may be, or have been, some weaknesses or flexibility in these structures, something we have overlooked or have not been able to see previously. Ultimately, the aim is social change. Writing about the outcome of memory-work, Haug states that: "In collective studies of the same object in different accounts, there evolved a collective subject capable of resisting some of the harmful consequences of traditional divisions of labour" (1987, p. 58). Change is brought about by "a collective subject", the we of memory-work. By arriving at shared understandings of the ways social structures operate and are appropriated, Haug argues, memory-work enabled the group to "resist some harmful consequences". This collective resistance is possible because, although the details of people's memories may be very different, they reveal commonalties between the experiences of group members, and these commonalties are potentially generalisable. On the latter point, Haug argues that "the range of activities accessible to any given individual can be examined as generally available choices" (p. 45). Memory-work is portrayed as a blurring of individual "boundaries":

> Our work begins … from the premise that the differences in our various areas of experience will have produced and will carry with them specific and distinct boundaries and separations, and that our collective work will make it possible to soften the edges of those rigid boundaries (p. 58)

In the memory-work groups in which I have participated, I think it would be fair to say that most people did feel like they experienced something like this from time to time. So when Haug et al. talk about the way in which memory work can produce a "collective subject", I feel like I have some sense of what is meant. It is one of the reasons why people enjoy and continue to participate in the meetings (and it is not exclusive to memory-work). But it certainly cannot be taken it for granted. It might be argued that my caution in talking about collective subjectivity arises from the fact that the work I am discussing here wasn't "true" memory-work. When memory-work is undertaken with one person in a chief investigator type role possibilities for collectivity are limited from the outset, hence the difference between the other people's roles and my own could have stymied the emergence of collective subjectivity. But this explanation stops us from fully considering what is meant by collective subjectivity, and *how* it emerges.

I do not want to give the impression that Haug et al. equate collectivity with consensus. For example, Haug describes discussions as "vehement" (p. 58), and stresses how the process of rewriting is supposed to, among other things, provide an opportunity to better explore and establish differences between group members - "by then writing against the interpretations of others, [we] could combine a process of self-examination with the first faltering steps to make [ourselves] comprehensible to others" (p. 57). But rewriting can be problematic, as Crawford et al. (1992) discuss. They mention that they found rewriting memories particularly difficult and unproductive (1992, p. 50), reasoning that their experience of rewriting diverged from that of Haug et al. because they had chosen to write early memories. In the group I undertook for studying women's experiences of conversation we also found it difficult to rewrite memories, but independently of our age at the time of the events (in the second project, I discussed rewriting memories but did not ask participants to do it). We did give it a go a few times. But each time I felt uncomfortable with the level of "encouragement" required on my part to get, otherwise extremely keen, memory-workers to produce rewritten memories. And I had to admit that I was finding it no easier than anyone else.

Again, it might be argued that the reluctance in this particular group sprung from the fact that we were undertaking a highly adulterated version of memory-work. We did not come together as a group out of a shared interest in undertaking all stages of the research on women and conversation. But more importantly, and this has implications for "purer" versions of memory-work, we did not agree on issues which loomed large in the background of the research. In this group there were different perspectives on what "feminism" was or should be, and on the relationship between social practice, subjectivity and change. These differences meant that the frameworks for our discussions were contested. Whilst such differences generally resulted in good discussions, generating rich material for further analysis, when it came to rewriting the memories the question was put: "yes, but what are we doing it *for*"? Haug et al. see rewriting as an opportunity to clear up misunderstandings, and to integrate anything learned during the group discussions about the limitations, gaps and ideologically bound nature of the first versions of the memories. I was discouraged to find that our attempts to rewrite memories often resulted in the previously vague now manifesting itself as the totally unintelligible. Were we using this part of the process as a way of entrenching ourselves in our initial positions, of defending against things which had been raised in the discussion? If so, instead of using the group discussions "as a means of transforming what had been up to then [our] forms of communicative incompetence", we could have been signalling that our apparent inability to make some aspects of our experience understandable to others was actually a way of making some aspects of our experience very clear (Haug, 1987, p. 57): "my interpretation matters to me".

This brings me back to the idea of collective subjectivity described in *Female Sexualisation: A collective work of memory*. I have already mentioned that the discussion of rewriting memories suggests that Haug et al. do not see memory-work as necessarily entailing agreement. Or do they? I want to return to the point of memory-work, as articulated by Haug: "In collective studies of the same object in different accounts, there evolved a collective subject capable of resisting some of the harmful consequences of traditional divisions of labour" (1987, p. 58). Here, talk of potential collectivity shifts to actuality, as members of the memory-work group are cast as a "collective subject". Were all the memory-workers in the project equally enabled to resist the same specific divisions of labour as a result of the meetings, we might wonder, or did some women find themselves in the position of having their resistance strategies criticised and invalidated? The account of the discussion about the barmaid memory in *Female Sexualization*, suggests that the question of difference within and between co-researchers is obscured when Haug et al. discuss the *outcome* of the process in terms of collective subjectivity.

Although Haug et al. avoid positioning experience as determining unitary subjectivity, the way in which differences between group members are obscured suggests that the process of memory-work is being figured *as evidence* of "collective subjectivity". When Haug argues that the experience of participating "[i]n collective studies of the same object in different accounts" results in shared, collective resistance strategies she seems to be casting this process as relatively unproblematic. What is being pared away in order for these collective strategies to emerge, I wonder? How easily do the different meanings memory-workers' attribute to experience collapse into the emergence of collective subjectivity? When "heated discussion" proves too difficult, rather than see this as an occasion to reflect on the many difficulties entailed in the process, Haug resorts to talk of "personal stability" – and by implication, instability (p. 57).

COLLECTIVE SUBJECTIVITY - FOREGROUNDING DIFFERENCE

In Haug et al's writing, collective subjectivity plays a crucial role; it figures as a foundation for the development of new understandings, resistance and social change. Experience and subjectivity are seen as socially produced. But if we refuse subjectivity - including collective subjectivity - as a starting point, seeing it as discursively produced, the implications are quite different. Spivak contends: "knowledge is made possible and sustained by irreducible difference, not identity" (quoted in Rooney, 1994, p. 161). It is not only what we identify as common and shared that gives rise to new understandings, but our attempts to recognise differences between us - as difference. This emphasises the need to be wary of the research methods which focus on the consolidation of identity categories, the consolidation of collective subjectivity, at the expense of interrogating difference (cf., Scott, 1993; Butler, 1990, 1992, 1994). What is implied is an alternate way of thinking the connection between memory-work, collective subjectivity and the political: change is made possible when, instead of shoring up an *a priori* notion of collective subjectivity, we seek to question it. This latter approach involves taking the risk that the outcome may be a different version of collective subjectivity than the one with which we started. What we share is constructed (as Haug et al. argue), but it is also possible to use memory-work as a means for investigating how our differences are also constructed. The problem with work which celebrates collective subjectivity is that, instead of helping us to understand difference, difference is explained away (cf. Scott, 1993, p. 399). Whilst both approaches seek strategies for social change, when collective subjectivity is treated as something which emerges unproblematically from memory-work, we risk:

locat[ing] resistance outside of its discursive construction and reif[ing] agency as an inherent attribute of individuals, thus decontextualising it ... experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring *how* difference is established, *how* it operates, how and in *what* ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world. (Scott, 1993, p. 399-400)

Instead of thinking of exercising agency and resistance as capacities with which individuals are endowed, if only we can identify the correct action or strategies to express them, now the emphasis is on trying to understand the discursive construction of agency and resistance. This is not achieved by focusing on the identification of commonalties, nor by engaging in the development of collective subjectivity at the expense of questioning the construction of "personal instability". Although this poses quite a challenge to memory-work, it is one which I think it is possible to meet.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RETHINKING MEMORY-WORK

In Haug et al's representation of memory-work, "collective subjectivity" becomes something which will emerge, if only people's "personal instabilities" can be adequately managed. Resistance, and social change, follow on from the identification of common experience and its root cause in social structures. Although the idea of subjectivity as unitary is explicitly criticised, by default, collective subjectivity is thought as unitary. It is worth revisiting the dangers of fixing on the "right" articulation of commonalities between the memories, the "right" interpretation of the memories. Interpretation can be "the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend [memory-workers] to a new will, to force [our] participation in a different game" (Foucault, quoted in Scott, p. 411). This does not mean that we have to end up in a relativist position where we can't say anything about memories which afford different readings.

Relativist positions repeat the problem of essentialist and universalist positions they claim to critique. That is, without any understanding of the situatedness of an interpretation, it is impossible to evaluate the importance of any engagement with or criticism of that interpretation; "relativism and totalization are both 'god-tricks' promising vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully" (Haraway, 1991, p. X). How then might we approach the multiple interpretations possible of any one memory brought to a memory-work group in such a way as to eschew relativism? Any knowledge that we can have of the memories needs to be understood as partial and situated (Haraway, 1991). When we seek knowledge with the aim of shoring up an identity position (like that of collective subject) we occlude partiality. The possibility of going beyond relativism lies in the *partial connections* that can be made between the locatedness of knowers (e.g., of different group members or between readers and writers). This does not simply mean identifying a particular, singular location of each group member. It does involve adopting a "mobile positioning" in the attempt to understand the situatedness of different interpretations, an understanding which will always be incomplete (Haraway, 1991; Stephenson & Kippax, 1999). Such partial understanding can be a means of recognising the existence of difference in the first instance, and may become a way of translating between different locations and so developing knowledge of the world (although this may not always be possible); "partiality, not universality, is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims" (Haraway, 1991, p. X).

Whilst Haug et al's failure to consider difference in the way they theorise "collective subjectivity" remains a problem, the *practice* of memory-work need not involve the assumption that collectivity will necessarily emerge as long as the method is applied appropriately by those in the right frame of mind. If we take a different starting point for memory-work, arguing that the processes and relations through which subjects are continually being constituted are ones of differentiation and exclusion, then competing interpretations of a memory need not be seen as a threat to the outcome of the group. I will finish with three (related) alternatives for thinking about the analysis of memory-work. In the first, the job of the researcher is not necessarily to decide on the best interpretation of a memory, in his or her view (although, as a reader, I'd always like to know). The idea is to approach the analysis phase as an opportunity to foreground differences, where they have emerged in the group, and to try to understand the discursive constitution of these different positions, identifying competing discourses. In one sense, this is really just re-framing memory-work as described by Haug, with an emphasis on the importance of understanding tension and conflict instead of explaining it away. The second option is an extension of the first. We can approach memory-work as a means of analysing "the position of situatedness of subjects to the knowledge they produce, and the effects of difference on knowledge" (Scott, 1993, p. 403). Both the memories and the interpretations people offer of them can be thought in terms of this relationship between the subject's situatedness and the knowledge she produces (Waldby, 1995). It brings in the possibility that the situatedness of different group members could be such that there may be some knowledge which they cannot share. But now that I've mentioned individual subjects as opposed to "the group" or the collective subject, I want to raise a third possibility, in the form of a question which may be worth revisiting. If we continue to treat experience or psychology simply as the effect of repressive mechanisms, or even as the effect of discourses, maybe we overlook an important site for understanding our situatedness. As Biddy Martin puts it:

> I have become more convinced that too thorough an evacuation of interiority, too total a collapse of the boundaries between public and private, and too exclusive an understanding of psychic life as the effect of normalization can impoverish the language we have available for thinking about selves and relationships, even as they apparently enrich our vocabularies for thinking about social construction. (1994, p. 106)

What is being introduced here is the interiority, the depth aspects of the psychologies of individual memory-workers. Is it worth, at any stage in the process of memory-work, thinking about individual group members as individuals? This question I will leave unanswered, but to return to the first, "If parties are Battles what are We?", I can say that the we (i.e. those in the groups in which I have been involved) are a diverse group of people who exercise agency and resistance in different ways, who find commonalties as well as differences between us, and will no doubt continue to do so.

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