

TOO PAINFUL TO REMEMBER: MEMORY-WORK AS A METHOD TO EXPLORE SENSITIVE RESEARCH TOPICS

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ABSTRACT

Qualitative researchers, by the very nature of their endeavours, are likely to undertake projects which involve exploration into the intimate crevices of people's lives. Feminist research further plumbs the depths of such exploration into the lives and experiences of women. Frequently such research will involve topics considered to be of a sensitive nature because of the threats that they pose to the research participants' emotional, spiritual and psychic integrity. Whereas one of the basic tenets of feminist research is that the participants should not be exposed to harm, it should follow that a feminist research method such as memory-work must not be deleterious.

While the focus of this paper is a discussion of some of the issues which I uncovered during the use of memory-work into the social construction of women's sexuality in the 1960s, I also refer to issues which arose during my initial attempt to use memory-work as part of a larger project which investigated the meaning of losing a baby to adoption (Farrar, 2000).

INTRODUCTION

The German socialist feminist, Frigga Haug (1987), who devised the method, has described 'memory-work' as a "bridge to span the gap between 'theory' and 'experience'". In this paper I do not propose to explain the method of memory-work in detail because this has been presented elsewhere (Small this collection). Instead, I shall provide a brief description of the nature of memories and memory-work as my co-researchers and I understood them, followed by an example of memory-work in process. Then, I will define what constitutes a "sensitive research topic", and address the issues that arose from that definition within the context of this research, namely the construction of women's sexuality during the 1960s from memories. Finally, I will discuss the appropriateness of memory-work as a method for researching sensitive topics, and conclude with comments about the use of memory-work in this particular research.

THE NATURE OF MEMORIES AND MEMORY-WORK

At any point in time, reflection on what has happened before is a memory. Some memories are more significant than; some are too painful to bring into consciousness; others have become submerged under layers of experience. What seems common to memories is that their nature changes over time and with revisiting. According to Frigga Haug (1992), memories are characterised by contradictions and silences as what I have called the 'past-self' engages with the 'present-self'. Contradictions serve the purpose of "non-recognition, denial and repression" of past experiences which memories may invoke, while silence is "another way of coming to terms with the unacceptable" (Haug, 1992: 22-23).

Memory-work differs from the usual modes of social-scientific inquiry (and must *not* be confused with the discredited therapy which recovers repressed memories) in that it explores "the ways in which individuals construct themselves into existing social relations, thereby themselves reproducing a social formation" (Haug, 1987:35). This is achieved through the recording and analysis of personal memories and stories within a feminist context. In justifying the place of memory-work as a social scientific method, Haug (1987:35) has described memories as "the empirical element" of research, and has demanded "the right to use experience as a basis of knowledge".

Continuing in this vein, Haug (1987:44) asserted that if "a given experience is possible, it is also subject to universalisation"; that is, what we perceive as individual and personal modes of adaptation to social structures are also potentially generalisable. It is only within the broader collective of social structure that individual experience is possible. Memory-work allows individuals to test the taken-for-granted uniqueness of their experiences through confrontation, challenging and common sense making.

Nor is memory-work simply another method of data collection. Based on the recommendations of Haug (1987), the method of memory-work follows specific guidelines (Crawford et al, 1992:44) for a process consisting of three iterative and reflexive phases of writing and rewriting memories, interspersed with collective theorising.

The main theoretical concepts on which memory-work rests are as follows: first, that the social construction of self depends on the recall of subjectively significant events, and how we construct those events in memories influences our sense of self. Secondly, the notion of a collective and an appreciation and acceptance of its dynamics is an integral part of memory-work. To this end, the memories are written in the third person as the collective assumes ownership of each memory during the process of theorising.

The third main theoretical underpinning of memory-work is the analysis of written texts and recorded / transcribed narratives, although this differs from the usual hermeneutic method in that "the collective process does not give priority to the interpretation of an 'expert' (as) new understandings and meanings are reached by the subjects, the co-researchers themselves " (Crawford et al, 1992:54). Rather memory-work shares some commonalities with postmodernism in the deconstruction of the memories, a point also noted by Gannon (2000).

Memory-work can be found embedded in the metaphor of material or cloth, of women weaving their relationships and re-weaving their lives, and of layering the garments of experiences. Memory-work is not only **(con)textual**, that is, found literally 'with text' or written narrative. but also occurs within a specific **context** which derives from the Latin *contexere* "to weave material". As Haug (1987:49) says,

"in making conscious the material out of which we have made ourselves...we are creating conditions for a more resilient fabric for our lives".

Through sharing memories collectively research participants are able to rework their own individually, and find meaning in what may have been either incomprehensible or taken-for-

granted. The richness of experience retold through memory-work is further enhanced by such collective participation to derive meaning, as previously inexplicable events unfold. This is, literally, a 'common sense'.

Other research projects (Davies, 1992; Davies & Harre, 1991; Stanley, 1993) which use the principles of memory-work without following the formal method have been encouraging and have provided some alternative ways of approaching the use of memories as data. In addition, some researchers have referred to memory-work by other names, for example, collective biography (Gannon, 2000). Notwithstanding differences in nomenclature, most research which employs memory-work or its analogues has investigated topics (such as 'emotion') which could be described as sensitive.

The aim and features of memory-work are such that the method could be suited well to the investigation of sensitive topics. By giving voice to the participants and breaking down the divisions between subject and object, researcher and researched, in an environment of egalitarianism, memory-work can provide an opportunity for women to confront and challenge sensitive issues.

MEMORY-WORK IN PROCESS

My main use of memory-work was in researching the sensitive topic of women's sexuality in the 1960s. I employed memory-work in order to bridge the gap between the representations of women's sexuality in the 1960s in discourses of popular culture (Breines, 1992; Douglas, 1995; Farrar, 2000), and the construction of sexuality by the women themselves through their memories of the lived experience. Drawing on the work of Haug (1987; 1992), this research constructed women's sexuality in the 1960s from the collective's memories of their sexual encounters, contraception and teenage pregnancy. Some triggers used for the memories were: a first sexual experience, a particular sexual encounter, contraception, a pregnancy 'scare', a pregnancy experience, and knowledge of other girls' sexual activity including knowing about a girl who "got into trouble". With the subsequent rewriting of the memories, further elaboration on these themes occurred as the collective constructed its own meanings about the emergence of women's sexuality during the 1960s.

In this section I will examine the ways in which memory-work impacted on the women involved in the research process, namely the memory-work collective and the transcribers of the taped meetings.

THE MEMORY-WORK COLLECTIVE

The collective consisted of four friends, Bronwyn, Helen, Liz and Chris, all nurses, who had known each other, in various contexts since the 1960s. Three of them were aged 46, and one was 48. All had been married: two remained so and the other two were divorced. Two had been educated to university standard at post-graduate level, one was engaged in tertiary study and one was contemplating the prospect. All would consider that they had a feminist consciousness. Although they may have been representative of any group of middle-aged, middle-class women, they did not believe that they were typical, in much the same way that the memory-work collective described by Crawford et al (1992) felt isolated and marginalised from their academic colleagues in psychology.

Each member of the collective was given a copy of the instructions as outlined by Crawford et al (1992). The collective met in each other's houses at ten day intervals, sharing food and wine, and the conviviality of each other's friendship. It was important that the meetings were a choice, not a chore: that "it is fun" (Crawford et al, 1992:1).

Each member wrote her introductory memory and brought it to the first meeting where copies were distributed to the other group members. Initially, writing in the third person seems at odds with the emphasis on the subjective nature of memory-work. However, writing a memory in this way allows it to become the property of the collective thereby attempting to remove any threat to the individual member. In addition, this technique allows a detachment which helps to avoid justification of the experience.

The group discussed the written memories, the initial texts, which they had brought with them and agreed to reappraise them before the next meeting, thus writing new memories. The memory-work worksheet devised by Haug (in Schratz & Walker, 1995:46) was used to analyse the written memories. The meetings were taped and transcribed and each member received copies of the tapes, transcripts and subsequent analyses for verification of authenticity. What the memory-work collective hoped to achieve was "...perhaps a demand that we measure ourselves against those others, learn something new, uncover sex's secret traces, free ourselves of an enforced silence" (Haug, 1987:185).

The collective met over a period of one month. Consistent with the recursive process of memory-work, it was critical that the three phases were not seen by the collective as mutually exclusive or separate, and that the first and second phases continued reflexively until the third phase was reached. During the third phase, the material provided in the first and second phases was further reflected upon, examined and theorised in the group. We tried to make some sense out of our experiences by challenging previously taken-for-granted understandings. Themes were critically examined and the common sense understandings were appraised again as new understandings were reached. This, in turn, involved a re-examination of the initial analyses of the memories.

For the purpose of analysis, the memories were coded under headings used by the women themselves, derived from colloquialisms of the era. The reflexive voices of the women resonated in the discussion derived from the transcribed meetings. Through their collective analysis of the memories, greater insight into the construction of their sexuality as white, middle-class heterosexual women emerged. As the memory-work collective continued to meet, it was able to refine the method, incorporate those refinements into the emerging process, and analyse the collective's findings and theorisations about women's sexuality in the 1960s.

SENSITIVE RESEARCH TOPICS AND ISSUES FOR MEMORY-WORK

According to Renzetti and Lee (1993:6), research topics which might be considered sensitive have the following features. First, they intrude into some deeply personal and private experience. Second, the research might be concerned with deviance and social control. Third, the research topics might impinge on the vested interests of powerful people, or the exercise of coercion and domination. Finally, these authors contend, the research deals with things that are sacred to those

people being studied. I shall provide examples of each of these features and explain how the research participants dealt with them.

SOME “DEEPLY PERSONAL AND PRIVATE EXPERIENCE”

As the principal researcher, who knew the other members of the memory-work collective better than they knew each other, I was aware that our memories of the sensitive topic of women’s emerging sexuality during the 1960s might provoke discomfort and embarrassment. However feminist research is based on a trusting and egalitarian relationship among research participants and a commitment to non-exploitation of individuals or, in this case, their memories. As the principal researcher I also felt responsible for maintaining the equanimity and integrity of the group. Cadman et al (this collection) discovered that “memory-work can be painful for participants, including the (principal) researcher herself.” In addition to being a “vulnerable observer” (Behar, 1996), the principal researcher also becomes a vulnerable participant through the disclosure of her own memories and the inclusion of her own voice. There were occasions when I would remember details of a particular experience during which other members of the collective expressed surprise that I had not mentioned it before and seemed to doubt the veracity of the memory. The supportive environment nurtured through memory-work provided all the participants with a space to present and examine their private experiences.

One of the collective wrote a memory about the deeply personal and private experience of her own mother’s loss of a baby to adoption, in response to the trigger of “First hearing about a girl ‘in trouble’”:

Many years later she worked out that her mother had a child during the war years whom she had relinquished. She wished they had talked about it all those years ago - she would have like to have shared it rather than suspecting secrets.

Another collective member returned to her feelings when writing a memory about another girl’s sexual activity:

She got very upset one day at the beach when some boys boasted about exploits with a good friend. She didn't believe them. Seemed they had to speak badly about all the girls. The boys often boasted that certain girls did it with everyone.

Setting up a memory-work collective is no easy task, particularly when the topic of the research is a sensitive one. Originally I had planned to form a memory-work collective of mothers who had lost their babies to adoption. Two other women and myself met on two separate occasions, but the process of memory-work (as I have outlined it above) was too painful for us to continue. The intrusion of this research into “some deeply personal and private experience” was indisputable: the loss of a baby to adoption strikes at the very heart of what is personal and private for the women involved. This research also confronted deeply personal issues related specifically to women's extramarital sexuality and illegitimacy. Nonetheless, I reflected on the clarity with which we remembered our experiences of losing our babies, and the frankness and honesty with which we shared our memories. We were still trying to unravel our experiences in order to make some 'common' sense of it, and in doing so it became apparent how we had rewoven the fabric of our

lives. The actual events, while not unimportant, were less significant at this time than our memories of them. Consequently I decided to use memory-work with a different topic and a different collective.

Memory-work is generally considered a most appropriate method for researching sensitive topics because the experiences of the individual participants are projected from a personal context into a social context. However it is possible, as my findings have shown, that some topics are just *too* painful, traumatic and personal to be explored using memory-work. Perhaps there is a point beyond which we cannot intrude into memories of experiences that are too raw to allow for the deconstruction and scrutiny that memory-work involves. In other words, the very features of the method that allow sensitive topics to be explored may work against the exploration of the particularly sensitive.

ISSUES OF DEVIANCE AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Closely related to topics which invoke memories of a deeply personal nature are those which concern issues of deviance and social control, in particular topics concerning the first sexual encounter or a particular sexual experience. Bronwyn reframed the topic as follows:

“Well, I really didn't have sexual encounters then. I mean, I had lots of country yobbos, groping in the back seat of cars, and fighting them off ... but there is no way in the world that I was going to go 'all the way'.”

An embarrassing first sexual experience often had the socially controlling outcome of curtailing further sexually activity, as Helen recounted:

“I didn't tell anyone, in fact my parents still don't know. I haven't spoken about it. But it put the fear of God in me...”

One written memory which invoked responses of anger and powerlessness among the collective concerned an incident of multiple rape which one member witnessed. Again, the control exerted by the incident was so profound that she had been unable speak about it at that time.

Gang-bangs were talked about She was at a party one night and went down a corridor where a few boys were standing. Actually it was a queue - there was a girl she knew vaguely on the bed and the boys were waiting their turn. It was the first time she'd seen anyone doing it - she was 15. She didn't ever tell her parents what was happening and what she saw.

“POWERFUL PEOPLE, COERCION AND DOMINATION”

Some of the memories and the ensuing discussion concerned people who had been in positions of power relative to the young women in the memories. During the remembered experience, these people were recalled as coercing the women into unwanted sexual activity and applying threats if compliance was not forthcoming, as Bronwyn recounted:

“I can remember also when I went for my driving licence, I was 16 and ten months, and the policeman asking me if I'd go out to the five mile, but he was the husband of a

girl that I knew, the local policeman, and used to do the licences in the country. I said, "No, no!" And anyway I didn't get my licence."

Helen recollected an incident with a family member:

"I had an experience too with my mother's half-sister's husband, who was from a very wealthy family... And he came up to me and passionately embraced me and he had three children, a very good looking man...I can't remember my age. I could have been 13. I certainly wasn't 14 but I looked older. It was inexcusable... but I thought, 'This is one of my friends, he's one of my favourite people. That was the part that was so unforgivable, absolutely unforgivable...."

Mothers of the young women were also remembered as having played a powerful role in controlling their daughters' sexual activity as these written memories reported:

He dropped her off at the local shops and she had to walk one mile home and try to get there before her mother arrived. He told her not to tell anyone because he could get into lots of trouble. He was 24 and she was 14. She felt too dirty and ashamed to tell anyone, and, anyway she felt that she deserved it and her mother would say that it was her fault because she was wearing tight shorts. She went home and had a shower but couldn't get clean, but she had to pretend that nothing had happened when her mother came home.

Her mother spoke with warning about the risk of pregnancy. She always said "Of course you would never do anything like that - you are too sensible". She sensed that her mother was trying to reinforce 'good' behaviour!! Mother told her it was not only the bad reputation, but a lot of men wouldn't want to marry someone who'd done it a lot, or had a child.

She remembers thinking it (her friend, L's pregnancy) was sad and that the scandal in a country town would be relentless. She remembered her mother constantly saying that a bad reputation is easy to get and hard to lose. It was fifteen years later when L told her about the baby she had given up for adoption. She became pregnant not long after she had finished her nursing training. Her mother was present at the birth in a private hospital.

SACREDNESS TO THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

There was no doubt for the memory-work collective that the topic of the emergence of young women's sexuality was not only important for them, but also carried with it elements of sanctity. They agreed that this was not a topic of which they could speak with frivolity or triviality, although it had been regarded with banality in cultural discourses in the 1960s, for example "pop" songs and "True Confession" magazines (Breines, 1992; Douglas, 1995; Farrar, 2000).

Helen expressed the bitterness that she felt regarding the way that women's trust had been betrayed and the way that their sexuality had been appropriated:

“I think it was very, very cruel. We subjected ourselves in the name of contraception and in the name of liberation, I sometimes now feel quite angry at what we subjected ourselves to, not knowing and thinking at the time, at that time, it was the right thing to do and we were being responsible. I think it was very, very cruel. yet what we were doing to our bodies ... I had one that I didn't get my periods on, and I never felt well on the Pill .”

The outcome of the collective's discussion was not a joyous story of sexual liberation or even sexual awakening, but a story of doubt and bewilderment. It was a story of fear of pregnancy and anxiety about propriety and maintaining respectability. It was a story of lurching from one month to the next, waiting for the relief that each menstrual period brought, along with the inconvenience of sanitary belts and pads, missed sporting activities, and grateful promises to oneself to be more careful next time. It was a story about sexual economy and of negotiating the tricky terrain of contraception and abortion, and when these failed or were inaccessible, of having a baby and losing it to adoption. It was a story of silences and contradictions, of aloneness and finding that, through our collective memories, we were not alone in our experiences.

MEMORY-WORK AS A METHOD FOR SENSITIVE RESEARCH

Unlike June Crawford and her colleagues (Crawford et al, 1992) who decided, first, on the method (memory-work), and, second, the topic (emotion) in their study of emotion and gender, I deliberated on the choice of method which would be appropriate for my research, being mindful of Frigga Haug's caution (1987:72) that "(memory-work) cannot moreover be applied at random to any given topic". Testament to Haug's advice is my unsuccessful attempt to use memory-work to research how women who had lost babies to adoption constructed themselves.

Criticism of memory-work on the grounds that it is 'too subjective' and hence, too sensitive, implies that "individuals' accounts of themselves and their analyses of their worlds are not to be trusted (because) they are coloured by subjectivity" (Reinharz, 1992). However, memory-work is concerned precisely with significant issues of subjectivity and sensitivity which influence individuals' sense of present-self, their sense of being-in-the-world. Notwithstanding, I am not suggesting that memory-work can be used successfully with *all* research topics where sensitivity is an issue. Even when the topic for the second memory-work collective, that is, constructing women's sexuality in the 1960s, appeared less sensitive than the topic of losing a baby to adoption, nonetheless one member felt some sadness about her memories as she had not thought about the events and the people involved for a long time.

Other participants in a research project who may be affected by the sensitivity of the topic are the transcribers who engage with the taped recordings of the collective's meetings and produce the written accounts. The degree to which a transcriber is disturbed by what she hears can influence what she types, as I found in this research. However, it must be stressed that although this problem is not peculiar to memory-work per se (and could occur whenever a transcriber is employed), when a research participant is immersed in data as personal as memories, the likelihood of distress is increased. Frequently, in qualitative inquiry, the transcriber of taped material is neglected as a research participant: she may be acknowledged for her technical skill but there appears to be little acknowledgment of her engagement with the stories in which she is intimately involved through

listening to women's taped accounts of their lives. An exception to this oversight is Vivien Lane's (1996) account of typists' influences on the transcriptions of taped interviews with women about their experiences of having Pap smears.

Given the emotional nature of the material being transcribed in this research, I recognised that some transcribers might have difficulty in undertaking this task. For this reason, it was important that a transcriber shared a trusting and equal relationship with me as a researcher. In keeping with feminist epistemological principles (Stanley, 1991:23) underpinning this research, I acknowledged that a transcriber would play an active role in the research process as a participant.

Initially the tapes for this research were transcribed by Shirley who was known to me through the university, although she did not know the other members of the collective. Shirley had expressed some distress at the content of the tapes, and had to take "time out" at intervals to reaffirm her own reality with her husband and family. Aware of Shirley's feelings, I asked her to write about how she was affected by being privy to very personal details about other women's lives.

Shirley's response was evasive, as if she was attempting to distance herself from the women to whose stories she was listening and about whose lives she was writing. Consistent with her difficult engagement with the sensitive material to which she was listening, Shirley frequently made her own decisions about what should or should not be included in the transcripts, and superimposed her own values on what was being said. For example, when a member of the memory-work collective spoke of "the boys taking you out for a bit of a grope and fondle", Shirley transcribed this as "a group and fun day".

I consulted another professional transcriber, Cathy, whom I had met as the result of another research project. Cathy had personal involvement with the issues and experiences discussed by the memory-work collective. Notwithstanding, Cathy was still affected by the sensitive nature of the material which she was transcribing, and manifested her frustration by inserting her own incisive comments (albeit in italics); when I prepared to return the transcripts to the other participants for verification, I had to erase Cathy's caustic retorts.

The assumptions that researching a sensitive topic might have "psychic costs, such as guilt, shame or embarrassment", or may be "threatening because participation can have unwelcome consequences" (Renzetti et al, 1993:5) were supported in my use of memory-work to research how women who had lost babies to adoption constructed themselves. However this was not the case in my use of memory-work in the construction of women's sexuality in the 1960s; rather, the collective welcomed the opportunity to share their memories in intimate detail. This outcome is consistent with a prediction offered by Renzetti et al (1993:9) that

"permitting research on the private sphere might reveal in many instances, particularly in sensitive areas, [that] research participants desire catharsis rather than sanctuary...That is, research on sensitive topics may produce not only gains in knowledge but also effects that are directly beneficial to research participants."

CONCLUSION

A danger in memory-work is the *potential* threat to people's stability, as members of the collective reappraise events which have been repressed, obliterated or forgotten: this is the power of the past over our present lives. Frigga Haug (1987) found that the most resistance came not from the collective but from within the memories themselves when "an infringement of the boundaries of the forgotten and the repressed created a psychically difficult situation". The collective discussing the loss of babies to adoption certainly experienced a "psychically difficult situation". The collective which was studying women's sexuality, on the other hand, found that one of the ways in which it could overcome this problem was to "curtail analysis and allow others whose personal stability did not seem to be endangered to take up the threads" (Haug, 1987).

Nonetheless, owing to the nature of memory-work, that it is not a forum for counselling or for addressing individual differences, some of the members were left with unanswered questions. All of the members agreed that the process of memory-work had revived forgotten issues which they needed to resolve for themselves. Some of the collective members were able to debrief these between each other; others felt the need to continue with the process, possibly in the exploration of other experiences which the collective had in common. All believed that the experience had been worthwhile, although one member felt that it was not without *some* cost of disclosure to herself and to the others.

It would be unrealistic to presume that memory-work could be unproblematic. However in this paper I have attempted to address some of the problems and issues which I uncovered when researching the sensitive topic of constructing women's loss of babies to adoption and women's sexuality in the 1960s from memories.

It has been suggested that a beneficial outcome of researching sensitive topics might be "imaginative methodological advances" (Renzetti et al, 1993:7), in this case, the use of memory-work. One of the advantages of using a method such as memory-work is that it is still revealing itself through implementation and is flexible enough to permit variations and re-working.

At the same time, the researcher should be aware of Haug's caution that memory-work "cannot... be applied at random to any given topic" (1987:72), supported by my own findings that some topics might be *too* sensitive for investigation using memory-work. As stated above, memory-work is not therapy and in some cases there may be the potential that the very features of the method which allow sensitive topics to be studied could pose a danger to some vulnerable participants. How well-equipped the memory-work researcher is to cope with a distressed participant needs to be considered.

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