

# **MEMORY-WORKERS DOING MEMORY-WORK ON MEMORY-WORK: EXPLORING UNRESOLVED POWER**

**A memory-work collective of  
Kate Cadman, Lorraine Friend, Susanne Gannon, Christine Ingleton, Glenda  
Koutroulis, Coralie McCormack, Patricia Mitchell, Jenny Onyx, Kerry O'Regan, Sharn  
Rocco, Jennie Small.**

## **ABSTRACT**

The use of memory-work as a qualitative method in feminist social research is well established in Australia and New Zealand. Memory-work, though, still brings with it many theoretical and methodological dilemmas and issues. To open some of these issues to collective discussion, a group of experienced feminist researchers used the process of memory-work to explore specific experiences of working with memory-work groups. Our exploration suggested that using memory-work within the dominant positivist discourses and patriarchal structures of academia could, at times, leave feminist researchers feeling powerless. Through this collective we expressed concern about method and methodological process in ways which had not been articulated through our earlier memory-work projects.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper has been written by a memory-work collective of eleven academic women who have experience and particular interest in using memory-work as a research methodology. We vary considerably in age and professional experience, are from a wide range of academic disciplines and have different levels of experience and expertise with memory-work methodology. Each of our experiences of facilitating memory-work has called upon us to investigate the dynamics of power that are played out and disrupted among researchers and participants in memory-work research projects. In undertaking the work reported here, we wanted to learn from each other's experiences of facilitating memory-work groups, specifically, the problematic positioning of ourselves as primary researchers in expressly non-hierarchical research.

Our working and writing together began when we attended a conference on memory-work as a research methodology, convened at the University of Technology, Sydney by Jennie Small and Jenny Onyx. During the course of this conference, our topic, conflicting issues around power for memory-work researchers, emerged as one that held unresolved and largely unexplored significance for us. In attempting to avoid the perpetuation of the exploitation of women (and other disenfranchised groups), feminists as researchers are particularly sensitive to the ethical issues of social research. Feminists are concerned that the traditional hierarchical relationship between researcher and participant means "objectifying your sister" (Oakley, 1981). Yet research contexts themselves very often make this relationship difficult to resist.

Following the formal papers presented during the first day, eleven of the conference delegates agreed to meet to participate in a memory-work session to explore our experiences of the

method. The trigger we selected was “Unresolved issues of power”. This trigger was designed to focus on one aspect of the methodology that we had repeatedly raised in the formal sessions the day before – the representation of voice, in particular, to what extent are participants’ and/or researchers’ voices silenced in both the process and the products of memory-work research? This paper examines our perceptions of our lived experiences as researchers, the methodological dilemmas and relations of power that arose for us as we carried out the collaborative process of memory-work.

## IMPLEMENTING THE MEMORY-WORK METHOD

For our own project we adapted the memory-work process described in *Female sexualisation* (Haug, 1999), with particular reference to the interpretation of the method detailed in *Emotion and gender* (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault & Benton, 1992) and presented in the introduction of this issue. Each of the memory-workers/authors came to the second day of the conference, the workshop session, with a written memory relating to the negotiation of power within a memory-work group each of us had initiated. After brief discussion we agreed to form two groups, of five and six respectively, to examine and analyze our written experiences.

Our collective analysis of the written memories aimed to uncover common social understandings of events, to identify the social meanings and authority embodied and disrupted in the actions described, and to examine how these meanings were constructed. Both groups met for one and half-hours and then reported their discussions to the whole group. All sessions were taped.

Following our workshop, the taped discussions and written stories were copied and distributed to the members of the collective. As the eleven women are geographically scattered throughout Australia and New Zealand, we used communications technology to continue our collective analysis through writing. In this third phase, the material from both the written memories and the collective discussion was further theorized. Insights from ‘common sense meanings’ identified by the groups through their discussions were extended and related to theoretical discussions within the wider academic literature. Each member of the collective in turn wrote and rewrote the paper, drawing on the memory protocols, the taped discussions, and their own knowledge of the literature before forwarding it on electronically to the next writer. This process was repeated before the final editing process was carried out.

In our oral and written analyses, we discovered unexpected commonalities in our experience of unresolved power issues in the memory-work process. Few of these commonalities are addressed in the memory-work literature or emerged during our formal discussions of the methodology on Day 1. Yet, many of them may be seen as a product of the methodology itself. The discussion in this paper aims to theorize our experiences as memory-workers using the methodology by focusing on how we managed its key principles. As outlined in the introductory paper, these are to use collectivity as a means of deriving common meaning, to collapse the dualism of subject and object within a specific research design, to understand the reproduction of social formation, and to reflect on memories as a means of agency and change. These issues revealed themselves as sites of struggle and anxiety for us as researchers who uncompromisingly embrace a feminist ideology within patriarchal hegemonic research structures. Our analyses moved us towards a new questioning of the core values and processes of memory-work as *method* and a re-evaluation of these fundamental principles.

## COLLECTIVITY AS A MEANS OF DERIVING COMMON MEANING

The meanings of actions are not found in the actor's head but in the common meanings, which she /he negotiates in interaction with others. (Crawford et al., 1992, p. 53)

The common meanings are derived from the broader social, cultural context and prevailing relations of power.

As memory-work researchers, we seek to derive common meaning from our shared experiences, yet we cannot necessarily assume this commonality. The discursive construction of agency and difference within the group may foreground difference in which some may resist others' interpretations of a particular event. As Koutroulis (1993) found in her memory-work group, differences in 'reading' of events, whether through interpretation or application of a particular theory, can be regarded as inadequate or expose vehement oppositions among the group members (see also Stephenson, this collection).

Our workshop revealed a high degree of consensus rather than difference with regard to the issues highlighted by and identified within our written stories. We all continue to struggle with the powerful/ powerless paradox of our positions as memory work researchers. Issues of trust were seen to be highly significant as these are implicated in and by relations of power, and taken up 'as usual' or disrupted by researchers and/or participants. Memory-work can be painful for participants, including the researcher herself (Haug, 1999). It became apparent to us, however, that when the researcher approaches the process with conscious intent to be participatory, to make explicit the usual relations of power and their effects, and to disrupt these, trust within the research group can be quickly engendered by the process itself. The evolving, participatory dynamic of memory-work was clearly represented in our written memories of experiencing the process as researchers.

Amazingly, great questions and discussion followed. There were also challenges by all to remember to speak in third person and not to talk over others. The group process was evolving. Three and a half-hours later, after reading and analyzing all the memories, they had finished. They agreed it had been a productive and fun session. "What trigger should we use next time?" Annabel pulled out her ideas. There was discussion and other suggestions. They agreed to the trigger, 'An exhilarating clothing shopping experience'.

Nonetheless, for most of us, the 'collectivity' exposed a thinly disguised contradiction in our positions as researchers. These tensions were particularly strong where participants had not met as equals - where a researcher/ lecturer/ teacher/ expert met with research participants whose co-operation she had solicited for her own research purposes and whose relative age and/or occupational status may be less powerful than hers. Our written memories and the discussion analyzing these tensions highlighted the contradictions inherent in being responsible for the research, for the ultimate outcomes and for the explicit methodological feature of collectivity:

*I felt like I was in charge; I was responsible but I didn't want to take over. I tried not to take over, but at the same time I wanted to make sure that I got out of it what I needed to get out of it...*<sup>1</sup>

The contradictions and uncertainties arising from the necessary disruption of taken-for-granted relations of power inherent in more usual research methods were evidently confusing for participants and researcher alike. From a poststructural perspective these relations of power and their disruption can be seen to hinge upon particular hierarchical binaries such as speaking-silence, researcher-researched, objectivity-subjectivity, rational-emotional, male-female. The dilemmas we wrote and spoke about indicated the effects of our attempts to disrupt these binaries. In struggling to disrupt the researcher-researched and speaking-silent binaries, the researcher might be ambivalent regarding her own right to speak:

No one commenced the discussion. Karen knew she had to start it. She wished they would take some ownership of the meeting. Through the meeting she found herself pursuing different lines. She felt she was 'facilitating' rather than being a 'co-researcher' and kept trying to stop.

Collective memory-work "models a way of doing inquiry that promotes new forms of subjectivity via a refusal of individuality and a diffusion of the sites and practices from which dominance can be challenged" (Lather, 1991, p. 96). However, this "refusal of individuality" was experienced as almost impossible within the academic contexts which framed our research. We were highly sensitive to the ambiguities of our situation, and the tensions engendered were deeply felt:

*The need to adopt as much of the responsibility as we need to, but to keep it as minimal as possible as well, then we can't police the procedures and get what we want out of it. We would be slipping into positivist and masculinist ways if we did... But in the end I was the one who was going to write the thesis, be awarded the academic award.*

Regardless of the researcher's best intentions, it was difficult for both the participants and the researcher to take or give, respectively, authority in the facilitation and outcomes of the group process. One researcher described her surprise when she still retained power as researcher after her and her co-researchers' prescribed roles in the memory-work group were disrupted:

This was the third and final meeting of the group and arrangements had been clear. Mary would do the hostess thing while they ate; over tea and coffee Liz would facilitate the session. However, now Mary had to break the news that Liz was sick and couldn't attend. Mary herself was in a complete panic.... One of the participants organized the taping, another got everyone seated, and together they picked the first person to read his memory (in fact the shyest and most retiring member). Now who was facilitator? At first Mary thought her role had been changed into observer by this turn of events. During the session she realized that this wasn't so....

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<sup>1</sup> Italicized text is from discussion transcripts rather than written stories. Pseudonyms have not been ascribed except where an author has chosen to do so.

Although the researcher might be acutely aware of the collective processes that she hoped to engender, her reluctance to take up “authority” could be read by participants negatively, as a “lack” rather than a difference in approach:

“It seems to me, “she [*researcher*] said, “that there’s concern that I don’t give enough direction to the group.”

[*participant*] “I don’t think we said that. All I think was said was that it would be helpful to you, not necessarily us, if there was guidance. And didn’t you say you had trouble concentrating on the memories and attending to the group as well?”

[*researcher*] “Hmm, I think that’s what I said. I do. I certainly do.”

[*participant*] “What about if we share it [*facilitation*]?”

Some silence, some no’s.

As these excerpts from our stories indicate, while committed to the principles of collective memory-work, we experienced significant tensions inherent in working with a method that requires “going against the grain” of research-as-usual. The Memory-work Research Conference as a whole illustrated how each woman experienced self-doubt about her capabilities and credibility as a researcher in the eyes of the academic establishment. We were inclined to claim the authority of the researcher over the researched and, at the same time, to reject it. This paradoxical situation could leave us in a *terra nullius*:

*It’s a real sense of isolation – you’re isolated because you’re not even one of the group, really you don’t come across as one of them and you’re not one of them.*

We felt responsible for the success of the event, but often could not or would not control the discussion. There were contradictions and ambiguities in being, and desiring to be, at once powerful-not powerful, controlling-open, traditional-creative, hierarchical-collaborative, and objective-subjective. These contradictions appeared at times to be mediating against the researcher’s intention to be, and to experience the method as, collaborative and participatory.

Throughout the conference there had been much debate about whether or not there might be distinctly ‘right’ ways to ‘do’ collective memory-work. We agonized over variations in method we had experienced or devised, and debated differences in terminology. We struggled over the question of what variations were possible for the method still to be ‘memory-work’. Particularly in the data collection phase of the memory-work processes, we had engaged in a variety of patterns of participation ranging from virtual non-participation:

*Feeling an outsider almost. They ignored me completely. I didn’t have to worry about any facilitating, they were just getting on with it;*

through subtle directing:

*I found myself saying, “I’m going to write a long memory” to set the standard unobtrusively;*

through reluctance:

She felt she was being a facilitator rather than a co-researcher;

to overt and acknowledged facilitation:

*There was no doubt in my mind that that was my role.*

The collective/control dilemma was seen to relate directly not just to the process but also to the reasons for which the group was formed, and its content:

*I think you have to go in with something if you are the researcher. I think it's different if you come together as a collective. I think it depends on how and why the group is coming together - whether the theme emerges from the collective or whether the researcher says 'I want to know more about this'.*

Thus the collective/control dichotomy reflects the difficulty posed by a key principle of the original concept of memory-work, the role of the researcher as the subject of her own research.

## **COLLAPSE OF SUBJECT AND OBJECT**

Haug states that collective memory-work is “only possible if the subject and object of research are one and the same person” (Haug, 1999, p. 35). However, as researchers operating within defined academic structures, our roles become increasingly complex and invite further exploration. In our discussions we agreed that, for us, memory-work may be described as making the discourses within which we operate in the world more visible. Davies (1994, p. 83) describes the process of speaking and writing memories collectively as one in which researchers “spin the web of themselves and find themselves in the act of that spinning, in the process of making sense out of the cultural threads through which lives are made”. To achieve this requires the researcher to position herself *with* the participants. *With* the participants, we can open up the discourses and be both subject and object of our own research.

Another aspect of the research responsibility in collective memory-work, as we experienced the method, is an emotional commitment to the group. Participants should enjoy and/or gain from the experience, and we, as researchers, should use the data “lovingly” and carefully with an eye to the potential consequences of representation. Our memories suggested that in the final analysis, this emotional commitment of a researcher to others in the group and to the integrity of the project's outcomes was a highly significant feature of the bonded collective experience generated by the memory-work method. This experience of emotional bonding was felt to be an important element which could override tensions of subject/object positioning.

This concept of research as embodied experience is alien to many conventional notions of research, but sits comfortably with notions of feminist inquiry. We were aware that we experienced the process not just as co-researchers/facilitators but as women, as complex and embodied individuals. Being highly personal in nature, memory-work was identified as a highly emotional experience for both participants and researcher:

Reading quickly through the notes transcribed from the previous meeting, Wilma [researcher] smarted, her energy draining. In black and white, marking her forever like a brand scorching her skin, those words that humiliated her.

Feminist researchers (Dupuis, 1999; Ellis, 1991; Ellis, Keisinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997; Friend, 2000; Stanley & Wise, 1990) have argued for the incorporation and acknowledgement of emotion in the research process, yet emotion has until recently most often been constructed as clouding reason. Barbalet (1998) and Scheff (1997) characterize emotion as comprising cognitive and dispositional elements. Emotion states include decision-making and a disposition to act, and as such, emotion contains elements of reason and action as well as of feeling. Emotion can no longer be regarded as a synonym for irrationality. Rather, our analysis suggested that emotionality is an acceptable, necessary and vital aspect of the embodiment of experience and therefore of the research process. Incorporating our feelings and emotions to understand, direct, analyze and interpret our stories in the memory-work process disrupts the rational/irrational binary that, within positivist traditions, has served to silence embodied feminist knowledges.

### **THE REPRODUCTION OF SOCIAL FORMATION**

A central concern of the methodology and its purpose, is to unravel “subjectification”, understood as “the process by which individuals work themselves into social structures they themselves do not consciously determine, but to which they subordinate themselves” (Haug, 1999, p. 59). Unlike theories of socialisation, where the individual is a passive subject "acted upon" by social forces, subjectification entails a degree of complicity, an active subordination of the subject within the social. As a group we recognized common ground in our struggles with issues surrounding subjectification.

A recurring concern for us was that other academics should acknowledge the methodology and us as researchers, as legitimate and credible. The particular academic discipline, institution and academic standing of the researcher all impact on her confidence in her role as facilitator within the group using the method. One way in which this was evident in our study was as a concern about how the method should be implemented:

*That methodology was so new and if I didn't do it in some sort of valid way [it would be questioned]. And there was already . . . debate and questions around it as a valid method. I wanted it all to go well. But I also wanted it to be seen as legitimate . . . [as it] was still very contentious, and probably still is. So there were all those things around the anxiety of getting started . . .*

Thus, despite the power conferred by academic knowledge and positioning, our stories of using memory-work highlighted the degrees of powerlessness and lack of control felt by all researchers at different stages of the method. The unresolved issues of power were not just to do with too much power but also with *lack* of power.

We wanted to be true to the feminist principles of the method, but we were also aware of the conditions and sanctions produced within prevailing academic discourses that were usually applied to obtaining academic recognition and credentials. These contradictions became particularly acute where the memory-work was part of a higher degree and subject to academic supervision. Whilst some supervisors were highly supportive and encouraged their

students to take up memory-work as a research methodology, others were hostile or suspicious of memory-work as a valid research paradigm. Even a benign supervisor may be conscious of the potential responses of examiners and others who will read what may be highly personal and emotive material, and who will 'judge' the work in a traditional academic context.

Our acute awareness of our 'location' within the complex relations of power in academic institutions seemed in some memories even to have colored our readings of the geographic sites we had chosen for our workshops:

The smallish gray seminar room set in the 'power passage' between the Dean's and the school administrator's offices and across from the Graduate Studies Director's office seemed to engulf her. She opened some more windows.

Adopting such an intentionally disruptive research methodology in academic disciplines which are unused to such methods can be read as dangerous, but it is also liberating, a literal 'breath of fresh air' in the suffocating halls of power.

While memory-work is widely acknowledged as a deeply felt emotional experience, it is primarily a research tool (with all that is then implied about its role in formal institutional and academic practices). We, the researchers, often found ourselves subjected to the demands of both these aspects of the process. Three powerful influences on our subjectification as situated memory-work researchers were: constructing and subjugating knowledge; the presentation of ourselves as competent researchers despite our fears; and our need to nurture.

## **CONSTRUCTING AND SUBJUGATING KNOWLEDGE**

Feminist epistemology values knowledges which have traditionally been subjugated in academic contexts, particularly embodied knowledges that are constructed from and through lived experience. As feminist methodology, collective memory-work disrupts the conventions of positivist research with regard to "how and where knowledge is produced and by whom, and...what counts as knowledge" (Weedon, 1997, p.7). In the tradition of feminist theorizing, memory-work utilizes experience expressed through written memory as valid data and legitimizes the subjective personal voice of the researcher/researched. In so doing memory-work creates the space for the otherwise silenced to speak of their experience. In this space all members are, or strive to be, more or less equal in terms of the knowledges constructed.

However, while such a space stimulates the sharing of personal experiences, not all of these are considered material for the public arena. There was a dilemma for us about our role in selecting which memories would be appropriate for the public arena and how the public might interpret these memories. There was concern that researchers, in suppressing certain knowledges in favor of others which would 'count', could be acquiescing to and colluding with repressive discourses.

*You're not wanting to disadvantage women, or whoever the group you are looking at, you don't want to disadvantage them by the outside reading so you are selecting them.*



*I think it's a major issue for me – choosing the memories – choosing how to present them, what order you present them, how much you present. Every time you make those choices it's a power decision...*

One of the women, whose collective had discussed menstruation, effectively illustrated this dilemma:

*Then in publishing a paper you think 'Okay, which ones are we going to select' and I suddenly thought, if I select that one, it's almost like waving a red flag and I thought of males and how they would react. I didn't think about women. Men reading it might think, 'Oh, for heaven's sake'. So there are levels at which we are suppressing and choosing because, 'what effect is it going to have on whoever is reading it?'*

For academic researchers the process of selecting, molding, and thus controlling the material to be exposed was felt to be problematic.

The following memory, reproduced in full, shows clearly how certain knowledges are (in)validated in the process of 'appropriate' socialisation within an academic structure:

They [*supervisor and student*] sat side by side on the couch both looking at Alice's [*student's*] memory detailing her first sexual experience with her partner following major surgery.

"I want you to seriously consider taking it out", said Clarissa [*supervisor*].

"But", said Alice as she reflected again. She thought about what the experience had meant to her. As she did so, tears crept slowly down both of her cheeks. It was such a difficult memory. Difficult to write and equally difficult to share, especially with her partner and she had done so only recently. Alice thought about her motivation for writing the memory, and why other(s) needed to know of her experiences. They need to learn from it she thought.

Clarissa continued. "Think about what it will mean for that memory to be in the public arena", she said. "Someone may choose to use it against you. Not everyone has a benevolent way".

The tears still with her, Alice returned home to her computer. She opened the document, selected the memory and pressed the delete key.

This memory shows how accepting another's pronouncement can dampen inquiry and knowledge and, as Haug (1999) argues, even prevent possible thoughts and ideas from emerging. As an example of how knowledges are subjugated, it is also an example of how certain knowledges are produced. For, while sexuality is never mentioned, there is in Foucault's terms (see Haug, 1999) a clear deployment of sexuality which functions through its regulation. This is achieved through the supervisor (Clarissa) marking out the site in which sexuality will not appear (Alice's memory text). As Alice's sexuality is eliminated and made secret, Clarissa produces a discourse of sexuality which takes effect through a dynamic of sexual repression. In this memory, our perception is directed to Clarissa's intentions, which suggest concern for Alice. However, value-laden issues of power and selection intervene to quash Alice's openness. As Alice acquiesces in Clarissa's advice, she does not achieve her own purpose of helping

others to learn from her experience. She obliterates a part of herself through pressing the “delete key”.

Struggling with our positions as co-researchers in this kind of academic structure - in regard to needing to select narratives for a defined, public purpose at the same time as being collective members of the group creating those narratives - can lead us to be confused about appropriate priorities. It can make us highly vulnerable and so sensitive to the dynamics of the group and to comments made by other group members that process not only suppresses knowledge but also prevents its generation:

One of the women started to say something, stopped, turned to her [*researcher*] and said, “I’m not sure how you want us to do this Sue. I don’t know what you want”. Others murmured. Fear pulsed through her body, panic, she realized she did not know herself.

Thus, where memory-work is used specifically for an academic goal, institutional structures can greatly influence subjectification and dominate social formation.

## **THE PRESENTATION OF OURSELVES AS COMPETENT RESEARCHERS DESPITE OUR FEARS**

In academic work we usually ‘decline to say’ our anxieties as researchers. We are ‘forbidden to name’ the fleeting moments of fear about our competence and credibility. Certainty and confidence are essential qualities in presenting and defending one’s research, and in pursuing academic careers. Doubts are rarely spoken out aloud and even less likely to be made the focus of academic papers when the subjects themselves are successful academics.

Regardless of having successfully completed memory-work research and of our levels of credibility and experience as researchers, we all wrote about and discussed our feelings of incompetence. We recalled being anxious about ‘being good researchers’ both in collecting and presenting the research, and about its reception by others in the wider research community. Particularly in regard to the collective process of the memory-work methodology, our anxieties were deeply felt. We felt anxious about our sense of responsibility to ‘get it right’. We were responsible for the layout of the room, the furniture, the food and drink, and whether the technology worked. But more than that, we felt responsible for the participants and for the outcomes.

She was assailed by all the last-minute doubts. Would the equipment work? Would anyone say anything other than trite banalities? Would they bring their scripts? Would anyone even turn up? Would this be the time when her veneer of competent professionalism would melt away exposing the anxieties and inadequacies beneath?

*I think it’s interesting that the first thing that came into my mind was this setting up thing and feeling responsible for the success of the group.*

A strong connection between silence and the researcher’s anxiety emerged through the memories. In some stories the anxiety engendered by silence became manifest in the researcher’s body.

She relaxed into her chair and listened carefully as the first woman read her memory to the group. She noted down phrases and images as she listened. The reader finished and there were low murmurs of “Mmmm”, “very good”, and sighs as if of recognition from the audience. Then there was silence. Glances criss-crossed the table, someone cleared their throat, she looked downwards at the tabletop. She had to stop herself from jumping in, not wanting to go first, to break the silence first. Her jaw grew tense, her body began to tighten.

The fear provoked by the research context of memory-work was experienced as a powerfully physical force both before and after the memory-work sessions were held:

She kept walking, imagining, remembering, anticipating, hoping. Mind racing, mouth dry, heart pumping as she pushed open the door...

In her anxiety as to whether the session had really worked successfully, she lost power in her legs to walk...She had to get a taxi back up the hill.

These feelings of anxiety about the process were unexpected. As one of us recalled, anxiety had received little mention in published memory-work texts. Rather, these texts suggested different sorts of feelings.

*I'd read Haug and I'd read the June Crawford book and I'd read some of Glenda's and everybody's work and the impression I had was a group of keen women get together, they're really enthusiastic, all this comes out of it, you know, the meetings go on into the night, no one wants to leave, they can't wait for the next meeting, they want to come back.*

Our own project, however, which focussed specifically on memory-workers doing memory-work, revealed researchers' anxieties in the same measure as their exhilaration or enthusiasm for the method.

## **THE NEED TO NURTURE**

Nurturance, a sense of the need to nurture, emerged as a dominant theme within the stories we told. This theme goes beyond our academic training to our primary social construction as women. The stereotypical hostessing role was represented in our stories by clichés such as “waiting for the guests to arrive”, “the frilly apron cast aside”, and “the white cloth serenely covering the table”. Within the usual conditions and habit of binary logic and the prevailing discourses of gender differences, nurturance is usually ascribed to the feminine position. It is embodied as female (Gilligan, 1982). Typically, we, as feminist researchers, felt compelled to invest time and energy into providing a nurturant atmosphere. Frequently this meant engaging in obvious, taken-for-granted practices of nurturing such as the preparation and presenting of food.

*I spent so much time and energy on the bloody food it was ridiculous.*

The presentation of food is not usually considered relevant to the obtaining of research data and it is certainly not specified in the prescribed practices of this method. Indeed it may seem antithetical to the expressed desire by the researcher to present as rigorous and competent.

Nonetheless, in most of the memories food takes a central part in creating an appropriate atmosphere.

She sat around the wooden table with her writing friends. She was pleased with herself, at how well things were going, at how carefully she had prepared, there was fresh juice in a jug, good bread, cheese and fruit on the bench behind them, and wine chilling in the fridge for later.

On occasions foods were even selected to ‘match’ the needs of the particular participants:

*I was so nervous about “What do I offer them?” Now I think about it, the food has been a big issue for me. With the different age groups it’s been different food, food that’s been more suitable.*

Nurturing the participants also went beyond the provision of food. There was a general feeling of responsibility for “the wellbeing of the group, trying to make it nice for them”, determining “what will make people feel comfortable and not comfortable”, and “being responsible for it being alright for them”.

*[There was the] notion of our awareness that the self-esteem of some of the participants is very fragile or vulnerable. Part of the responsibility of facilitator is to nurture them.*

Also, in an extension of the nurturing role, we took great care with the intellectual preparation of the group. Many of us were concerned to share the method and the theory with the participants, not merely to use it on them. Often we would discuss this material with participants.

All the women had brought along their blue folders from last week. They carefully discussed the extracts from Haug’s and Davies’s work that she’d [the researcher] photocopied for them. They’d teased out what terms like “rationalizations” and “explanations” might mean.

Through our stories we came to realize the significance for us of our need to nurture, to balance the human needs and expectations of participants against the imperatives of the research process, even though none of us had articulated this before. Clearly the levels of social formation in which we were involved were multiple and highly complex.

## **REFLECTION ON MEMORY-WORK AS A MEANS OF PRODUCING AGENCY AND CHANGE**

The issues of unresolved power in carrying out memory-work prompted stories which highlighted the vulnerability of the researcher. However, it was the method itself which enabled these stories – usually silenced, and secret - to emerge. Recognition that vulnerability and anxiety were experienced by most of us moved our individual emotional experiences into a different arena, one of collectively recognized and understood experience. Through the memory-work method, each one of us constructed and re-constructed our sense of self as a

researcher. In so doing, we became more confident to express the specific conditions of our personal research situations and in this way agency was generated at a fundamental level.

At another level, it gradually emerged that one of the driving forces behind the pressure we put on ourselves as memory-work researchers comes from our sense of “mission”. Memory-work itself is explicitly concerned with empowerment, with bringing about some positive change in the participants and in the world. Haug and her colleagues begin their book with the following statement:

Our object in this book is women’s capacity – or incapacity – for action and for happiness. It involves a study of the structures, the relations within which women live and the ways in which they get a grip on them. (Haug, 1999, p. 33)

We wanted our memory-work to lead to action, to engender some sort of personal and social change, to succeed in the larger world of creative empowerment of our participant group and others like them. Through our storying we recognized that as we evaluate the process we have initiated, we rarely lose sight of the longer term goals of creating opportunities for agency and change which the method opens up. Echoes of justification slipped into our memories:

Alice [*researcher*] thought about her motivation for writing the memory and why others needed to know of her experiences. They need to learn from them, she thought.

She [*Alice*] will tell them that this is an opportunity to participate in generating knowledge about the lives of women and children.

Sometimes the impulse toward change was unfulfilled and outcomes were not understood as action. The closure of a memory-work session could be associated with a feeling of flatness - a feeling that *this didn't quite come off*, that the researcher had failed because the group had not apparently experienced any change in understanding:

There seemed to be little more to say so Chrystal [*researcher*] wound up, asking if the group wanted to meet a third time. No, they didn’t have any further issues. Chrystal said she hoped they had gained from the process. Yes, they’d found it interesting and enjoyable, but one of the women said she didn’t think she had learned anything new. Others nodded. Chrystal thanked them for their participation, but felt flat.

In the discussion, Chrystal recalled feeling flat because she felt she

*Wasn’t at my best in terms of enabling the group to fizz and buzz, because she was not tapping into stuff, and because one of the women said she didn’t think she had learnt anything new.*

Taking responsibility for the group’s increased agency, as well as for the academic validity of the results, added to our assessment of what constitutes a successful outcome. On at least one occasion participants had been inspired by the memory-work method to take their insights into the public arena themselves (see Luthfi, Bellido-Caceres, Meiliani, Shahin, Siwamogsa, Sudhakaran & Sumpowthong, 2000), thus furthering their ownership of the process and adding

a dimension to the researchers' appraisal of success.

The capacity of the individual to reflect on memory is a crucial condition for intentionality, and hence agency (Shotter, 1984). While we had discussed our various experiences with the method as a group in the main conference sessions, it was only through 'using the method to explore the method' that we came to understand that the anxiety each member had felt in the research process, was actually shared by all in the collective. We broadened our understandings of our selves as (anxious) researchers from an individual to a wider social/ cultural context. It was an empowering experience.

Through this process, we began to reposition our researcher selves outside of the humanist tradition which Haug and her colleagues describe, wherein, "attention is focused on individuals seen in isolation from the conditions in which they live" and,

what is demanded of the individual is an inner triumph over the surrounding conditions. Individuals are left to come to terms on their own with those conditions, and success is measured in terms of the way the individual can adjust his or her response to them (Haug, 1999, pp. 222-223).

From an individualistic perspective, an anxious researcher may consider herself to be inept or unsuited to academic work. With the collective insight that memory-work brings, we began to see that what we had felt as a weakness for each of us as individuals, could actually be a resource from which we all drew in our commitment to the success of our project for everyone involved. From this realization we can go on to challenge the institutions and disciplines within which we work and study about procedures for gaining academic credentials and publications, and about how research is conceptualized within and outside academia. Our own agency is thus multi-faceted.

## CONCLUSION

In our academic work, using memory-work methodology, we have each grappled with questions of power and authority which have sometimes been emotionally, physically, and intellectually challenging. Examining and analyzing our embodied experience as researchers in a memory-work collective was one way in which we could "get a grip" on the academic and social structures and relations within which we are developing personally and professionally as feminist academics. Additionally, by unraveling our own subjectification as memory-work researchers, we have engaged in essential processes of reflexivity and critique. As feminist scholars we also aim, as Lather (1991, p. 80) describes, to develop "the skills of self-critique, of a reflexivity which will keep us from being impositional and reify ourselves" in terms dictated by patriarchal modes of knowledge.

What had not been shared with our previous memory-work groups but emerged in our workshop collective was the reproduction of numerous acts of powerlessness through self-doubt, anxiety, 'being good', trying hard to be seen as credible, putting burdens of nurturing and perfection on ourselves, and catching ourselves being silent/silenced in the very act of making our participants' voices, including our own, heard. To a large degree, in generating our own memory-work groups, we have been active in our own "subjectification" as anxious researchers. Our written stories provide clues into the active ways in which we have created ourselves in the social structures in which we have chosen to participate. From the many insights of our

memory-work analysis, perhaps the most acute is the realization of how hard we try to be seen as credible and competent, instead of taking that power and believing in it.

The insights and anxieties which emerged from our analyses of practice gave rise to on-going discussion about the nature of the methodology itself. There was some concern about the tension between the need to sustain the organic vitality of an emergent methodology and the maintenance of the integrity of memory-work *per se*. We expressed a range of views and experiences in applying, and modifying, the method as we recognized our questions regarding the status of ‘principles’ as against ‘rules’, and ‘guidelines’ as against ‘procedures’. Finally we came to the general conclusion that, as we continue to work through the issues we have identified,

*...at some point down the track [we need] to articulate principles. [We need] as memory-workers to identify a set of principles and a variety of structures, so that the structures of the memory-work process would be fluid, but that the principles would not be compromised. Because if we don't compromise the principles we've always got a methodology.*

Although the written stories recorded moments of anxiety, our discussions were animated and excited, and affirmed that each of us had found that memory-work, as a research methodology, generated great joy. At short notice, we had come to the Memory-work Research Conference from interstate and international locations because of our enthusiasm, our commitment and our continuing interest in the methodology of memory-work. Within our diverse individual experiences as memory-workers and within the collective which came into being for this project, we would concur with Haug and the original collective that:

Despite our own experiences of bottlenecks, dead ends and running on the spot, we would nonetheless plead, in conclusion, that this form of story-writing is a solid method. Writing stories is fun. More than this, it expands our knowledge enormously, sharpens our social perception, improves our use of language, changes our attitude to others and to ourselves. It is a politically necessary form of cultural labor. It makes us live our lives more consciously (Haug, 1999, p. 71).

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