

# MEMORY-WORK: AN INTRODUCTION

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Research methodology, from the perspective of Critical social science, is considered as:

inherently political, as inescapably tied to issues of power and legitimacy. It is assumed that methods are permeated with assumptions about what the social world is, who the social scientist is, and what the nature of the relation between them is (Lather, 1991, p.12).

Critical social science moves away from description of behaviour as enduring social fact to attempting to understand how behaviour is produced, thus recasting behaviour as “the effects of contingent and contested processes of change” (Churchman, 2000, p.100 citing Scott).

Feminists and those working within a social constructionist paradigm have debated whether there are research methods specific to such approaches. In other words, is there *a* social constructionist or feminist method? Schwandt (1994), in discussing constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human enquiry, commented that “what is unusual about the approaches cannot be explained through an examination of their methods. They are principally concerned with matters of knowing and being, not method per se” (p.118). Feminists have also considered that it is the methodology and outcomes rather than the methods which define the research as being feminist. Nonetheless, while feminists have adopted a variety of methods, they have tended to prefer qualitative methods. It is generally agreed that a method for women needs to be one in which women can present their thoughts and feelings in their own words rather than the words of the researcher. As Graham (1984) argues regarding the use of narrative in survey research, the emphasis is on the telling rather than the asking; participants can choose what and how much to tell. The traditional hierarchical manipulative relationship between researcher and researched can be broken down and interviewing can be an interactive experience.

Notwithstanding that they are the premises underlying a research project which define it as critical social science, one innovative research method which has been developed to suit a social constructionist feminist paradigm is memory-work (Haug & Others, 1987).

Appreciating the link between ontology, epistemology, methodology, theory and method, German feminists and socialists Frigga Haug and Others (1987) developed the research method “memory-work”. Their first attempts at memory-work were in the study of female socialisation and published in Volume 1 of *Frauenformen* (Women’s Forms). Research into sexuality as a form of socialisation led to the publication in 1983 of *Sexualisierung: Frauenformen*, with the English translation *Female Sexualisation* published in 1987 with Haug as the principal author. A second edition was published in 1999. Memory-work has also been discussed by Haug in *Beyond Female Masochism: Memory-work and Politics* (1992). In the mid-1980s, while a visiting scholar in Sydney, Haug introduced the concept of memory-work to a group of Australian academics. One particular group, June Crawford, Susan Kippax, Jenny Onyx, Una Gault and Pam Benton (SPUJ collective), employed the method in a study of the social construction of emotion and published *Emotion and Gender* in 1992. In the

process of their research, they developed and documented the method. They expanded and made more explicit the “rules” or guidelines of the method.

## THE PHILOSOPHY

The method is a social constructionist method as it focusses primarily “on the process whereby individuals construct themselves into existing social relations” (Haug, 1987, p.33). Referring to Haug, Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault and Benton (1992) state, “the strength of her method is that it is integral to her theory of socialisation, of how persons become selves and the part persons themselves play in that construction” (p.37). Haug (1987) stresses the active participation of individuals in the ‘socialization’ process. They emphasise, “The question we want to raise is thus an empirical one; it is the ‘how’ of lived feminine practice” (p.33). The underlying theory is that the self is socially constructed through reflection – memories. The construction of self at any moment plays an important part in how the event is constructed. Memories therefore are studied in their own right; they are not judged against the ‘real/true’ past event. As Arnold (cited in Bain, 1995) says, “meaning does not lie *in* the experience. Rather experiences *become* meaningful as a result of being grasped reflectively” (p.240). Events are composed as they are remembered (Douglass, 1994). As the present changes so do our memories.

Memory ... is unlocking the past; freeing the spirit. Memory is filling the gaps, breaking the silence, telling what could previously not be spoken, which was buried in the frozen silences of the history of women. (Walkerline, 1990, p.112)

Haug (1987) states:

The very notion that our own past experience may offer some insight into the ways in which individuals construct themselves into existing relations, thereby themselves reproducing a social formation, itself contains an implicit argument for a particular methodology. If we refuse to understand ourselves simply as a bundle of reactions to all-powerful structures, or to the social relations within which we have formed us, if we search instead for possible indications of how we have participated actively in the formation of our past experience, then the usual mode of social-scientific research, in which individuals figure exclusively as objects of the process of research, has to be abandoned ... Since however we are concerned here with the possible means whereby human beings may themselves assume control, and thus with the potential prospect of liberation, our research itself must be seen as an intervention into existing practices. (Haug, 1987, p.34)

The basic premises of a social constructionist approach bring into question the relationship of researcher, researched and knowledge. Bond and Gilliam (1994) see the work of scholars as an “extension of omphaloscepsis” (p.13). The scholar/ researcher develops paradigms to explain “that which they have themselves created” (p.13). As Mills (1970) says, the social scientist is not “outside society”. “No one is ‘outside society’; the question is where each stands within it.” (Mills, 1970, p.204). An acknowledgement of reflexivity requires a writer/researcher to identify their social location. As Moore (1994) says, “The question of who speaks for whom and on what basis has given rise in feminist debate to a number of very significant divisions; one of which is the split between theory and practice” (p.79).

Haug (1987) recognised that in the research process “constructions can be elicited and refined only through interaction *between and among* investigator and respondents (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.111). Memory-work aims to close the split. It breaks down the barriers between the subject and object of research. The participants are the subjects of their own research. The researched become researchers, thus eliminating the hierarchy of “experimenter” and “subject”. Ideally, the academic researcher positions herself with the group and becomes a member of the research group. The Haug collective refers to the participants as “co-researchers”.

Memory-work involves a collective examination and theorisation of individuals’ experiences. Through group discussion the participants can gain in understanding and new meanings. This can lead to social change and liberation. Haug defended the collective’s commitment to subjectivity against criticisms that such findings cannot be generalisable. If our lives are produced collectively, then our lived experiences are subject to universalisation.

There are three phases of memory-work. In the first phase the participants write a memory of a particular experience. The basic rules for writing (from Haug, 1987) are:

1. Write 1 - 2 pages about a particular episode, action or event (referred to by researchers as a “trigger” or “cue”).

The writing of the memory has a number of benefits. It provides a discipline for the group, the group remembers more through writing and it gives the everyday experiences of life a status, which is considered of particular importance for women.

2. Write in the third person using a pseudonym.

The advantage of writing in the third person is that the participant can create personal distance, and view the memory from the outside. This helps to avoid justification of the experience.

3. Write in as much detail as possible, including even what might be considered to be trivial or inconsequential.

By asking for the trivial it is hoped to avoid an evaluation by the participants of what was important or unimportant. Such an evaluation might well be socially defined.

4. Describe the experience, don’t import interpretation, explanation or biography.

Interpretation smoothes over the rough edges and covers up the absences and inconsistencies which are crucial elements of the analysis. The selection of a suitable trigger topic is vital, but difficult. In particular, a conventional topic is likely to produce a conventional, well-rehearsed response. The trick is to produce the more jagged stuff of personal lived experience.

In Phase 2 the individuals as a collective discuss the written memories. Crawford et al. (1992) explain: “The two foci of memory-work capture something of the duality of self. The self talking with itself is phase 1 and responding to itself as others respond to it is phase 2” (p.40).

Although expressed as Phase 1 and Phase 2, Crawford et al. (1992) stress, “intersubjectivity precedes subjectivity” (p.52). As they explain:

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 – both then at the time of the episode and now in reflection. The memories of events are collectively reappraised. Memory-work makes it possible to put the agent, the actor, back into psychology – in both method and theory – without falling into psychological individualism. (Crawford et al., 1992, p.53)

As Stephenson (see this collection) states:

From a methodological perspective, one way in which taking part in memory-work challenges the rational, unitary, fixed subject is that a co-researcher is not automatically credited with the ultimate powers of interpretation over her own experience.

Crawford et al. (1992) cite Harre's argument that "human agents are also social beings, persons. Indeed their agency depends upon them being social beings" (p.53).

*Phase 2* also proceeds through a set procedure (as identified in Crawford et al., 1992, p.49):

1. Each memory-work group member expresses opinions and ideas about each written memory in turn.
2. The collective looks for similarities and differences between the memories. The group members look for continuous elements among the memories whose relation to each other is not immediately apparent. Each member should question particularly those aspects of the events which do not appear amenable to comparison, without resorting to biography.
3. Each member identifies clichés, generalisations, contradictions, cultural imperatives, metaphor, etc. This is one way of identifying the markers of the 'taken-for-granted' social explication of the meaning of recurring events.
4. The group discusses theories, popular conceptions, sayings and images about the topic, again as a way of identifying the common social explication of meaning around the topic.
5. The group also examines what is not written in the memories (but which might be expected to be). Silences are sometimes eloquent pointers to issues of deep significance but which are painful or particularly problematic to the author.
6. The memory may be rewritten.

This collective analysis aims to uncover the common social understanding of each event, the social meanings embodied in the actions described in the written accounts, and how these meanings are arrived at:

The collective reflection and examination may suggest revising the interpretation of the common patterns, and the analysis proceeds by moving from individual memories to the cross-sectional analysis and back again in a recursive fashion ... In this way the method is reflexive. It generates data and at the same time points to modes of action for the co-researchers (Crawford et al., 1992, p. 49).

In *Phase 3* the material provided from both the written memories and the collective discussion of them, is further theorized. This phase is essentially a recursive process, in which the insights concerning the 'common sense' of each set of memories is related back to the earlier discussions and to theoretical discussions within the wider academic literature. *Phase 3* is usually done by one of the co-researchers as an individual (academic) exercise, though with drafts of this process subject to further discussion by other members of the collective.

## APPLICATION OF THE METHOD

Since the path-breaking work of Haug and her colleagues, the method has been taken up and developed by many researchers around the world. Feminists in particular have found resonance with its potential for reaching new depths of human (female) experience. Some have taken it further into a poststructural/postmodern paradigm and prefer the term “collective biography” (Davies, 1994, 2000; Davies, Dormer, Gannon, Laws, Rocco, Taguchi & McCann, 2001; Davies, Dormer, Honan, McAllister, O’Reilly, Rocco & Walker, 1997; Davies & Gannon, 2006; Gannon, 2001; Kamler, 1996, 1999). Those using memory-work (or collective biography) come from diverse disciplines and fields of study. The subject areas in which the method has been employed are broad: *emotion and gender* (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault & Benton, 1990, 1992; Kippax, Crawford, Benton, Gault & Noesjirwan, 1988); *the experience of women leaders* (Boucher, 1997a, 1997b; Boucher & Smyth, 1996); *work-life harmony* (Small, Ateljevic, Harris & Wilson, 2006); *body/landscape relations* (Davies, 2000); *body and place* (Stratford, 1997); *racism* (Schratz, 1996; Schratz, Walker & Schratz-Hadwich, 1995); *subjectivity* (Davies et al., 2001); *silence and gender* (Davies et al., 1997); *women’s sexuality* (Farrar, 2000); *consumer service encounters* (Friend, 1997, 2000; Friend & Rummel, 1995; Friend & Thompson, 2000); *patient-practitioner relationships* (FitzPatrick, 2004); *leisure experiences* (Friend, Grant & Gunson, 2000; Grant & Friend, 1997; McCormack, 1995a, 1995b, 1998); *tourist experiences* (Small, 2002, 2003, 2005); *sport* (Laitinen & Tiihonen, 1990; Markula & Friend, 2005; Ryan, 2005; Sironen, 1994); *use of memory-work to enhance student learning* (Friend, 1999; Grant & Friend, 1997; Rummel & Friend, 2000); *student assessment process* (O’Conor, 1998); *experiences of casual ESOL teachers* (Granwal, 1998); *women’s writing* (Gannon, 1999; Kamler, 1996); *emotion and gender and learning* (Ingleton, 1994, 1995); *study of economics and gender* (Ingleton, 1997); *emotion and mathematics learning* (Ingleton, 2000; Ingleton & O’Regan, 1998); *science* (Kaufman, Montgomery, Ewing, Hyle & Self, 1995); *women and mathematics* (Johnston, 1995, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 1998d; Webber, 1998); *menstruation* (Davies, 1994; Koutroulis, 1996a, 2001); *pro-feminist subjectivities among men* (Pease, 2000a, 2000b); *women’s speaking positions and feminine subjectivities* (Stephenson, 1996, 1997, 2001a, 2001b; Stephenson, Kippax & Crawford, 1996); *women and AIDS prevention* (Kippax, Crawford, Waldby & Benton, 1990); *HIV treatments* (Stephenson, 2000, 2005); *older women, health and relationships* (Mitchell, 1991, 1993, 2000); *heterosexuality and desire* (Davies, 1994; Rocco, 1999); and *critiques of memory-work* (Koutroulis, 1993, 1996b; Onyx & Small, 2001; Small, 1999, 2004; Small, Cadman, Friend, Gannon, Ingleton, Koutroulis, McCormack, Mitchell, Onyx, O’Regan, & Rocco, 2007).

While the above researchers have been committed to the basic philosophy and tenets of memory-work, the various disciplinary bases, subject areas and approaches of the researchers have meant various adaptations of the method.

## MEMORY-WORK CONFERENCE

Despite the employment of memory-work as a research method across a broad range of disciplines, there has been little formal critique of the method. This collection of papers is the outcome of the coming together of a group of researchers at a Memory-work Conference in

Sydney to examine the method. It was encouraging and exciting that of the thirty contacts at the time who were using memory-work, twenty-two attended the conference. They were all women. As the researchers came from a variety of disciplines and with research often unpublished, there was an ignorance of the others engaged in the method. The researchers welcomed the opportunity to share experiences and debate issues of concern with other like-minded academics. What emerged from the conference papers was the researchers' dedication to their research and to memory-work and awareness of the "issues of power and legitimacy" which are inherent in methodology. As feminists the women were trying hard through memory-work to dismantle the hierarchical relationship that exists in positivist research and to accurately re/present the voices of their participants. They were aware of the powerful role of the researcher in research. Following the formal program of conference papers, a conference workshop involving eleven memory-work users, enabled the women, through the use of memory-work explicitly to explore further "unresolved issues of power".

The papers in this collection are those presented in the formal program of the conference and the paper which emerged from the workshop. They address key issues with which women using the method have grappled. It was apparent that the users of memory-work had turned to both Haug (1987, 1999)<sup>1</sup> and Crawford et al. (1992) in their understanding and employment of the method.

The first paper in this collection critiquing the method is by **Patricia Farrar** who discusses memory-work in terms of exploring "sensitive topics". She claims that memory-work is well suited to the research of sensitive topics as the method allows the experiences of the individual participants to be projected from a personal context to a social context. However she concludes from her research that it is possible that some topics of investigation can be *too* sensitive and thus too painful and personal to allow for the deconstruction that memory-work involves. She also discusses the experience of the transcriber when working with material of a highly sensitive nature.

**Jennie Small** looks at the use of memory-work with different age groups of participants. The paper reports how 12 year old girls, 20 year old women, women in their 40s and women aged 65+ approached the various tasks of the three phases of memory-work. She points to the differences in the task of writing a memory and following the "rules" of the method (Phase 1). The author reflects on how the collective theorising and challenging of the public discourse differed by age groups and suggests how the participants' memories and interaction with memory-work are produced from within the dynamics of the research setting. The difficulty (or impossibility) of being a "co-researcher" (in Phases 2 and 3), when the researcher is unable to position herself with age groups different from her own, is addressed.

**Betty Johnston** explores participants' layered memories which represent what she calls "the texture of the everyday". She claims that "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

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that for a collective method, an inherent difficulty within our traditional publication system is how to reference a collective. In this collection of papers, the authors of *Female sexualisation* (the original text outlining the method) are variously referred to as "Haug et al.", "Haug and others", "Haug and her co-researchers", or "Haug".

normality of heteronomy' – the normality of external control, of other people's rules". However she sees a possible contradiction in how we go about doing memory-work with its own set of "rules" and the strength of the method which is supposed to help us explore the normality including other people's rules. She asks, "Are we allowing ourselves to be 'trained in the normality of [this specific] heteronomy'?" The reliance on rules is claimed to be a consequence of memory-workers' gradual movement away from the method's theoretical anchors.

The concept of the "collective" which is central to memory-work is explored in various ways by a number of authors.

**Niamh Stephenson** examines the rationale for and explanation of memory-work's "collective subject", how the "we" is understood and practised in memory-work. She claims that in the original method there has been an "overemphasis on identifying commonalities between group members' positions and ideas, at the expense of interrogating difference". Rather than thinking of difference as "personal instability", by interrogating difference we will arrive at new understandings and possible change. (This paper has been published in *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* – see Stephenson 2005.)

A problem experienced by all of the authors in this collection is the issue of analysis of memory-work data when participants and researcher do not share the same academic goals and thus cannot collectively have the final say in the analysis of the data.

**Glenda Koutroulis** focusses on the spoken text/narratives/stories (as opposed to the written memories) that arise in the more intimate research setting offered by memory-work discussion. She expresses her concern that these narratives are not subject to the collective theorising and analysis in the same way as are the written memories. Therefore, converting these stories to data orchestrated "a shift of collective participants as subject-object to a position of object-Other". Like the other authors, her concern is ethical. In this shift, whose voice is heard and whose is not heard?

**Christine Ingleton** also focusses on this issue and expresses her concern that in the "process of selection and thematisation, there has been a paring down and concentration of focus which has inevitably whittled down the voices of the groups". Judgements have been made by her, as the researcher, beyond her level of conscious awareness. In order to create a transparent means of analysis, Christine Ingleton proposes a model for the theoretical basis and uses headings based on discourse analysis for the analysis of her project.

**Kate Cadman, Lorraine Friend, Susanne Gannon, Christine Ingleton, Glenda Koutroulis, Coralie McCormack, Patricia Mitchell, Jenny Onyx, Kerry O'Regan, Sharn Rocco and Jennie Small** highlight the powerful influences on the researchers' subjectification. By unravelling their own subjectification as memory-work researchers in the memory-work workshop, the women engaged in essential processes of reflexivity and critique of the academic and social structures and relations within which they were developing personally and professionally as feminist academics. The exploration suggested that using memory-work within the dominant positivist discourses and patriarchal structures of academe could, at times, leave feminist researchers, feeling anxious and powerless. The researchers strived to provide a

nurturing environment for their participants, to hear and accurately report their participants' voices and, at the same time, to be seen as academically credible and competent. Not an easy feat! (This study has been published in *The critical turn in tourism studies: Innovative research methodologies* – see Small et al. 2007).

The themes and issues presented in this collection reflect the grappling of individual memory-workers forging new paths. Hopefully others currently engaged in memory-work, or others anticipating doing so, will benefit from the soul searching presented here. As Christine Ingleton, in her paper says, “The methodology forces on us an honesty that is generally unquestioned in methodologies that are ostensibly objective and rigorous”. The honesty reflected in this collection of papers reflects the thoughtfulness and dedication of the memory-workers in their concern to carefully and “lovingly” re/present the voices of women they are researching and to create a space for social change.

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