MEMORY-WORK: THE POWER OF THE MUNDANE

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I raise three interconnecting questions that emerge from my use of memory-work: memory and normality; research 'rules'; and, briefly, the theoretical underpinnings of the method. The first question addresses the nature of the memories written about: were they focussed on one singular, extra-ordinary occurrence, as some researchers seemed to find, or were they what could be called 'layered' memories, reflecting the ordinary repetitive stories of everyday life? What are the implications of either kind of memory for understanding how 'we are constructed'? The second question explores this idea of normality further, and considers the assertion of the original memory-work researchers that 'crisis has an everyday quality'. One strength of the method may be to help resist a 'general training in the normality of heteronomy' - including perhaps a tendency to take memory-work itself as a set of imposed 'rules' to follow. The third question emerges from my own sense that I could have used the method even more powerfully if I had been able to generate my own 'rules', by calling on a deeper understanding of the Marxist, as well as the feminist, frameworks of the original memory-work researchers. It is a question about how we can use the strength of a wide range of both theoretical frameworks and everyday experiences to develop memory-work into the rich and heterogeneous collection of methods that can help us understand the apparent normality of everyday life.

THE QUESTION

Society is saturated in numbers. Quantification, rationality and abstraction are intricately connected, increasingly embedded and highly valued in our scientific and technological world. As I came to do the research for my doctoral thesis, I was interested in the interaction between mathematics and society, in how, for instance, the quantification of society constructs us, particularly as women, and in how we construct or resist it. As Willis (1989) argues, generations of explanation of the gender imbalance have shifted the focus from girls *cannot* do maths (they are biologically incapable of doing so), to they *do not* do maths (they are not socialised into that particular role), to they *will not* do maths (they choose not to). The emphasis has changed from biological determinism to a more complex social determinism, and it is shifting from this still quite passive picture of women to one that insists that individuals are actively engaged in their formation as mathematical beings.

THE METHOD

It would undoubtedly be neater to be able to say that having worked out my question, I then went on to consider an appropriate method to explore it. However this was not how it happened. I was intrigued and made suspicious by the amount of research on maths and gender issues, and particularly by the huge number of statistical studies that showed increasingly little difference between the genders (eg Friedman 1994). I strongly resisted the idea that statistical methods could tell me anything I really wanted to know about how people construct and are constructed into the mathematical world. I didn't want to measure. Over the same period of time I became intrigued and excited by the series of seminars given at Macquarie University by feminist and socialist Frigga Haug, on research into women's experience, and particularly by the method that she and her colleagues had developed to do this: memory-work. I wanted to use memory-work to - somehow - explore women's mathematical experience in the everyday world.

In the seminars, Haug spoke as a feminist, and as a socialist; she drew on psychological as well as sociological theoretical frameworks. She talked about female sexualisation, about technology and work, about daydreams, about memory-work, about women as victims or actors, about critical psychology, about gender and technology. One of the things that kept me going back to listen to more was her ability to make connections between - in fact, her refusal to treat separately - individual experience and wider social structures. In the structure and agency debate she and her colleagues refused to take sides: both structure and agency were important. The thread that bound all her interests was the question of how ideologies and social structures get into our heads: how we are constructed by them, and how in turn, we construct - or resist - them:

> It is the fact of our active participation in social structures that gives them their solidity; they are more solid than prison walls. (Haug et al 1987: 59)

Memory-work was the method that she and her colleagues evolved to help untangle that question. Shortly after her visit, her book *Female Sexualisation* was published, a detailed account of the result of one such process of memory-work (Haug et al 1987).

Two other refusals which are a feature of memory-work engaged my attention:

- the refusal to separate subject and object of research: our own experience - our subjectivity - she insisted, could be the object of our research;
- the refusal to separate knowledge and action: the point of the research was to increase our capacity for action, especially collective action.

Generated from feminist and Marxist frameworks these challenges to the taken-for-granted separations of mainstream research were exciting. As humans, and as women in particular ways, we live quantified lives, where to be categorised, compared, ordered, measured is normal. Normality itself becomes measurable: the 'normal' is seen as the true form from which we deviate in different (potentially measurable) ways. One way of understanding memory-work is as a rejection of the quantifying method so prevalent in maths and gender studies, at least in so far as such methods can help us understand our experience. It can be seen as an assertion of the limits of such quantifying

research: its separation of the object and subject of research, its inability to theorise the processes of our daily lives, its pervasive individualistic approach, its customary distance from action and commitment to social justice. Using memory-work as a methodology might challenge the chasm between the separated, abstracted knowledge of mathematics and ourselves as knowers. It might make possible spiralling connections between the topic and the methodology.

Thus my use of memory-work grew out of a double fascination: the challenge posed by the question 'What *don't* the statistics tell us about women and mathematics?' and the desire to explore how this method could help us understand and transform our experience.

THE POWER OF THE MUNDANE

In this paper, I have taken one particular focus out of a number of lively and interesting questions which arose from my use of memory-work with two groups of women. I have taken as my thread the notion of the mundane, the normal. The need to understand its construction and to use this understanding to change our lives, is core to the underlying philosophy of memory-work. I have tried to explore this notion in relation to three issues: the nature of the memories we used, the idea of autonomy, and the "rules" shaping the method. I want to show how the stories of memory-work can tell us about normality. I want to argue that normality can too often involve what Haug calls heteronomy - control by others, others' rules - rather than autonomy. I want to conclude this section by asking whether we, as researchers, are espousing the normality of a specific set of rules.

MEMORIES: ORDINARY AND EXTRAORDINARY

In many of the written memories presented in memory-work research, the memory is of an extra-ordinary occasion, of a singular critical incident. Many of the memories written in our groups were of this kind. But we came to see that others were not, they were stories that drew on layered memories, in the sense that many occasions merge into one in the telling of the story[1].

Let me illustrate this with two stories, from Penny - in response to the cue 'patterns' - and from Marie - in response to the cue 'doing maths'. The first is an example of the singular critical experience, the second is a more layered account. (I would like to point out that it was very difficult to find a story that was entirely without layers.)

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[1] Stories (boxed) and quotes from discussions about the stories can all be found in Johnston B 1998.

Penny

The sack was in fashion. Her mother who usually sewed her clothes was away. She decided to make a sack for the party, in teal-blue wool. When she tried the dress on she realized both sleeves had been made the same. The darts at the elbows were on the inside. Well you really couldn't tell with a sack, she didn't care. Of course her mother noticed.

Marie

She' s about eleven years old, crouched over her work, arms around the outskirts of her books, hiding it. Palms sweating. The extent of her shame, not knowing, dirtiness, must somehow be contained and hidden. Then there is a figure behind her, towering, menacing: Sister Peter. Her voice is cold and low and in a few words the shame, not knowing, dirtiness of the young girl are exposed, public. "That's wrong. What do you think you're doing. Tear it out and start again." Repeat the shame, repeat the humiliation.

Penny's short story is the memory of a singular occasion, and of the reactions - her own and her mother's - to her sewing prowess. Marie's story has specific conversation, characters, location. However the conclusion - 'Repeat the shame, repeat the humiliation' - leaves us with an extraordinary feeling of compression, of a multitude of occasions concentrated into this single memory.

A concern with the nature of memory recurred in many of our discussions; it surfaced particularly strongly however in the 'doing maths' stories, of which Marie's is one. We realised that all the stories were to some extent collages built out of a multiplicity of occasions. We agreed that none of the stories was a story of a single occasion, and that they shared:

> ... a layered effect, like - Marie's was sort of a specific occasion but when Kath asked you at a later point: would that have happened again and again? - and you said, 'oh yes, yes', so that that was a specific type of experience, maybe a particular one but it's got layers - layers before and layers afterwards. And Kath's was definitely that - because she couldn't actually remember a particular thing and that was the layers, its got all those things in it. And Colleen's was again another Saturday going to the tutor again, feeling depressed again... And Louise's was obviously recurring - 8.30 am - yes, she said the 'usual discussion of these three girls', 'before school' and so on. So this was a particular thing but a layered one. And mine ... It was very much a feeling of four or five occasions put into one.

Why these layered memories here, rather than the singular memories of a particular outstanding occasion? Was it the nature of memory or was it the particular content of the memories?

In relation to the nature of memory, Crawford and her colleagues argue that we remember (some) incidents that are problematic and unresolved, and that we forget those that are unproblematic, those socially constructed as 'the trivial, the mundane, the usual, the appropriate'[2] (Crawford et al. 1992:152-159). Our stories here give support to that argument, so long as we are clear that the 'usual' can still be problematic. It was the layers of the normal in Marie's story that gave it its power, the sense that this had happened again and again, that this was not a single unusual experience, but in some awful sense mundane, usual, even, in the context, appropriate, though never trivial.

So what was it about the content of some memories that made them more layered than others? Some stories from some cues were particular, specific. They might contain elements of a layered context but were seen as breaks with the continuity of that context, as can be seen to some extent in Penny's 'sack' story. The layers of the 'doing maths' stories and others like them however, located as they were in the institutional context of school or family, could be seen to be reflecting the repetitive nature of that institutional life, rather than breaking with it. These layered memories generated for us what we began to call 'the texture of the everyday'. Marie used the discussion about layered memories to think about the difficulties of looking at the 'hidden, treacherous' dynamics of gender in school settings:

> It's just interesting, that notion that the everydayness of it makes it hard to grasp it as a problem, because it happens everyday with monotonous regularity.

Also referring to Marie's story as an example, Sophie agreed:

> ... that thing happened, but if you were to go to that teacher and say what happened, about that experience, she would question a whole lot of minor details, and you would then have to start saying, well that was because you did that to me two weeks before, and therefore I was nervous about you walking around my desk, and because last week ... you know ...

The meaning that we give to an event - our memory of it - can be seen to be constructed, and reconstructed, from related experiences and understandings as well as from the particular event. The contexts of the memory - its history, its physical and emotional setting, even events that followed - are inextricably woven into the event itself. It is these meanings and how they were constructed, ourselves as 'a sedimentation of different levels of 'working over' of the social' (Haug et al 1987: 47), that we were trying to understand.

[2] They argue too that we may forget - repress or suppress - incidents that are highly problematic.

A DAILY TRAINING IN NORMALITY

Referring to a story not unlike Marie's, Haug et al argue that '[its] extraordinary condensation must surely have arisen out of some barely perceived ordered daily training in normality' (Haug et al 1987: 90). They suggest that we should work at remembering the everyday and the normal, in order to tease out the power of the mundane:

> Strange the tricks our memories play. Events are etched on our memory as the triggers of change; we see our socialisation and the construction of our identity, in retrospect, marked by twists and turns, breaks and fractures. We would not wish to claim that memories of this kind are simply fallacious, a retrospective exaggeration of quite insignificant events. Yet it does seem to us problematic that this kind of remembering of crisis-points veils the normality and the petty, everyday character of our socialisation - making it impossible to perceive it as a problem. In an endeavour to portray crisis as extraordinary, we make it seem as if the rest of life proceeds quietly on its way, free of crises, harmoniously - and that decisive changes occur as the result of catastrophe. Instead of this we should perhaps begin from the premise that all developments contain an element of crisis and thus that crisis itself has an everyday quality; that the catastrophe is prepared well in advance, and is itself the result of a general training in the normality of heteronomy. (Haug et al 1987: 86-7)

So can we train ourselves to see the critical within the mundane, the normal? Many of these layered stories can be seen as evidence of the everydayness of crisis, and of the frightening power of ' the general training in the normality of heteronomy' - the normality of external control, of other peoples' rules. As I argue in an earlier article, reflecting on some of the memories that were written:

> To learn every day that it is normal that mathematical knowledge is externally given and monitored, that patterns reflect no reality, that the quest for a certain kind of understanding hinders success, that everyday practices are quantified and regulated by a vast array of indices, is to experience mathematics as a profoundly decontextualised discourse: an abstracted discourse that could refer to anything and for most people refers to nothing (Walkerdine 1992). It is to experience mathematisation as the ordered daily training in the normality of heteronomy. (Johnston 1995).

One of the strengths of memory-work is its potential to help us explore this 'barely perceived, ordered daily training in normality', and understanding it better, to move towards autonomy, to move from victim to actor.

HETERONOMY OR AUTONOMY: THE 'RULES' OF MEMORY-WORK

But is there a contradiction between this strength of the method and the way we go about doing the research?

How are we to understand the processes that we engage in? Why, for example, do we write in the third person? Why do we sometimes rewrite another's story? How can that be valid? Why do we

search out silences and contradictions? Through my own practice, and through other accounts that I have read, I am aware that there is a danger that the process is being transformed into 'rules', and that the rules are becoming ossified. Are we allowing ourselves to be 'trained in the normality of [this specific] heteronomy'?

When Crawford and her colleagues immersed themselves in the ideas of the German group, they used, and modified, the method over a period of some years, evolving for themselves a sense of three 'phases', and six 'rules' for writing and analysis (Crawford 1992: Chapter 3). These phases and rules have however been adopted as ‘the’ method by a number of followers. Schratz outlines points derived from Haug and Crawford and refers to them as:

> ... a set of procedures which are best considered as a set of rules. Some of the rules might seem strange or unnecessary at first, but they have been shown to work in practice and they have survived significant tests of experience. (Schratz 1996: 67)

Others simply use the list evolved by Crawford and her colleagues, saying things like: 'our methodology was modelled after the three phases described by Crawford et al; 'the rules for writing are ...' ; 'The participants were given a handout which outlined the rules of memory writing ... it is important that participants follow these rules'. Memory-work is in danger of being reduced to a set of rules. Rules evolved by ourselves and for our own use are one thing; rules given to us by others bring a whole other set of implications. It is not another '[pattern] of thought drilled into us by others' (Haug et al 1987: 60) that we need, but the 'real pleasure to be derived from emancipation from ossified ways of thinking' (Haug 1992: ix).

That this trend can be detrimental, can be seen by contrasting some of the more 'rule' oriented work with, for instance, the diverse and exciting ways in which a group of Scandinavian sports sociologists have approached the potential of the method. In an exploration of men's experiences in sport, Laitinen and Tiihonen (1990) looked at how masculinity in boys is constructed through sport. Tiihonen, a student, then combined memory-work with other 'techniques commonly used in the feminist movement' (life-experience, oral exchanges) to analyse 'the latent social story beyond his personal sport history' (187). Sironen and his colleagues experienced memory-work as an 'epoch-making event':

> ... as if it were a natural extension of the age-old habit of women to conduct debates on everyday issues amid the tasks of cooking, looking after the children and doing the washing ... its discursive technique of interpreting small narratives ... was for us an extensively developed tool which we could use. (1994: 9)

THEORETICAL ANCHORS

The reasons for this potential ossification may well relate to the gradual movement of memory-work away from its theoretical anchors. As it floats free, the assumptions that inform it begin to seem arbitrary, though attractive. As though to make up for this lack of theoretical anchorage, its process is more and more often presented as stages, and its techniques as rules.

While its feminist parent is sometimes in danger of becoming token, its Marxist parent has been all but invisible. I have not been able to find in any of the research other than that of the original group any mention of the Marxist framework underlying memory-work. If Haug and her colleagues, the initiators of the method, are located at all it is as 'a group of feminist researchers and scholars' (Schratz 1996: 67) and the method is 'a feminist method' (Kaufman 1995: 2; Stephenson 1996: 182). Two fleeting references characterise the collective as 'members of various socialist groups' (Schratz 1995: 39) and Haug as 'transcending traditional boundaries, for example ... those between Marxism and feminism' (1992: 3).

Memory-work however did not spring fully formed out of a book in 1987. Its assumptions and frameworks grew over a period of years out of a double commitment, to both feminism and Marxism. All the members of the original collective were associated with *Das Argument*, an independent journal of Marxist theory, and all were active in the women's movement, most being members of the Socialist Women's Association. Just as the method itself pays central attention to contradictions and silences, so the evolution of the method was a response to a series of contradictions and silences in the lives of the group. In 1982, the women working with *Das Argument* were able to bring together the two previously separated sides of their lives - feminism and Marxism - in their work as an autonomous women's editorial group. Haug states explicitly that the aim of the original group of women was 'to inscribe feminism into the Marxist framework' (1987: 23). In more detail, she describes the ideas and the difficulties involved:

> My approach to research is simultaneously individual and collective ... Memory-work ... is an attempt to organise work contexts so as to make it possible to work on memory and experience in both a constructive and a destructive way. To convert Marxist theory into a theory of emancipation for women means, among other things, diverting a powerful and long-standing anger into detective work. In this spirit I have taken up a whole set of Marxist ideas: the notion of human beings as producers of their own circumstances, histories and personalities; the conceptualisation of things as caught up in a process full of contradictions and a methodology which, recognising this complexity, situates human actions in the context of both production and gender relations; the political and praxis-oriented approach which consists of taking as a starting point people's actual experience; and concrete theories of work, ideology, learning and social action. (Haug 1992:ix)

And it was not merely feminism that was informed by Marxism - the challenge worked both ways:

> ... our group work had a common theoretical foundation - in Marxism, critical psychology, theories of culture and ideology. Our work on these theoretical systems involved us at the same time in reconstructing their foundations; our attempts to confront them with the issue of the specificity of gender inevitably changed them. (Haug et al 1987: 31)

Many of the specific ideas are familiar to those of us who have been involved in memory-work research; few of us however would be able or perhaps willing to acknowledge their source. Anne Junor offers the only Australian discussion I have seen that elaborates on the method's Marxist context, when she contrasts:

> ... Derrida's model of women's free-floating resistance with the model of collective reconstruction developed by Frigga Haug and other women. ... By contrast with the poststructuralist assumption that girl children are 'inserted' into the social order, this alternative, Marxist, model is based on a view that women find ways of 'constructing themselves into' the social order. Different views of resistance follow. (Hartwig et al 1990: 20)

She argues that memory-work challenges subjectivity by making individuality problematic, a challenge that is quite different from poststructuralism's 'disappearance' of the subject. The kind of withdrawal envisaged by Derrida, is, says Junor, 'the only possible response to one who sees social relationships as a ubiquitous deployment of pregiven male power' (p23). Memory-work on the other hand allows us to see such relationships as constantly being produced, and therefore able to be produced differently (p24).[3]

I am not arguing for an unthinking adherence to the theoretical frameworks that generated the method. But I am arguing for a revisiting of those theories. As well as feminist theory, I would have liked to have been able to draw on a deeper understanding of Marxist theory and on a conversation about it within memory-work research. Even without the conscious recognition of its debts to Marxist theory, memory-work offers a fruitful method for untangling some of the processes that make us who we are. With these powerful tools also at our disposal, the challenge and potential increases: solidarity, liberation and action become as important as understanding and issues of identity. It is essential, argues the German collective, to make conscious 'the patterns of thought drilled into us by others', but the aim is always to 'outline strategies for liberation' and 'to develop resistances against this 'normality' ' (Haug et al 1987: 60).

And one of the ways that we can do it is through a memory-work where we do not work according to 'drilled' rules, but remain mindful of what the German group wrote of their own process of exploration:

> The individual analytic stages outlined above developed out of these groups' work with their own stories; they were not formulated prior to nor in abstraction from the questions evoked by the stories themselves. In our experience, 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 the varied nature of our attempts at resolution, seemed to suggest that there might well be no single, 'true' method that is alone appropriate to this kind of work. What we need is imagination. We can, perhaps, say quite decisively that the very heterogeneity of everyday life demands similarly heterogeneous methods if it is to be understood. (Haug et al 1987: 71)

The energy, the concern with contradiction, silence and ambivalence, the richness and fluidity, is in danger of being cemented into the safety of rules. It is an issue about how we can use the strength

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[3] Another version of poststructuralism more compatible with a theory of practice sees individuals as not so much being inserted into the social order as '[taking] their subjectivity up through the available discursive and interactive practices' (Davies 1990:511). Memory-work, argues Davies, is particularly appropriate for poststructuralist theory, because of the way in which it shows how particular individual memories are cultural productions

of a wide range of both theoretical frameworks and everyday experiences to continue to develop memory-work into a rich and heterogeneous collection of methods that can help us understand and contest the apparent normality of everyday life.

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