

## OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

### **Collective Memory-Work – a Method Under the Radar?**

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Did you ever hear of memory-work?

There is no copyright on this term. You may associate it with a variety of practices in different contexts, probably within realms of disciplines like psychology and history.

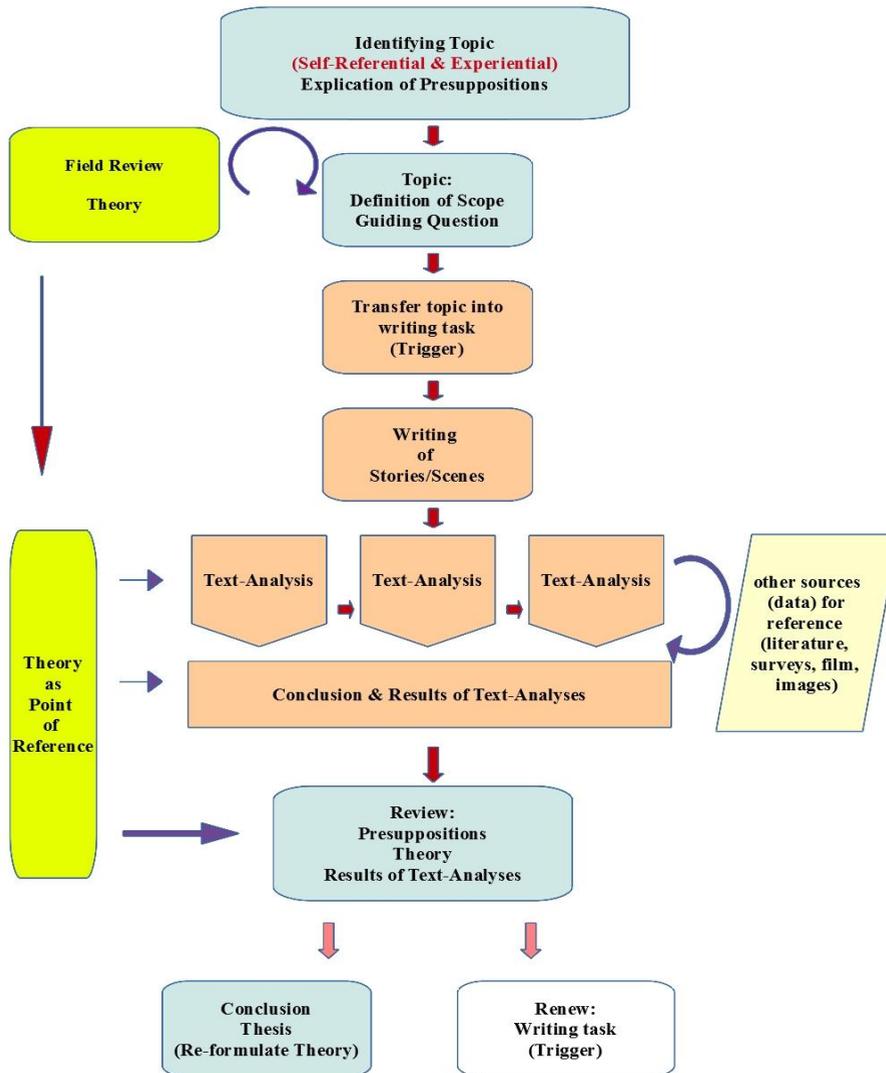
Yet there is a distinct method also called memory-work or, in fact, collective memory-work. This method is an educational alternative, something tangible, offering the promise of practical experience and self-determined investigative learning. It is used as a method of teaching and learning in third level education, e.g. teacher training and continuing professional development (see e.g., Witt-Löw 1991; Mitchell & Weber, 1999; Norquay, 2008; Kaufman, 2008), and in a variety of other disciplines (e.g., Oinas, 1999; Berg, 2008; Widerberg, 2016). It has also been used in the training of educators in Germany and Austria (Ortner & Thuswald, 2012; Hamm, 2017) Nevertheless memory-work is still a method under the radar. At any rate a method that often leaves those who worked with it intrigued by its experiential potential as much as its depth. This is nicely put in words by a collective from Australia: “The method is radical—and it is

fun.” (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, & Benton, 1992, p. 1)

This Other Contribution on collective memory-work is meant to simply raise awareness. I do not offer here a comprehensive description of the method. Such descriptions are available in different formats (see e.g., Haug, 1983, 1987, 1999; Crawford et al., 1992; Willig, 2001). Any description of the method needs to be read as an option, not a rule set in stone. With this in mind one can say: In collective memory-work a group engages with short texts written by the group members themselves in which they describe memories of events, situations, scenes and experiences of their own life. Often these texts refer to mundane, everyday life experiences. Analysing the texts is a key element for memory-work. Collective memory-work revolves around the text-analysis, or more correctly analyses because of the group context in which there is normally more than one text generated.

However, in a fully-fledged collective memory-work project there is more involved. Before going any further I present a schematic overview of the steps involved in a complete cycle of a collective memory-work project:

## Collective Memory-Work



The flowchart is meant to clarify that collective memory-work provides a rather elaborate method involving all steps of a thorough investigation. Whether one wishes to call it scientific or otherwise does not matter.

The colour coded fields mark phases in the methodical process. The light orange middle part concerns the actual work with the texts. For readers from within academic research it will be obvious that the different phases are in accord with a general model of scientific research processes. In this regard the writing of scenes resembles the gathering and analysis of data.

In collective memory-work this can lead to a conclusion, e.g., in form of a thesis or another written document. If a group decides to continue developing their topic further, it can also lead to a second round of writing and analysing. The process of renewing the writing task can be repeated as long as it suits the interests of the group.

Collective memory-work is then a scientific method. It is a method for research. It is also a method for teaching and learning. So how can it be radical? And more so, how can it be fun?

The choice of topic is ideally self-referential and experiential. Instead of looking at the peculiarities of others the group members look at themselves and their own peculiarities.

Collective memory-work was developed in the 1980s by Frigga Haug and a group called *Frauenformen*, operating at the intersections of academic research, feminist and Marxist theory, and political practice. Conceptually it is a critique of traditional male dominated science/s. It takes the level of everyday experiences of the participants in memory-work groups as

its starting point. Thus it brings to the agenda perspectives that are otherwise marginalised or not represented. For the original group this was the experiences of women in their societalisation (Haug, 1983, 1987).

When *Frauenformen* developed collective memory-work they built upon practices in consciousness-raising groups. They however shifted the focus decisively by using the experiences and remembered stories as material for critical analysis, and reference for a review of antecedent theory.

The central position of text-analysis in collective memory-work stems from basic assumptions on which the method is build, including the ideas that (all from Haug, 1999, pp. 9-11):

- “our personality is not simply inherited, fixed, but rather that we construct our self in given structures (...) our personality consequently has a history in which we gave meaning to what we found essential and by doing so shaped ourselves as personality. This history defines our steps in the present and the future.”
- There is a constant “tendency to eliminate contradictions. All that does not fit in with the unambiguous presentation of our self is put aside in favour of a most clear-cut picture of our self, for ourselves and for others.”
- “in our everyday lives we try to establish a consistent meaning for ourselves. We create a type of image of ourselves in which we believe and that we try to present in all communicative situations. The construction of meaning is a process permanently ongoing. We send messages and expect that others receive these messages in the same

way as we intended to send them. The construction of meaning thus relies on the acceptance of others. This happens by means of gestures, appearances, expressions, but first of all by the means of language.”

- “language is not simply a tool which we can use at will, (...) in and through the existing language politics are made that are talking through ourselves and that are regulating our construction of meaning. (...) culturally in a way there are ready-made meanings lying around. These meanings impress themselves upon us when we are writing and dictate to us what we may not ever have intended to express.”

Hence the necessity to scrutinise our own utterances. In memory-work this is in the form of written memory-scenes taken as the material for analysis and critical reflection.

History is viewed as the lived practice of concrete human beings with specific (nameable) interests. The historic circumstances in which we find ourselves are to be understood as results of earlier struggles, negotiations on the level of society that brought about not only structures and institutions but also specific constructions of meaning.

In the constructions of meaning and the construction of our personality we are always involved as active agents (and negotiators). Yet, the leeway for positioning in these negotiations is bound to concrete historical circumstances. This also means that in these processes of construction we don't have an infinite number of possible definitions at our disposal. Instead we always operate from within the boundaries of a historically

determined spectrum of meaning/s. Whether we like it or not we refer to preceding patterns, forms of thought and behaviour. There is scope to reshape and shift these patterns, but we cannot get rid of them completely.

Thus our—what we may feel or assume to be unique—individual constructions of meaning and constructions of personality are always already more than a unique creative act. They are this but they are also, at the same time, bound to the spatio-temporal social conditions from which they arise. Looked at from a more distant perspective we find that often they differ from those of others only in nuances.

There is a narcissistic injury to the identities built on the idea of autonomous individual subjects contained in such a view. At the same time this is also a chance. It suggests the potential for collective social action in a bid for emancipation. In collective memory-work it is assumed gaining insight into the modes and lines of construction of meaning that we apply in our lived reality can lead to new perspectives transformable into an enhanced capacity to act. It is implied in this that human behaviour can be influenced and changed by way of self-reflection.

Collective memory-work is a method that requires a group. This is particularly important for the critical analysis of the memory-scenes. Only the views of the other group members allows detection of one's own blind spots. This is a very obvious requirement within the framework of the method as sketched here already. Yet at the time of the development of collective memory-work it ran counter to the traditional positioning in scientific

endeavours because it included the researcher in the group by default.

An important influence in the development of collective memory-work was also the theoretical discussion of Critical Psychology with its subject-scientific approach. Critical Psychology

“as a subject-oriented research program promotes a type of research in which subjects are both participants and co-researchers simultaneously.... Psychological research is intended as research for people and not about people. This is possible only if psychological research is conducted from the standpoint of the subject.” (Teo, 1998, p. 247)

The approach of *Frauenformen* is very close to this. “Taking humans as subjects of their life circumstances—as in the project *Frauenformen*—demands from the research process to bring to bear their subject-status” (Meyer-Siebert & Schmalstieg, 2002, p. 48 [transl. RH]). The term ‘subject of life circumstances’ in this context has the double meaning of ‘made by’ and ‘makers of’ at the same time.

What *Frauenformen* focused on was the problem of construction of self in circumstances of oppression, and the perpetuation of these very circumstances in spite of their oppressive character, through the acts of the subjects. The demand to bring to bear the subject-status of those who take part in a research process means including participants in the process as co-researchers, and vice versa include researchers in the group as participants. Research then is not research on, but research *with* and research for those who are the subjects of the research. The distinction between research, reflection, education is then of little interest. The

whole process is one of self-determined collective investigative learning.

Thirty-five years on this may not sound as exotic any more (I would hope). Collective memory-work could be identified as fitting labels like participatory research, or participatory action research.

So far, so good. But the questions posed earlier were how is it radical, and how is it fun?

Radical? Well, any label can be used and abused. In Germany the latest addition to the idea of “alternative” is a right-wing populist nationalist racist xenophobic party called “Alternative für Deutschland,” hardly the “alternative” that the readers of *Other Education* would subscribe to.

But radical refers to radix, the root. Hence the label radical is quite appropriate for collective memory-work because the method allows ‘social searchery’ that is probably not as painful as on the dental chair but similarly thorough (if you have a good dentist, that is).

And the fun bit?

If you are a status driven careerist hopping from step to step on the career ladder in your academic bubble, used to using subjects as objects in your research projects...collective memory-work is not exactly what you should try. It has the potential to disturb you and at the end you may find your approach abject. So, in short, it may not be fun for you. Better stay away from it.

For anyone else, try it, and you’ll see.

### Outlook

With this little flashlight on collective memory-work I hope to help bring the method out of its position ‘under the radar’. It is my hope that this introduction can allow you, the reader, to follow up on the

method theoretically or practically, as you wish.

The idea to write this piece did, however, not just come out of the blue. It is connected to a project in which I am trying to trace the adaptations and adjustments of collective memory-work implemented by people in their respective institutional, disciplinary, political, social contexts. Thus if you have used collective memory-work, be it in its original format, or in an adapted version, be it in a full cycle or only in parts, I would be glad if you were to get in touch with me. I am interested in an exchange about your experiences with applying the method, and your reflections on it.

In another part of my project I am also looking for cooperation with people who would like to try the method in their own framework: in their field of work or in social, political, cultural groups.

Last but not least it is envisaged to make collective memory-work the focus of a special issue of *Other Education*. For this purpose do let me know if you have an idea for an article (with or without peer review) that you would like to contribute.

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