

RESEARCHING DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS THROUGH MEMORY-WORK

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the issue of researching different age groups using the research method, memory-work. Four age groups have been studied: 12 years, 20 years, 40 years, and 65+ years, in an investigation of women's and girls' good and bad holiday experiences. The paper highlights the different ways in which the different age groups approached the key features of memory-work: the writing of memories of holiday experiences and the collective discussion and theorising of these experiences. The emergent good and bad themes of women's and girls' holiday experiences cannot be understood without reference to the research method - memory-work, the relationship of the different age groups to the method, the other participants, the researcher and the socio-cultural environment. It is from within this context that the memories of holiday experiences emerged. The paper highlights the difficulties of researchers interpreting the experiences of age groups different from their own.

INTRODUCTION

The challenge for a feminist researcher is how to make audible the voices of women. Amongst women there are some groups who are more likely to have been socially silenced than others. Age is a criterion which may marginalise certain groups. In the present paper I discuss how I attempted to hear the voices of different age groups of women using the research method, memory-work. In addition to a young adult and middle aged group, I included in my study, the aged groups which are perhaps the most marginalised, children and older women.

Traditional, mainstream psychological developmental literature and research methods literature have tended to neglect fundamental questions as to **how** one might go about researching different age groups or whether we ever can re/present their voices. Where age is mentioned it is usually as an independent variable or in terms of how to get a *true* measurement of the dependent variable. This omission is not surprising as a traditional positivist approach would not question historical and cultural specificity of knowledge nor relate ways of knowing about the world with the methodology employed. In recent years, some of the feminist and critical researchers, in questioning positivism, have also questioned the research methodologies appropriate to different age cohorts.

Allred (1998, p.150), in discussing children, explains that for the past 150 years the focus on children "has been on what happens to them (and processes they undergo), rather on what they do or say". This is confounded with a developmental approach to children which stresses "the construction of a linear, sequential and normalized process

by which children become adults”. As Alldred (1998, p.150) says (citing Speir), “Developmental discourses, therefore, exacerbate children’s objectification within research. It is not unless children are seen as people in their own right that they can be thought of as participants of research”. Mayall (1999) also rejects traditional approaches to childhood which have denied children agency and discusses different means for researching children’s understandings of their social position. One way of viewing children in action is to study children talking to each other, thus providing the opportunity to observe children constructing and reconstructing their ideas.

Sargent (1999) in discussing the study of older women has made the point that gerontology has traditionally adopted research methods of a positivist science. As she says, “...many gerontologists have been prevented by their positivist philosophy from seeing their work as ideological. They have not necessarily understood that their ‘scientific’ activity has supported the status quo and the present distribution of power in the world” (p. 41). As an age group, the older woman is devalued in the general social discourse. Gerontology has been partly responsible for such devaluation.

In listening to women’s voices, I wanted to hear their talk of tourism; how women of different ages experience holidays, how they talk amongst themselves and how they collectively make sense of holidays. In recent decades, tourism has become part of the modern experience with many alleged benefits for the tourist participants. This paper is based on a study which explored women’s and girls’ understanding of holiday experiences and the associated benefits which they are presumed to enjoy. While limited, research which has taken the woman tourist/holidaymaker as central (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault and Benton, 1992; Davidson, 1996; and Deem, 1996) has suggested that holidays for women are not necessarily the pleasurable experience of conventional understanding. These studies have focussed on, what might be called, middle aged women. As age cohorts, children, young adults and older women have been marginalised and generally omitted from gender studies of tourism. In the tourism literature as a whole there have been some writings on “seniors”, some on “youth” (young adults), very little on children and middle aged adults (it may be that many tourism studies are focussed on this middle aged group but the age of participants is not identified). Where researchers have focussed on an age group, the research has been more descriptive than analytic. Overall, the age group of least interest to tourism researchers has been children. Most tourism research has not even treated children as an *object* of investigation, let alone the *subject*. Tourism researchers have treated the child as passive in decision making, of little economic interest, and thus the childhood experience has been of minimal concern.

The theoretical framework for my research is social constructionism, which, in the case of the present research, emphasises the historical, cultural, and social specificity of the terms in which the tourist experience is understood. The assumptions from this paradigm are that women’s and girls’ tourist experiences are socially constructed, that is, women and girls are likely to have a specific view of tourism and holidays and that this knowledge will also vary by age. Being interested in ordinary women and their holidays, I wanted to look at everyday experiences as a basis of knowledge. By looking at experiences from different age vantage points, I hoped to

gain some idea of how the holiday experience has been constructed over the years. This paper critiques the use of the method, memory-work, in researching different age groups of women. It should be noted that the relationship between the researching of different age groups and the method, memory-work, has to be considered within the context of my research topic and the characteristics of participants in the research groups.

The research questions I was investigating were:

1. How do women and girls construct the holiday experience? What is a good experience and what is a bad experience? How are these experiences explained? Are there patterns of experience?; and
2. Is the construction related to age?

METHOD

To correspond with my own paradigm, I employed the feminist, social constructionist research method, memory-work (Haug, 1987). Memory-work was chosen as a method as it aims to break down the barriers between the subject and the object of research. Everyday experience is the basis of knowledge. In its "ideal" format, the academic researcher positions herself with the group and becomes a member of the research group. In its original conception, the researched become researchers, thus eliminating the hierarchy of "experimenter" and "subject" (Haug and others(1987) referred to the participants as "co-researchers"). Memory-work appealed as a means of giving voice to women and to hear publically the experiences of different age groups.

In my research, *Phase 1* involved a group of 4 - 5 participants, each writing a memory about a holiday experience. Since the purpose of the method is to let the group decide the direction of the discussion, I needed to choose a broad topic for the trigger. Since I was concerned about the negative and positive aspects of the tourist experience for women, I decided on two triggers: a good holiday experience, and a bad (or "not so good") holiday experience. The memories were to be written according to the set of rules specified by Haug (1987) and Crawford et al. (1992) (outlined in Small, this collection).

Phase 2, in which there is the collective analysis of the memories, again followed the same rules, or in my case, "guidelines" as described by Crawford et al. (1992) (again see Small, this collection) with two exceptions. My groups did not rewrite the memories. However, I did ask them to summarise the discussion at the end of the session. (I was not present during this summary.)

In the present study, *Phase 3* was my analysis of the collective analysis. Being a PhD study, it was not feasible for the collective to be involved at this stage.

The participants in my research were urban, middle-class, white Australian women and girls. To gain an understanding of the construction of tourist experiences and the construction of self, four age groups were researched: girls aged 12; young single

women (early 20s); middle-aged women (40s) and older women (65+). The members of the groups were friends. The women in the two older age groups were mothers. The women in their 40s had at least one child under the age of 15. Six groups of 12 year olds, five groups of 20 year olds, four groups of women in their 40s and two groups of women 65+ years have participated. To examine the construction of the tourist experiences, groups reported a recent memory and memories at earlier ages where applicable (at 12 years, around the age of 20 years, and in their 40s). A different meeting was held for the discussion of different age memories. Thus the 12 year olds met once, the 20's age group twice, the 40's age group three times and the 65+ age group, four times. (See the following table.) Being aged in my 40s, I was a member of one of the 40s aged groups.

Memory-Work - Research Design

Memories at different ages

Participants	12 Years	Early 20s	40s	65+
1. Aged 12	✓			
2. Aged early 20s	✓	✓		
3. Aged 40s	✓	✓	✓	
4. Aged 65+	✓	✓	✓	✓

Due to the specific nature of my research design and research participants, memory-work was adapted for different age groups. The age of the group members determined the number of times the group met. The venue also differed for different age groups with the 12 years, 40 years and 65+ age groups meeting in the homes of one of the participants and the 20 year old group (who were university students) most commonly meeting in a conference room on the university campus. While the different age groups of women received the same rules and “guidelines” in *Phases 1* and *2*, I felt I needed to make some adaptations for the 12 year old girls as the language used by Crawford et al. (1992) did not appear appropriate for the girls. My adaptation was only slight as I wanted to remain as faithful to the method as possible. In retrospect, I am uncertain as to whether I should have adapted the “guidelines” further. Although not specific to memory-work, it is important to note that, there may be different ethical considerations when researching different age groups. As Alldred (1998, p. 147) cautioned, “Particular ethical and political dilemmas arise in representing the lives of people who are marginalized within, and by, the

domain of public knowledge”. Compared to the women participants, the children may not have been as well informed or as free to decide whether or not to participate. As Berk (1989, p. 64) noted, “...immaturity makes it difficult or impossible for children to evaluate for themselves what participation in research may mean.” I felt it appropriate and ethical to first approach the girls’ parents, usually the mother, about the possibility of her daughter’s participation in the research. I had the feeling that some parents might not have discussed the research project with their daughter before giving consent for the child’s participation. On the other hand, I was also frustrated when parents reported that their daughter did not want to participate. I wondered how encouraging or discouraging the parents might have been and whether they had informed their daughter of her friends’ participation in the research (which likely would have been a deciding factor for the girl).

DISCUSSION

If one believes that the knowledge which is produced by the collective is related to the research method, then, to review thoroughly the method in relation to different age groups would mean presenting all my research findings! For the purposes of this paper I shall concentrate on selected aspects of the method and how the groups approached the task. The discussion presented below is organised according to those features of the method which when combined form the method, memory-work.

PHASE 1 - WRITING THE MEMORY

The writing provided a focus for all age groups. The task of writing was unproblematic for most participants, however, there were a number of participants who expressed concern at their ability to put in writing a holiday experience. This uncertainty was either due to their perceived inability to remember a holiday experience at a particular age or their lack of confidence in their writing skills. These participants usually fell into the 65+ age group and the 40 year old group. While the children may have had no problems with the task of writing, a number of their mothers (and it was the mothers with whom I was discussing the project) doubted their daughters’ ability to write 1-2 pages on holiday experiences. (Wherever there was doubt I reassured them that they were just to write as much as they could). The 20 year olds were the least likely to comment about the task of writing. Being university students, they were familiar with such tasks. Despite some of the women’s initial hesitation, it was only rarely that a participant in the 12 years, 20 years or 65+ years age group did not complete the written task. Although it did not occur very often, the group most likely to arrive without a written memory was the 40 year old group, with their very busy lifestyle often the explanation. Despite all age groups being asked to write “in the third person” there was variation between the age groups, with the children least likely, and the older women most likely, to follow the rule of “third person”. While there were differences within age groups, the women tended to write more detailed accounts than the children. Most of the memories were written in prose, however, there were some written in dot-point form. Where this occurred, it was most likely to be from the 12 and 20 year olds. The most detailed accounts were found in the written memories of those aged 65+.

PHASE 2 - THE COLLECTIVE MEETS

Co-researchers.

A key component of the method is that the researcher is also a participant and all participants are considered researchers. The method attempts to break down the hierarchy between researcher and participant. The object and subject become one. As doctoral research, there were difficulties in being a co-researcher in both *Phases 2* and *3* (see other papers in this collection: Cadman, Friend, Gannon, Ingleton, Koutroulis, McCormack, Mitchell, Onyx, O'Regan, Rocco, & Small; Ingleton; Koutroulis; Stephenson) however, what I want to discuss in this paper is the implication of the method when researching age groups other than the researcher's cohort. A social constructionist approach considers that knowledge of the world is socio-culturally and historically specific. Quite simply the researcher cannot be a co-researcher of other age groups (according to the method) as she cannot position herself with the other age cohorts in either *Phase 2* or *3*. Consequently, I had to leave the 20 year olds, 12 year olds and 65+ year olds alone to theorise by themselves in *Phase 2* while I theorised in *Phase 3*. However, as I was trying to capture the private voices of age cohorts, it could be argued that not having the researcher present allowed this talk more easily or clearly to be heard. When an adult researches children, there is the potential problem that children feel they have to please the more powerful adult. The method in my study allowed the children, as it did the other age groups, to construct the experience for themselves. Being in a group with same aged friends of similar backgrounds meant their knowledges were similarly constructed.

The groups' approach to the task

All of the age groups appeared to enjoy their discussions of holiday experiences. While the focus of the discussion was holidays, the groups in a very natural way often found themselves discussing other topics and then returning to the topic being investigated. Across all age groups, I found many ignored some or all of the rules and guidelines. The 65+ age group was most likely to read verbatim (or with minor changes) their written memories, as per the rules. Of the 12 and 20 year old age groups there was a sizeable number who "adlibbed" her written memories, often reverting to 1st person. When this occurred it often included all members of a group, in other words, if the first person started adlibbing, they all did. Perhaps the younger aged groups felt self conscious in reading their memories. It appeared that additions/changes were often made for affect, to look "cool" and thus be accepted by the social group. For example, in reading her written memory, one girl changed "peeved" to "pissed off", another introduced "stupid" to describe her brother and another (after being teased as a "goody-goody" by other members of the discussion group), added, when speaking her written memory of school camp, that she had "ignored the teacher". Possibly this statement was added to contradict the other members' impressions of her and improve her status with her peers. Groups approached the task differently, some commenced with positive experiences, some with negative experiences. In some groups discussion began after all participants had read their memories. The older members of the 65+ age group (some of

whom were in their mid 80s) tried this but decided it was too difficult to remember each memory and so discussion followed each individually-read memory.

The instructions for *Phase 2* stated that in an attempt to gain a social understanding of holiday experiences, commonalities, differences, clichés, contradictions and silences in the memories were some of the things the group might like to consider. Within age groups there were differences in the degree to which these concepts were addressed. While a member of a group would usually refer back to the guidelines distributed to the group and raise the concepts for discussion, they were often treated superficially or dismissed by the others. Commonalities and differences were more likely to be discussed than clichés, contradictions and silences. I am not sure whether the girls and women did not understand the notions of clichés, contradictions and silences or whether discussion of them was seen as too difficult, constraining the normal flow of conversation. Possibly the explanation lies in both the above reasons. I would suggest that the identification of clichés, contradictions and silences is a difficult task even for those academic participants experienced in the method. Across the age groups, the 40 year old women were most likely, and the 12 year old girls least likely, to engage with the guidelines.

While I was not present during the discussion, the older age group indicated that they would have quite liked me to be present in *Phase 2*. I had the feeling that they would quite have liked the guidance as they were a little unsure of what was wanted. They couldn't quite accept the "freedom" that I had given them to talk amongst themselves and that **that** was what was of interest to me. They were more likely to want direction and discipline. Perhaps they would have liked the formality of a "professional" researcher being present, perhaps it would have given their participation more status than their everyday activity of "just chatting". Perhaps they felt it would have been more interesting, having the professional perspective as input. Whatever the reason, it was this group (and to a certain extent the 40 year old group) who somewhat doubtfully expressed the view, "*I hope we've given you what you wanted*". The impression I have is that the 12 year olds and the 20 year olds were less likely to have doubts as to their contribution. Was the older groups' hesitancy a consequence of greater concern for another (the research and the researcher) which might be age related or historically related, (see Hareven, 1978 for a discussion of the life course approach to history which differentiates between individual lifetime and historical time) or, is it that the world in which the older groups have grown up and the expectations they have of research are to do with formal rules and hierarchy? Perhaps the world they know does not respect the *I* and the everyday experience. The younger participants, on the other hand, were more self assured and unquestioning of their participation in the research. Unlike the 12 year old girls, the older groups had the opportunity to dig deep into the past. In most discussion, they (especially the 40 years and the 65+ age groups) seemed to enjoy the nostalgia of reminiscing.

There were also differences in the group dynamics of the collectives as they met and discussed holiday experiences. While leaving the women and girls to themselves had the benefit of the participants controlling the discussion, there were some interesting differences between the age groups in terms of how they related to each other.

Of all the groups, the 12 year olds were not only the least respectful of the research task, but also the least respectful of each other. The girls were often loud and disruptive, interrupting and dismissing the voices of others in the group. As in the academic language of children's *play*, the girls' talk was for a great part "parallel" as opposed to "cooperative". Some girls found it difficult to focus on the task. In a number of 12 year old groups, conversations were, for a large part, unrelated to the memory-work topic. The girls could be quite condescending and contemptuous of others. To an outsider listening to their discussion, it appeared that other girls in the group could also be the object of contempt. The girls seemed to be showing off, playing to a gallery, acting "cool". The presentation of self appeared to be more important than the research task for many of the girls. Whereas I would disappear from the venue premises when *other* age groups were meeting, I needed to stay within earshot of the girls and intervene when things sounded like they were getting "too" rowdy – the tape recorder's microphone was a source of fun! It was after the first meeting with the girls that I decided to come in at the end of the session to ask them to summarise their discussion in my presence as I was concerned that I might not be able to hear their holiday voices. I later decided to do this for all groups. In my presence the girls' behaviour changed (powerful adult?). The girls' behaviour has to be viewed within their social context which stresses the importance for 12 year old girls of peer pressure and looking cool. The girls for whom looking cool was most important were often those girls whom I had "roped in" to participate (and asked them to form a group). Perhaps they felt personally responsible and embarrassed by the situation.

While most groups of the women seemed comfortable with the task, of all the groups, the 20 year olds, seemed to take the task in hand and "get into it". As they were university students, most were likely to be "experienced" at being asked to participate in research discussions. The groups came from different academic disciplines. It was interesting to note that the group of Human Movement students expressed their pleasure at being in a discussion group. I got the impression from them that most of *their* research experience was laboratory work. While other topics came into the conversation of the 20 year olds, they seemed more focussed on the task. This may have been as a result of the venue, the timing of the meetings or perhaps because they had regular contact with each other and didn't have a great deal of "catching up" to do as did some of the other groups.

Compared to the discussion sessions of the younger age groups, the collective get-together of the 40 year olds and those aged 65+ was more of a social occasion as the home-owner of the venue played "hostess" serving lunch or morning tea to the group.

Collective theorising

It is impossible to separate out the various age group approaches to the research experience (as discussed above) and the theorising that resulted in *Phase 2*. Memory-work stresses *collective* theorising. What resulted from the discussion group was the collective's perspective. It was the inter-subjective nature of memory-work, as opposed to a subjective or objective claim for the status of knowledge

produced which differentiated memory-work from other research methods for all of the age groups.

The bravado exhibited by the girls in their behaviour to each other and also to the task was also reflected in the content of their memories. The memories of the 12 year old girls (unlike the older age groups) reflected little concern for others. The girls did not seem too concerned about getting into trouble with adults. Challenging adult authority was a mark of achievement for many. They did so with bravado in front of their peers. It was interesting that Crawford et al. (1992) found the same behaviour when men were asked to reflect on boyhood holiday experiences. Like the memories of the men as boys, there was no sign of an imposed or accepted sense of responsibility in the girls' memories. For the girls, other people were seen as a backdrop to the holiday. Drama revolved around their own private excitement and play, memories were predominantly carefree and pleasurable, every day was fun and new. The memories were unproblematic compared to some of the memories of the older women thinking back. One might question whether the bravado exhibited in the collective theorising might have occurred because the girls were on their own in a research collective. Kathy Esson (1999) from the Faculty of Education at the University of Sydney has, in recent years, researched the same age group of girls from the same social background in Sydney (albeit with a different research topic) using an individual interview research method but has not encountered the swaggering which I observed with my participants (K. Esson, personal communication, April, 1999). I am not suggesting that the swaggering was necessarily problematic, merely that it was part of the context of the collective situation. A positivist might view the girls' disruptive behaviour as interfering with the researcher's task to achieve a "true" measure of the dependent variable. A social constructionist would interpret the girls' behaviour as "data".

An aim of the method was to uncover the multi-layered voices of each of the age groups. Challenging the authority of one accepted way of knowing, one reality, the method provides the opportunity to go beyond the public knowledge which is objectified through language and rules. The proper and acceptable public story can be revealed through clichés and contradictions. Memory-work created a space for the girls' and women's voices to be heard. All groups went beyond the public discourse of the travel brochure in their discussion of good and bad experiences. However, there appeared to be less challenging of the public discourse than Haug and others (1987) and Crawford et al. (1992) and many later users have found with memory-work. Explanations may be that I was not present to facilitate and perhaps "encourage" the participants to challenge the orthodoxy. Another explanation might be the very public nature of the topic under discussion. My participants also were not academics and in most cases were not used to challenging the public knowledge. The age groups least likely to disrupt the social discourse were the 12 year old group and the 65+ aged group. I found that of all the age groups, the older women's talk tended to be more rehearsed than the other groups. Their accounts of holidays were very comfortable and unproblematic. There was not the "jagged stuff" of which Small (this collection) refers. Is it that this group is not accustomed to challenging the public discourse, or, can one argue that life and holidays become "sweeter", in other words, the public and private voices, with regard to holidays, are not so different. The group most likely to challenge

the conventional version were the women in the 40 year old group. Perhaps they are at an age when peer pressure is not so important and historically, “keeping up appearances” is not so relevant in society. Questions arise, however, as to what constitutes public and private discourse. How easily can one identify which is the conventional and which is the challenged discourse for each of the age groups?

Phase 3 – My Interpretation of the Collective Theorising

In attempting to avoid the perpetuation of the exploitation of women, feminists as researchers are particularly sensitive to the ethical issues of social research. To avoid the possibility of exploitation, feminists have favoured techniques which allow the researcher to position herself with the participants. Ideally, this positioning occurs at all stages of the research. Obviously I could not do this with all collectives in *Phase 2* (as a result of my age and the fact that I considered it inadvisable to belong to more than one of my age collectives). Neither could I do this in *Phase 3* (as a result of age and being a student). While reflexivity was less of an issue in *Phase 2* for all of the age groups, I could not avoid it in *Phase 3* in the interpretation and production of the research account. Questions arise as to how well I was able to re/present the voices of the different age groups. By asking the groups to summarise their discussion by themselves and afterwards to me, I was hoping to get closer to their understanding of holiday experiences. Were some groups disproportionately disadvantaged? Perhaps my own age group was the group least disadvantaged. Alldred (1998) discusses the adult – child difference (or divide) in research involving children by adult researchers. It could be argued, however, that the difference between adult researcher and other adult age groups is equally great or greater. Not being a child does not make adults the same. Perhaps a researcher is less able to position herself with *older* age groups than with children. At least the researcher has experienced childhood, not the childhood of today, but childhood nonetheless.

CONCLUSION

The data which resulted from the discussion groups was the collective’s understanding of good and bad holiday experiences and in many cases these differed by age. The method allowed me to see how the groups within a research setting constructed their holiday experiences. What stood out were the different ways in which the groups approached the task and the degree to which they challenged the popular discourse. As stated, a critique of the application of memory-work in researching different age groups should examine the method within the context of the topic area.

As Small (this collection) has noted about topics and associated triggers, “...a conventional topic is likely to produce a conventional, well rehearsed response”. With regard to holidays, Deem (1996, p. 115) observed that,

...holidays are a cultural form about which researchers are much more likely to hear rehearsed and sanitized narratives rather than any account which reveals conflicts, disappointments, difficulties or power struggles

emerging from engendered relationships and encounters or indeed from any other source.

Parr (1998, p. 87) refers to the application of theoretical perspectives as “either sharpening sensitivity to research participants’ voices, or as shaping and silencing those voices”. While the topic area of holidays may encourage the silencing of voices, memory-work allows the participants the *opportunity* to discuss the more personal lived holiday experiences within a collective of friends. Where rehearsed stories were presented by different age groups, the challenge for me, as a researcher, is to understand what part the *conventionality* of the topic, “holidays”, played in the construction of the memories for the different age groups. The holiday is constructed within the existing broader social context. Whether women challenge the popular discourse about holidays needs to be seen within their broader life experiences. Maybe for women inexperienced in challenging the popular discourse, the presentation of a conventional topic for discussion lessens the possibility for liberation. A further challenge for the researcher is knowing what constitutes public and private voices for the different age groups. The purpose of my research was to hear the voices of the different age groups. I felt comfortable that the discourse of my own age group in the research collective was similar to that of the non-research setting. From eavesdropping on my own children the content of the 12 year olds’ talk seemed quite familiar. Neither was I surprised by the talk of the 65+ age group as it resonated with stories from my mother and older women of my acquaintance. The 20 year old groups were the ages of my students. The difficulty lies in how I interpret and re/present the voices in the public domain.

The dilemmas and challenges with which I am left are not a criticism of the method. They are the reflection of a method which seeks to uncover the complexities of lived experience.

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