

TALK ABOUT MEN AND SIDELINING! THE “OTHER” TEXT IN A MEMORY-WORK STUDY ABOUT MENSTRUATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws from a project that used Haug’s (1987) theory and method of memory-work to study menstrual experiences of eight Australian women. As memory-workers, we wrote memories about menstruation and we discussed and analyzed them in relation to each other: we glimpsed pride and wonderment and we unmasked anger and shame. We argued about theory, about research style, and about politics, especially feminism. And we told stories. We told them about others and we told them about ourselves. Sometimes we cried when telling these stories and sometimes, perhaps even many times, we laughed. Then we told *more* stories. This telling of stories, or “narrativization” (see Reismann, 1993) occurred because the memory-work process evolved in such a way that permitted this to happen. Whereas some of these narratives could be found threaded through the discussion and analysis of the written memories, many stood as an ‘adjunct’ to the memories yielded, for example, after a deliberate call by one group member for participants to tell stories about sex and menstruation. Whether we are cast as a group of unrestrained storytellers prone to excess of which Haug (1987) speaks, beyond this label there are wider consequences for memory-workers to consider. This paper argues that because memory-work has a principal interest in the written record of the memory and the accompanying collective analysis, ‘Other’ forms of the spoken text such as stories/narrative and conversation generated through the course of memory-work produce certain sorts of problems. These are explained as issues of voice and representation.

INTRODUCTION

This is a story of ethics. It is also a story of hyphens. And it is another story of how political the personal is and how personal the political can be. It began with a memory-work group. I had brought this group of eight Australian women aged between 30 and 50 years, and with the pseudonyms of Jill, Kate, Rosa, Paula, Shane, Theresa, Rosemary, and Anastasia, together in the 1990s. At the time that I convened this group, which was for the sole purpose of my studying menstruation as a doctoral candidate (sociology), memory-work was in its infancy, unknown by many researchers. Those who had begun to use memory-work and those who had heard about memory-work (like my PhD supervisor) were enthusiastic about what it offered as a collective research strategy. What I tell here was a pain and a struggle that I experienced while doing memory-work. The pain, perhaps akin to a ‘growing pain’, was idiosyncratic, would not effect everyone in the group, would not even be understood by everyone, and just had to be lived with until grown out of. It came because of (inter)relationships, and because of personal and structural silencing practices that concerned the text. Here, I use text to mean “a written or spoken unit of language that is available for appraisal by one or more observers” (Waitzkin & Britt, 1989, p.586). These silencing practices were to do with written text, to do with spoken text, and then what was done with the written and the spoken.

As a tale of the field, this paper is a personal account to form part of the written ethical and practical accounts that address dilemmas encountered in memory-work research and how they might be resolved. My purpose in this paper is to address one of these dilemmas as encountered in my own experience of memory-work research. I set forth a perspective of memory-work as a qualitative work that creates a collective sense of research and, to draw on Fine's (1994, p.75) words, "self-consciously interrupt[s] Othering." That is, because it is collaborative work concerned with social activism and renders problematic relations of subject-object, individual-collective, hierarchical-nonhierarchical, it ought to work against reproducing what Fine (1994) calls a colonizing discourse of 'Other'. My conceptual interest here, though, is on Fine's notion of the Self-Other hyphen, which she describes as our relation with the research context and those who are researched. I deploy this concept to discern one practice concerning the spoken text that contributed to memory-work becoming a site for 'Othering'.

I organize the paper in the following way. I begin by distinguishing between the written text of memory-work and the spoken text of story telling/narrative and conversation. Then I proceed to provide examples of these differences in text that were generated within a memory-work group about menstruation of which I was a member. The implications of how these different texts as data were analyzed, especially issues of voice and representation, are explored.

THE SUBJECT-OBJECT AND THE OTHER OF MEMORY-WORK

Haug's concern with the way in which women 'grow' into their female bodies is a developmental focus of memory-work that involves the research participants collectively working through written memories historically. This historical-developmental focus calls for the participants to trace and unravel the processes by which we construct the self through the structures of discourse so that we come to see "the locks that constrain our actions, and our sense of self in the present" (Schatz, Walker, & Schatz-Hadwick, 1995, p.43). Memory-work is remarkably efficient at doing this through focus on the written memory – contrived in a particular way, of course, as memory-work asks.

Memories, conceived by Haug (1987) as social text, require reflection to make sense of experience by understanding the social context in which behaviour occurs. However, when participants have the freedom to ask questions of the memories and respond to questions and so forth in ways they find meaningful, they tend to do what Riessman (1993) calls "narrativize" or generate narratives. They do this to make sense of events and actions in their lives, tending to narrativize disruptive experiences. It is not surprising, then, that a memory-work study of menstruation produced abundant stories and, in our group, this especially concerned men.

Thus, the process of memory-work produced an array of data from the crafted written memories of the self as both subject and object of the research, to the spoken stories, disconnected sentences and exchanges among collective members on topics far flung from that which brought the group together. The spoken texts were produced out of a research context where intimacy grew and intimacies were shared in a way that might yet be shown to have few parallels in other research situations. In the early part of our memory-work group we worked together on the memory

text within the terms of memory-work that we had extracted from the book, *Female Sexualization*, by Haug and her colleagues (1987). At this time, focussed on the written memories, we did not know that we would become storytellers, sometimes unrestrained and prone to excess in the way described by Haug (1987). And we did not know at this time that these stories, exchanges, and conversation that I converted into data would orchestrate a shift of collective participants as subject-object to a position of object-Other as I reinscribed them as my research object.

Although there are alternate definitions of narrative, in this paper narratives can be understood as the unwritten memories, the spoken stories, the anecdotes, told in the course of the memory-work process, and where this “talk [is] organized around consequential events. A teller in a conversation takes a listener into a past time or ‘world’ and recapitulates what happened then to make a point, often a moral one” (Riessman, 1993, p.3).

Narratives share similarities with, and yet are different from, written memories. One difference is that they are less sophisticated in form than the written memories. Another is that they are told in the first person and so there is a shifting of voices from third to first person when there is movement from written memories into the autobiographical ‘I’ of narrative. As well, narrative is not subject to the group theorizing and analysis in the way that is asked of the written memories. Narrative also tends to be edited, devoid of contextual detail, which contrasts with the detail asked for in the written memory.

Written memories and narratives resemble each other in the following ways. The process of memory-work as outlined by Haug (1987), and narrating or telling stories as described, for example, by Bell (1988), Riessman (1993), and Stivers (1993), is a way that people attempt to make sense of their lives, and understand the self in relation to others and wider social structures. Linked stories show how people explain their experiences and how the interpretations might change over time (Bell, 1988), in the same way as does theorizing written memories. Both narrative and memory are associated with subjectivity. As such, they struggle against ideological adversity to be recognised as legitimate forms of knowledge.

There are writers such as Bell (1988) who note the little attention given to narratives produced within the research process. Whereas, writers such as Giddens (1986) point to the oversight of analysis of conversation produced within the research process, proposing that analysis of conversation may be one of the most illuminating ways of understanding the social, particularly in relation to language and meaning. Thus far, supporting the claims of Bell and Giddens, there has been inattention to those spoken texts produced from memory-work. Although, elsewhere (see Koutroulis, 2001) I have focused on narrative and discussion elaborated in discussion of written memories, to show cultural meanings associated with and embodied experience of a menstruating woman.

Memory-work, however, concerned with analysis of written memories, does not specifically address the spoken text such as narrative, question-and-answer exchanges, arguments and conversation produced in the memory-work process as data that warrants collective analysis. So, there is a possibility that these forms of spoken text may be seen as an adjunct to the written text and thus be cast aside. Certainly, in our group interactions, written memories provided the ‘official’ data by which memories were privileged in the analysis and so typically, as Bell and

Giddens might predict, narratives and conversation were freed from analytical scrutiny. While I have treated narratives and other spoken text as an inevitable and necessary by-product of the memory-work process and, as such, an additional source of textual analysis - although not always collective analysis - their inclusion brought a distinct set of ethical concerns. These are concerns of voice, whose is heard, whose is not heard and so forth and are highlighted in the following paragraphs.

Turn to the group setting integral to memory-work: a comfortable setting; a number of people, written memories in hand. There may be a facilitator, attending to the functioning of the group: the group dynamic, time keeping and other practical matters. In the group interactions, written memories of the self provide the primary data on which the analysis is hinged. But then the group start to tell stories. Then there are *more* stories and more talk.

In our group, telling stories was very social. The stories or narratives entered the group, creeping in sometimes seemingly disconnected from the task at hand. But, they came in a number of ways. One way was through the analysis of the written memories, and trying to make some understanding about the characters not recorded in the written memories. Take fathers for example. Anastasia's memory made no mention of her father at all. Anastasia believed that her mother could only introduce the topic of menstruation to her in conjunction with buying a bra (indicating the difficulty she may have had in raising the topic on its own), and away from her father's hearing. Similarly, in the memories of Rosa, Kate, Shane, Theresa, and Rosemary, there was no reference to fathers. In Jill's memory, however, her father was intent on photographing Jill's antics; Jill's mother stepped in and removed Jill from the scene and from her father's observation. Paula's father while written into her memory was characterized as remote, distant, and dismissive of her menstrual experience. Discussion of these memories, though, incited much discussion and many stories: few about fathers and many about men more generally.

Thus another way of generating narrative was from the group dynamic. As stated above, some of this was fuelled by participants questioning of the memories; and some came from digression and even deliberate diversion of the analysis or group process that included testy interpersonal exchanges and challenges within the group (see Koutroulis, 1993, 1996), similar to those described by Haug (1987). Such angst, though, can change the group psychodynamic and may be the prompt for the strategic insertion of narrative into the group interaction, including the insertion of stories at key points (see Riessman, 1993). It perhaps does not matter how these narratives and other forms of spoken text come about. The point of this paper is that they do and what we as memory-workers do with them.

SELF-OBJECT TO OBJECT-OTHER

I begin to demonstrate in a rather sanitized way what may unfold and why it is important for memory-workers to distinguish between these forms of text. For the more formal part of the memory-work group process, there are the written memories where members are writing of themselves. These memories are written in the third person and the writer is asked to give attention to detail, disregarding thoughts of relevancy. Writing the memory, Haug claims, is a first level of analysis: choosing a vocabulary, selecting what to say is "a form of production, an

activity which creates a new consciousness” (1992, p.22). As an example, I provide an excerpt of Rosa’s memory. She writes her brother into her memory as well as Ruby, a woman who took care of the family in the absence of Rosa’s mother:

Ruby delivered her message in a cold, flat yet angry voice.

“You have done something unforgivable. You have left an ‘unmentionable’ in the bathroom where your brother might see it.” . . . As the ‘unmentionable’ took shape in her mind as an image of a blood stained pad, her shame mimicked the image and stained her cheeks with a blush.

Rosa read this memory to the group. The discussion, analysis and theorizing that followed provided a second layer of analysis. We had much to say about Ruby, Rosa’s emotion, and ‘etiquette’ of menstruation, especially concerning men, to which Laws (1990) refers. Within the intimacy of the group and our sense of collective, we traced the origins of the emotion and the etiquette, comparing this memory with the other memories. Here, in this subject-object space with its barely visible hierarchy, we discussed the gaps, the silences, the contradictions, and the inconsistencies in the memory. In this collective critical reading of the memory text we examined the language – ideology, clichés, metaphors – and our complicity in our oppression, not that we considered this complicity necessarily deliberate, as we worked toward making sense of and construct meaning from our memories and the disjunctions between past and present. In so doing, we were “working the Self-Other hyphen” as we probed how we were in relation with the study context asking,

What is, and is not, “happening between,” within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told, why, to whom, with what interpretation, and whose story is being shadowed, why, for whom, and with what consequence. (Fine, 1994, p.72)

All the while, as might be imagined, the ambience of the group invited disclosure and group members began to narrativize. Paula and Rosa were the only group members with brothers. And while Paula’s brother did not feature in her written memory she told a short story concerning him. This narrative, of course, was told in the first person:

I remember my brother just saying to me, “Oh God, you leave things in the toilet.” And it was probably just a box of unused tampons and it was like any sign of it was yuk. . . . The same thing, too, recently. I had some undies and they weren’t even blood stained, and I said [to my brother], “Can you stick these in with your load of washing?” And he said, “They haven’t got yucky sort of secretions on them have they?” I said, “Yes, they are all stained with blood and gore and yuk, I wouldn’t want them in there if I were you.”

Here the group laughed at Paula’s brother’s fear of the alleged polluting potential of her secretions, before calling for clarification of some points. Paula’s story prompted stories from other group members. In this story telling, the self as subject-object of the research was eclipsed. There was neither cross sectional analysis of these stories nor collective theorizing. We did not embark upon a detailed decoding of language, noting the gaps, silences, inconsistencies, contradictions, similarities and differences, ideology, cultural imperatives, or meanings then and now that we so painstakingly explored when analyzing the written memories. Mostly, the stories

came unsolicited yet linked by one or another theme as part of the analysis, the dynamic, or as part of a diversionary tactic that humoured us and allowed us to perhaps stabilize when we were tilting toward or on the edge of a destabilized and disintegrating group.

And so there were more stories, a rich array of them, and many more than the written memories. Collective members chose to write and analyze only one memory (this took place over eleven meetings) on the theme 'significant moments.' The writing, the talking, the story telling was implicated in the establishment of a persuasive psychodynamic of collective research. We were comfortable. We were, we thought, partners in the process. Some stories invited comments and some led to questions like Rosa's:

Let's tell stories about men and their response to menstrual blood, I find that a very fascinating topic. Who's made love when they've been menstruating?

Shane: Most men I know haven't really found it a problem.

Jill: What a desperate, they'd do it with a sheep.

Rosa's open-ended question led to a discussion that was both subversive and liberating. What was subversive was the challenge to the idea common to all the women in the group that menstruation was a hidden or secret phenomenon. Not only was secrecy being challenged, it was being challenged at its most intense point, that is, in an intimate, physical relationship where this powerfully secret bodily fluid was now touching the skin of anOther. No wonder this question was fascinating to Rosa. The liberating aspect of this discussion was that through shared information the women recognized, as the humour indicated, their attitudes: the information imparted in the group demonstrated a wide range of individual responses to sex during menstruation.

The group laughed at the vulgarity and the shock value of Jill's usage of sheep, disclosing a level of acceptance of male sexuality that is frightening. However, it was noted that Jill's comment objectified men and revealed a stereotypic image of male sexuality. In poststructuralist terms, Jill has taken up a subject position of male sexual needs discourse. Her expression indicated an expectation that men who had sex with a menstruating woman would not be deterred, not even by a sheep, when seeking sexual gratification. There is an expectation in this social construction of male sexuality that he will be a purely instinctual sexual other. The connotations that come with sheep are stupidity, passivity and defencelessness. It is compliant, as expressed in the colloquial phrase, "they follow like sheep," yet it is powerless to resist its assailant. Within Jill's social construction of gender is a resignation and expectation that men will not be denied sex. Jill's statement portrays men who sexually engage with a woman during menstruation as deviant. Her focus is on male sexuality, without any question of the role of the woman, as if it is the man alone who makes decisions regarding the sexual encounter. But Jill's inference that men who have sex with a menstruating woman are desperate for sex, so desperate that they would do it with a sheep, suggests by implication that women who choose to have sex during menstruation are in some way wanting.

We can see how if we had limited ourselves by concern for attention to content of the written memories, all of which were far removed from sex and menstruation, we would have denied ourselves the opportunities of exploring the associations that came by opening the connection

between sex and menstruation. Without a fluid group style we would not have accessed this image of male sexuality and the inherent image of powerlessness of his sexual object. What does it mean, though, that we laughed rather than expressed anger? Only an analytical historical-developmental approach to the data could help us trace the process that leads us to this point. In the above talk, we did not stop to explore **how** we had come to construct ourselves through the structures of this sexual discourse, which is what a memory-work analysis of written text would have explored.

But these words and interpretations are mine. In my above use of the group interchange, Self and Other are knottily entangled and, in particular, Jill's relation to the research context undergoes a transition. She has shifted from subject-object (research on the self by the self) to object-Other. This is because I wrote about. I wrote about Jill and her utterance and, as Fine (1994) says, when we write about, we Other and deny the hyphen. Jill became the object and as such my subject. As she was silenced the group hierarchy was exposed. This text slipped into my doctoral thesis not only as a discourse of sexuality, but also a discourse of individualism, and a showing of inscribing the Other.

Movement between the subject-object position, especially to the object and so Other position through use of the spoken text as data produced power-ethics concerns for our group. It also produced a circumstance where I may well have been accused of 'ripping off my sisters'. I was well into my doctorate before I saw this issue of voice and representation as connected to the hyphen at which we construct Self-Other that Fine (1994) argues is the politics of everyday life. I shall explain. After our considerable story telling about our menstrual experiences with men, I assembled this data, analyzed it much like that following Jill's utterance above, distributed a copy to collective members, and arranged a meeting to discuss the contents. The meeting was torrid. My analysis and interpretation led to a tirade of harsh opposition by some and then debate about interpretation, the range of views about interpretation reflecting those expressed by various writers: validating subjective interpretations so that information is not misrepresented (Ramos, 1989), which is what Shane asked for; acknowledging alternative interpretations that may not fit with the subject's self-understanding (Stivers, 1993), called for by Anastasia. However, any viewpoint about interpretation and negotiation about whose voice(s) to privilege, Fine notes, carries a risk that "lies in the romanticizing of narratives and the concomitant retreat from analysis. In the name of ethical, democratic, sometimes feminist methods, there is a subtle, growing withdrawal from interpretation" (1994, p.80-1). A useful warning.

CONCLUSION

Memory-work, in its theoretical underpinnings and practical application, is a site for expression of feminist practice and politics. One problem, though, as told above, was that in my experience the practice did not always comply with the political conceptualisation; in positioning myself as an individual and 'Othering' in the process, I was not always observed to be memory-working in a feminist, collective way. The notion of collectivity, however, is a structuring practice, which has predominantly been viewed as favourable and as distinctly feminist practice tied to notions of nonhierarchical research. What I have presented compels attention to memory-work as a certain style of research (not always nonhierarchical), which allows for narrative and other forms of

discourse to be silenced or to silence, and that as the writer I was free to do this. When these forms of text are silenced, so is the benefit of collective analysis, and so is the benefit of understanding how these texts illuminate social meaning and understanding.

Little is known about how memory-work is mediated through the relationships of participants. Although, my data of the memory-work process suggests that collective members' transformation from subject-object to object-Other was, in part, mediated by my position in the collective as convenor of the research, and for a time facilitator of the group, as well as doctoral candidate. Learning to constitute the self as collective member, and group facilitator, defining these different subjectivities against being a doctoral candidate, and styles of research that objectify and individualize, often proved elusive. The complexities of researching within a memory-work group, however, forced a radical rethinking of our ethical and political relations to each other.

Finally, it is not always possible to extricate the narrative and other forms of discourse from the memory-work analysis, but there is reason to try. The men about whom we spoke might have been sidelined, eclipsed or obliterated had they not been 'Othered' as we wove them into our stories, drawing them into the gaze of the group. Here we could criticize patriarchal culture, and we were free to split our sides laughing, liberating ourselves from those who construed menstruation as dirty, polluting business. To bury narrative, conversation and arguments in tapes, transcripts or computers, or cast them aside as we may like to do with those Others who oppress us and silence our voice is to 'clean' the data – something we as qualitative researchers might consider to be very 'dirty business'.

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