Collectivity and analysis in memory-work

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Abstract

This paper describes some of the dilemmas of collectivity, voice and power experienced by researchers in their analysis of the narratives and discussions that form the data of memory-work. Each memory-work project begins with a dynamic process in which individuals become a group generating unique and unexpected outcomes. Memories are stirred, experiences shared, insights gained and perceptions changed, long after the last meeting has been held. But when the project develops into a product for publication, some of these vital signs are lost. Three issues pertaining to collectivity and the researcher’s authority are taken up in this paper: the integrity of the individual production of the research outcomes from a collective process; an ambivalence about the nature of the researcher’s authority in the collective production of data, and the robustness of the analytical process.

Introduction

Memory-work (Haug et al 1987, 1999) foregrounds experience as the focus of research, in a process which can evoke strong emotions and closely held interpretations of participants’ life stories. The methodology is powerful in accessing memories, experiences and emotions ranging from the pedestrian to the extraordinary, from daily acts of socialisation to incidents of crisis; from shared histories to the never-before-spoken-about. Central to the methodology is the principle that participants are subjects in the process, not objects, and that the researcher, as a social being, equally a participant in socialisation processes, cannot avoid being a subject as well. Haug et al’s principle of the ‘collapse of subject and object’ confronts memory-work participants with the complexity of moving between the subjectivity of their own experiences, emotions and interpretations, and the more distanced and academic processes of collectively theorising the meanings of those experiences.

Haug et al make clear at the outset that, in challenging the separation of scientific knowledge from everyday experience, they are not only disrupting a whole academic canon, but inviting enormous disrespect by demanding ‘the right to use experience as a basis of knowledge’ (1987:34). However, using a methodology focused on such subjective and shifting territories as experience and memory is a source of anxiety for researchers. Many are concerned about how they are viewed by both participants and by the academic community. At the same time, however, the choice of a methodology which focuses on experience appeals strongly to memory-workers, precisely because it speaks of women’s experiences in a way that dominant texts generally do not. Crawford et al (1992) were
excited by the methodology because ‘We have found a voice to articulate our disquiet with traditional psychological treatments of topics like emotion’ (1992:1). In Australia, the uptake of the methodology in the 1990s has been rapid and widespread, a factor prompting the organisation of the first national memory-work research conference at the University of Technology, Sydney, in February, 2000. The conference provided an opportunity to explore researchers’ own questions arising from their use of the methodology. Invited theoretical papers were presented at the one day conference after which part of our discussion focused on the issue of power in working with groups.

Following this discussion on power relations, a group of eleven of the researchers volunteered to meet in two groups the next day and use the memory-work methodology to focus on their own facilitation of memory-work groups. The group decided on the topic or trigger: *Facilitating a memory-work group: unresolved issues of power*. Overnight, we each wrote, in the third person, a memory of a particular episode and brought it to our group. For the next two hours we explored (and tape recorded) our experiences as facilitators of memory-work groups. This paper raises my own questions, reflects some of the issues discussed at the conference concerning analysis, and quotes from the discussion by these two memory-work groups. Significantly, the theorising from our own experience as memory-workers raised issues that had not even been hinted at in the formal sessions the day before.

Memory-work was first developed by groups of women working as collectives. Today, it is being used in a diversity of university settings by both men and women. Given the rising number of PhDs and publications based on memory-work, it appears that individual publication is taking over the models of collective publications resulting from the work of Haug et al and Crawford et al. Many memory-workers are choosing this methodology in research designed for the production of a higher degree, and so are responsible for the individual production of theses and academic papers. Once the collective process of writing and discussion is completed, the researcher’s own analysis and writing up of the project takes over. The individual production of research outcomes from a collective process confronts researchers with dilemmas of power, inclusion and transparency in making decisions about the data. In the organisation and management of the data, researchers make choices, conscious and unconscious, about what is significant and relevant, whose voices are heard, what is to be in the foreground or the background or to be omitted. It is generally the researcher who does the academic work of the literature search, theorising anew, proposing new hypotheses and writing for examination or publication. As one member of the collective said in the memory-work session,

> 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…so 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'.

In the context of the individual production of academic work from a collective process, three questions pertaining to collectivity and the researcher’s authority are taken up in this paper.

(1) In the individual production of research outcomes from a collective process, whose voices are heard?

(2) Are we undermining our competence as researchers by ambivalence about the nature of our authority?

(3) How do we ensure the integrity of the analytical process?
Voice

The first issue of authority relates to the silencing of ‘voices’ - both the researchers’ and the participants’. The intensity of the issue became apparent only in the memory-work sessions themselves. That was when the extent of our uncertainty about our relationship with our groups was revealed. When the memories were shared, we were surprised by the commonality of our questions about our own power in the collective setting. The fact that this had not been addressed in our theoretical discussions indicates the potency of the methodology’s focus on memory to enrich theory. In the memory-work process following the formal conference sessions, we made transparent a hidden issue, enabling us to begin to bridge this particular gap between theory and experience. This hidden issue exemplifies how the separation of theory and practice acts to separate private and personal experience from public and academic debate. We had hidden our private problems with the memory-work process from our own public discourse. Subsequently, in the process of writing a collective paper, some of us were confronted with decisions about how much of our anxiety to reveal or delete in the desire to maintain an image of academic credibility. We thereby reinforced not only that separation but also our own perceived weakness in using our power.

Whose voices are heard or silenced in the production of individual research outcomes from a collective process? By what choices do we censor, delete or approve for inclusion the stories, discussions, themes and conclusions from our shared work? We feared our own censorship from a number of angles such as, ‘Is that memory going to get a negative reaction from male readers?’ ‘Does this author need protecting?’ ‘Will this one put the supervisor/examiner offside?’ ‘Does the inclusion of this memory disadvantage women?’ ‘Which ones lend themselves most readily to inclusion in prevailing academic discourses?’

In the writing-up process other voices became decisive – perceived readers, supervisors, potential examiners, referees or editors.

Yet another layer of perception influences our choices: the judgments that are made from beyond our level of awareness. As we draw on memories, often re-experiencing the emotions they evoke, and also select what we recall or are prepared to discuss, it would seem inevitable that we draw on the sub-conscious and unconscious. I am suggesting that only the small shared space where all three areas of the Venn diagram below overlap might represent the extent of our collective theorising.

![Figure 1 The area of collective theorising](image-url)
All sources are drawn upon, but because not all are conscious, we may see or choose specific themes from the data due to our own desires, unresolved issues or unawareness. Some researchers at the conference reported taking to their beds after a session, or having powerful dreams. Even at the most analytical level, in our perception of what is significant, it is probable that some of the choices we make are neither transparent nor collective, and so must necessarily be tentative.

**Ambivalence**

*The white cloth that covers the chaos*

The tentativeness of judgment tends towards ambivalence about the extent of our authority as researchers. The anxieties cloaked beneath that ambivalence were expressed in the metaphor of the white table cloth. In the memory-work session, a number of contradictions in our role as researchers became apparent. Rather than feeling confident as researchers, we found ourselves wanting to be 'nice' because we felt the groups were doing us a favour, and some felt torn between being part of their groups and wanting to control it. We were surprised to find that we had all taken responsibility for nurturing our groups by taking on a hostessing role, putting considerable effort into the provision of food and a comfortable environment. The 'white cloth' became a metaphor for both looking after the group and providing a quality experience, one that would be 'put up for scrutiny' as one group member commented. The 'chaos' represented the self-doubt behind the professional researcher façade.

We also experienced ambivalence because of the lack of clarity in the nature of the contract we had as researchers in relation to our groups. One researcher saw herself as 'trying to help them get something out of it because they were doing something for me.' Some felt they were 'asking favours', and could not ask too much, like taking more time for debriefing the process. Others wanted the group to take responsibility for the process once discussion had been started, to take control. Yet at the same time they were aware of how much they had invested in the success of the process and needed it to work well. One spoke of 'control by niceness', in her need for the group to succeed. One expressed the struggle she felt to maintain herself 'as a coherent whole' in the contradictory process of being a group member and a subject, at the same time as taking responsibility for the process. We articulated our collusion in the feminine discourse of being nice, rather than being powerful. In the name of collectivity we restrained ourselves from overtly controlling the groups, despite having a strong investment in the outcome.

To some extent, the problem of ambivalence arises from lack of experience in group work; several of the researchers had not worked with groups before. An essential ingredient in group process is the articulation of group norms (understood rules for group behaviour) at the outset, and this process needs to be established by the researcher. Initially, groups expect the power to be in the hands of the researcher who 'goes into' the group with a specific research agenda. Predictably, the members will be tentative in their first meeting, waiting for direction. It is the researcher's responsibility to direct at this stage if the group is to establish trust. Careful facilitation enables members to assert their own power and responsibility, so that power sharing can grow and make collectivity possible. Paradoxically, the clearer the researcher is about her role, the more powerful the collective process can become.
To achieve a group process where there is 'no power differential between researcher and the researched' requires a high level of skill in facilitating group dynamics. This is especially important for groups that are brought together for a short period of time where the building of trust needs to be carefully managed over a short time. An environment of equality, sharing and trust is essential for the expression of opinions, knowledge and judgment. Such an environment fits a feminist perspective which is ‘non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian, [and] non-manipulative’ (Reinharz, 1983:174). Both Reinharz’s and Haug’s groups claim that the integration of theory and practice is made possible by there being no power differential between researcher and the researched, where the participants themselves are researchers, and the process itself enlightens the participants. But as we have found, the dispersal of power is no easy matter!

A further uncertainty about collectivity and individual authority stemmed from differences in researchers' and participants' political agendas. Haug’s group set out to both influence Marxist psychology and feminist ideology. They were intent on providing a ‘springboard for social action’ (Haug et al 1987:15) through which women could take greater control of their own lives. Their political agenda clearly motivated the focus, the process, and the critique they employed. Today, the earning of a PhD and publication of papers are political motivators. So also is a feminist commitment to collectivity, and a desire to change individuals’ participation in their own socialisation. The researcher’s motivation calls for information about political goals to be shared with participants in order to clarify the boundaries of responsibility, control and the sharing of power.

**Integrity**

‘Is it still the memory it was by the time you get it to publication?’

Given the tensions in the methodology itself, can memory-workers be feminist, political, collective, the subjects of their own research, and at the same time be rigorous researchers? Haug et al make it clear that there is no ‘true method’ that might satisfy academic demands for rigour:

New modes of analysis suggest themselves continuously. … The diversity of our methods, the numerous objections raised in the course of our work with the stories, and our attempts at resolution, seem to suggest that there might well be no single, ‘true’ method that is alone appropriate to this kind of work (Haug et al 1999:70).

The original memory-workers were not in search of normative guidelines, but they did set out some steps towards their goal of achieving an understanding of ‘our active participation in subordinating ourselves to social structures’ (1999:58). Their first step in analysis was that all of the group should express ‘opinions, knowledge and judgment’, deliberately ‘slash[ing] through the horizontal seams that traditionally keep domains of experience separate’ (1999:60). The approaches they considered most useful in uncovering women’s active subordination to social structures included comparison of experiences and assessment of specific events. In such comparisons the physical and emotional are linked with the rational. Judgments and decisions are made directly from the emotion in the experience itself (Barbalet, 1998; Scheff, 1997). At another level, the unravelling of meanings hidden behind clichés and silences or the murmuring of ‘mmmm’, helps bring to the surface taken-for-granted ways in which we construct our active involvement in the socialisation process. Through this range of approaches we are aiming for subjective experience and theory to interact in a ‘reciprocal and mutually critical relationship’ (Crawford, 1992:42). The principles
underlying the achievement of this relationship through memory-work are collectivity, the collapse of subject and object, the analysis of memories in the search for awareness of our own subjectification, and theorising from experience.

The first memory-workers have given us a number of tools that proved effective for them over two or more years of working together on their projects. Short term researchers could find that the convenience of adopting the tools gives the illusion of having a ‘true method’, rather than a process made possible over a year or more of working together by trial and error. The idea of a true procedural method also calls up the need for a true method of analysis, but there is no sure model for this. The choice of approach to analysis is as political as it is academic, which raises questions for researchers such as, ‘Is a coherent theory for reading the data necessary?’ ‘Is there a place for quantitative analysis with tools such as NUDIST?’ ‘Can collective biography be called memory-work?’ The conference provided no collective responses to these questions, apart from acknowledgment that we were drawn together by the principles outlined above rather than close adherence to the methods.

Many memory-workers have diverged from the joint theorising of Haug’s and Crawford’s groups by reducing the collective emphasis for three main reasons:

(a) the participants do not purport to share the same academic goals of thesis-writing or publication as the researcher;

(b) the length of time spent together (from three to five meetings) may be too short;

(c) the groups often say they are less interested in theorising at an abstract level than in the sharing and understanding of their experiences.

In my groups (nine groups involved in four projects since 1993) we theorised at what Koutroulis (1993) has called the first level of analysis - conjecturing about some general principles of explanation of our experiences during discussion before and after writing. A second level of analysis consisted of my drawing together of the work of more than one group on the same topic, or even on different topics, thus creating an overview that was not apparent to the participants in any one group. The groups were not involved in this level, although they had the opportunity (albeit rarely taken up) to respond to my drafts.

A further non-collective level of analysis lay in my development of new theory emerging from the overview of the first project and its comparison with subsequent projects. New theory began to emerge well after the meetings of the two groups in my first project were over. The pervasiveness of shame in memories of learning in schools stood out (Ingleton, 1995; 2000), and I began to theorise the gendering of shame and pride through socialisation within the power relations in the classroom. However, my theorising began to crystallise issues in a way that distanced the voices of the participants through a somewhat reductive process. From the groups’ analyses to the final writing for publication there has been a paring down and concentration of focus that has diminished the voices of the participants. In the necessary process of writing for a particular audience, within a particular word limit, within the context of selected literature, I felt I had moved too far from the original voices.

Later, I introduced a model of learning (Ingleton 2000) incorporating the place of pride and shame in the development of self-identity as a learner, as follows:

pride solidarity confidence
The model became the theoretical basis for the analysis, and at that stage, I sought additional academic currency by using discourse analysis. The feminist, social constructionist and critical theoretical perspectives I had previously called upon suggested that analysis of data ‘draw heavily on the language of the persons studied’, for ‘the language practices and cultural practices of the self and of relationship’ may be examined through narratives (Reinharz 1983: 183). For the sake of veracity, I used an approach to the analysis, loosely based on Fairclough’s constructs of description, interpretation and explanation (1989: 17). Again I felt I was moving away from the very voices I wanted to represent, with a loss of immediacy of voice in presenting the data through a contrived analytical sieve. The question that remains is: how to stay close to the voices of participants and maintain veracity?

Memory-workers are using a wide range of qualitative methods, all of which strive for but cannot guarantee, integrity. Each memory-work project begins with a dynamic process in which individuals become a group generating unique and unexpected outcomes. Memories are stirred, experiences shared, insights gained and perceptions changed, long after the last meeting has been held. But when the project develops into an individual’s product for publication, some of these vital signs are lost. Integrity is to be found less in any ‘true’ analytical approach than in the strong principles underlying memory-work. As with other qualitative methodologies, integrity and veracity are open to scrutiny at each stage of the analytical process as new ground is continually broken in the bridging of experience and theory.
References


Figure 1 The area of collective theorising

Nb this diagram should have arrows from soc rel to pride, along to sol, along to con, and down to dis; from soc rel down to sh, along to al, along to th and up to dis.

pride solidarity confidence

social relationships disposition to learn

shame alienation threat

Figure 2 Emotion and learning (Ingleton 2000)