

## OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

### **Individual Becomes Collective Becomes Individual: Collective Memory-Work as a Reciprocal and Continuous Learning Process for Hybrid Artists**

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#### **Abstract**

*Collective Memory-Work is a method that aims to question and change the general ways of thinking that lie behind our theoretical assumptions. One of the principal ideas in memory-work is that individual persons actively participate in their own formation as social beings and parts of existing social structures. In this way, the individual becomes the collective. The Collective Memory-Work approach was originally developed within a feminist framework, but it has been widely adapted to more general contexts, including the arts. In this article I reflect on my experiences as a learner in the light of memory-work's potential for, and challenges in, bringing the individual into the collective and then back from the collective to the individual. At the same time, I present the role of arts in my experiences of using the memory-work method. Finally, I discuss the potential of Collective Memory-Work as a reciprocal and continuous learning process for hybrid artists, enabling them to develop their identity as artists and introduce their artistic methods and products into collective learning processes in order to*

*meet the growing needs for creativity, collaboration, change, and well-being in society.*

**Keywords:** Arts, collective, education, hybrid artist, individual, memory-work

*It is within the domain of collective production that individual experience becomes possible. If therefore a given experience is possible, it is also subject to universalization. (Haug, 1987, p. 44).*

I learned to use Collective Memory-Work when I was studying for my master's degree, where I had a minor in Women's Studies that offered a memory-work methods course. I cannot exactly remember when I first heard the phrase "the individual is collective," but it became very important to me during the methods course and then later in my life. I remember my first book when I was a little child. The name of the book was, in Finnish, *Ensimmäinen Kirjani* (in English *My First Book*), written by Garth Williams (1955),

and there was a picture on the cover of a little child reading a book, on the cover of which there was a picture of a little child reading a book, and on the cover of that book there was another picture of a little child reading a book, and so on. When looking at this continuing image, it felt like and feels like diving deep into the universe. I feel like I am disappearing as an individual and merging into something limitless and infinite. This is exactly the same feeling that I felt when learning about “the individual is collective.”

In a Collective Memory-Work group, members write short texts in which they describe memories of situations and feelings based on their own everyday life experiences. These texts are collectively analysed, and the process is usually published in a written format (for a flowchart of the process, see Hamm, 2018). In this article, I explore my experiences of using Collective Memory-Work in different academic contexts. It is especially interesting that in one way or another the arts have been involved with all my experiences in using the memory-work method. Therefore, I reflect on those experiences as a learner in the light of the memory-work method’s potential for, and challenges in, bringing the individual into the collective and then back from the collective to the individual. At the same time, I present the role of the arts in my experiences of using the memory-work method. Finally, I discuss the potential of Collective Memory-Work as a reciprocal and continuous learning process for hybrid artists, enabling them to develop their identity as artists and to introduce their artistic methods and products into collective learning processes.

### **The Individual in Collective Memory-Work**

According to Haug (1987), everyday experiences are often felt to be very personal and unique issues, even though human experiences can be generalised. Private troubles are public issues. Even more: the personal is political. This was one of the powerful ideas in the second wave of the feminist movement in the 1960s, stressing the interconnection between public and private, especially in interpretations of women’s everyday problems and intimate relationships, such as sexuality, childcare, and marriage (Grant, 1993).

One of the principal ideas in memory-work is that individual persons actively participate in their own formation as social beings and parts of existing social structures (Haug, 1987). Thus, my memory is not only my personal experience. It is also an interpretation of history, culture, society, and everyday life. Through understanding this, it is possible to find the potential to change myself, and even change existing power relations in society, by making the social aspect of the experience visible. The advantage of working collectively, as opposed to individually, is that it provides critical views and different interpretations that can challenge each other’s day-to-day assumptions by unveiling the things we take for granted in everyday life (Koutroulis, 2008). Therefore, the memory-work method aims to question and change the general ways of thinking that lie behind our theoretical assumptions, such as the construction of one’s own personality, the tendency to eliminate contradictions, the construction of meaning, and the politics of language (Haug, 2008). Although

Collective Memory-Work was originally developed within a feminist framework, it has been widely adapted as a method to more general contexts, including the arts. What can the memory-work method offer to artists, and what can artists contribute to the method?

### **Hybrid Artists and Collective Memory-Work**

When thinking about the combination of artists and Collective Memory-Work, the concept of a *hybrid artist* offers a useful approach. According to Lehtikoinen, Pässilä and Owens (in press), a hybrid artist combines the autonomous artist's individual working and applied collective arts practices, and can in this way contribute as an expert to the growing needs for creativity, collaboration, change, and well-being in society. In hybrid contexts, the liberal humanist view of the artist as a self-contained author and the view of the arts-based developer do not need to fit together. Instead, an artist's identity can be complex, context-specific, and flexible. When artists decide to expand their professionalism in hybrid contexts, they need to develop social, pedagogical, analytical, and critical skills alongside their artistic expertise.

To support development of hybrid artists, Collective Memory-Work can offer potential tools both for investigating an artist's identity and for using arts-based methods to contribute as an expert to society. Next, I will explore my experiences of using the memory-work method, to offer practical examples of how it can be utilised in developing participants' identities, and to show how the arts can be combined with the method.

### **Tears in Eyes and Pee in Pants: Learning to Work in a Group**

As mentioned above, my first experience of Collective Memory-Work was in a methods course, in which we were fifteen women researching our *identities*, and how they were built, through memory-work. After the methods course, we decided to continue our collective work, but now we wanted to choose a lighter topic for the memory-work, so we started to explore our memories of *laughing*. As a result of our collective work, I and ten other women wrote an article "Tears in eyes and pee in pants," concentrating on laughing, happiness, and joy (Alakurtti et al., 1996). When writing the article, we decided to work in smaller groups. One of the groups used transcriptions of our recorded meetings as material for poems, and in that way broke the academic writing tradition by introducing artistic expression into the academic article.

When reading that article now after twenty years, I cannot always find myself in the memories written about in our article, or in the text which we edited together. At the same time, I can also find myself in many places there. Which part of the text was written by the group which I belonged to? I am not sure, and at the same time I am almost sure. Again, I feel like I am diving into the deep universe, knowing that I am there in the text but at the same time feeling that I have disappeared.

I remember feeling safe working in a group, compared to the feeling of loneliness which I experienced during the other university courses, and especially in the exams. Individual learning and measuring each student's results are very typical ways to educate in the university context. Therefore, participating in

Collective Memory-Work felt like different—and enjoyable—learning. I can remember that writing the article in a group was fun, but at the same time frustrating when trying to merge together many ideas. I had to give up on some of my own ideas and accept ideas which I would not have chosen if I had written an article alone. It felt quite messy, but now when reading the article I think it is very well and logically written, even though parts of it were written as an artistic expression. Thus, the result of the learning process was very high-quality, although it happened collectively in a group without the possibility to measure our individual learning.

#### **Without Women/Women in the Air: Learning to Process My Identity**

During my minor studies in Women's Studies, I became so familiar with using the memory-work method that I decided to use it in my Master's thesis. The title of the thesis, translated from Finnish, was "Without women/Women in the air. Memories from seven women growing up within their sexualities" (Jääskeläinen, 1998). "Without women/Women in the air" is a wordplay in the Finnish language, because the title of the thesis "ilman naisia" can be understood either as "without women" or "women in the air." I and six other women wrote memories about *growing up within our sexualities*. We met three times as a memory-work group, and each of the meetings had a different theme for sexuality. We read aloud our written memories, and discussed them. I recorded our discussions, and used them to support my analysis in my thesis. Haug and her research group (1987) also explored female sexualisation in their memory-work group,

and that project was the basis for my research. The theoretical framework of my thesis also included a post-structuralist feminist approach, and when analysing our memories within this framework I created the concept of "women in the air" as a way to live and express many kinds of sexualities through writing. Writing as an artistic expression offers a space for creativity and imagination when the structures of an existing society built up "without women" do not make that possible. Although we as a group found many similarities in growing up within our sexualities as women, I also found out that I am very special and unique as a woman. I am me. I am myself.

At the same time in my life as I was pursuing this research I was also going through a process of finding my identity, and the memory-work group helped me strengthen my boundaries when I was able to speak in the group about my experiences as a woman. Somehow, sexuality is a very personal basis of being an individual, and when thinking about this in the larger societal context, it seemed strange that only two genders are usually mentioned: male and female. Things have changed a lot in society nowadays, compared to those times twenty years ago. Now it is recognised that there are more types of sexual identities, but still, those who do not fit into those two categories can face discrimination by some people.

Because the memory-work method was already familiar to me, it was easy to use it in this Master's research process. That experience also made me brave enough to follow my feelings, and to be more creative in my academic writing, so that I wrote part of the thesis as poems. I think that as a learner this experience gave

me the possibility to understand differences between individuals, and it started a process of searching for my own identity. So, the process which started during this memory-work group continued over ten years. In the beginning, I connected my growing process strongly to feminism, then to religion, and finally to psychotherapy. It led to the acceptance of myself as an ongoing growing person, and finally loving myself as the woman who I am.

### **Art Work as a Secret Power Opening: Learning to See a Larger Picture of the World**

After graduating, I forgot Collective Memory-Work for twenty years. But it came back in a different academic context. I was working in the university administration at the same time that I was a doctoral student. I also studied Arts University Pedagogy, during which we had a visiting lecturer who talked about her experiences of using memory-work. At the same time, I started my teacher training period in a combined research and artistic project called the “Gambia project.” I did my training by researching *visual art learning* in an international collaboration between visual art students and teachers in Finland and the Gambia. The memory-work method was well suited to that research project. An article “Art work as a ‘secret power opening’: A Finnish and Gambian collaboration in researching perspectives, essences, and positions in visual art education” was published at the end of the three year project (Jääskeläinen & Pitkänen-Walter, 2018).

This project offered the possibility to adapt the memory-work method to an artistic context. The participants were mostly visual artists, and writing was not

their primary tool to express their experiences and feelings. When participants wrote about their memories, they had the possibility to use other ways to express their memory, for example by drawing. However, everyone decided to write about their memories. Language was a challenge in this memory-work process, because the workshop took place in an international collaboration where neither the Finnish nor Gambian participants could use their mother tongues. Even though everyone was able to speak English, it was not always easy to understand each other.

Although it was more challenging to use the memory-work method in this kind of artistic context compared to an academic context, this research project was a very meaningful experience on a personal level. It changed my way of thinking about the world and myself. It started a process that made me look at the larger picture of the world. It made me recognise how advantaged I was as a white, Western academic woman. It made me want to change the world to be a better place for everyone. I think it has been one of the most significant learning experiences for me as an individual, forcing me to wake up and notice the inequalities in the world.

### **Plot: Learning to Act for Change**

In the Gambia project, I used Collective Memory-Work twice. At first with the Finnish and Gambian visual art students and teachers, as mentioned above, and the second time in a workshop with the Finnish visual art students and teachers and local Gambian women. Although I had prepared everything well, I had to give up my plans to use the memory-work method to explore *arts education*, in order to be able to follow the Gambian women’s own way of doing

art in their everyday life. I reflect on that experience, and the transformation process I underwent as a researcher, in the article “Plot—A space for transformation in the intercultural research process” (Jääskeläinen, 2018). In that process, writing about my experience as a story plot rather than in strict academic form helped me to question my approach as a researcher, and to find artistic expression in a place where I was not looking for it—in the local Gambian women’s daily tasks of preparing meals for their families.

Somehow, giving up using the memory-work method taught me more than if I had used it and strictly followed my research plan. I noticed how limited my knowledge was as a white Western woman. I had to face the history of colonialism, and my co-participation in it as a researcher. In a way, I was disappointed that memory-work was not a method that could overcome these kind of issues. Although it aimed for emancipation, it only seemed to work well in “suitable” circumstances in Western academic contexts.

However, the problems were not in the memory-work method itself, but in the way that I was used to adapting it for environments that were familiar and comfortable for me. On the other hand, this experience of adapting memory-work in an environment where I faced these challenges has given me the deepest learning experiences, and forced me to act. I have become an activist in countering discrimination, and have developed my teaching to include human rights education. I have started to act for change (Jääskeläinen, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Now it is over twenty years since my first experience in using Collective Memory-Work. There have been many moments during these twenty years when I have had a feeling, often related to shame or fear or loneliness, and I have first thought that it is my own personal problem. But, then I have remembered that “the individual is collective” and realised that if I am feeling this way, it is not only my personal feeling. It is something that is part of larger structures, and other people can also feel the same thing. That idea has freed me from my own boundaries, and helped me to overcome those feelings. According to Haug (2008), memory-work is an emancipating learning project that makes transformation possible by making things conscious, upsetting the boundaries of the discourse, and interrupting the traditional ways of knowing the world in the dominant culture.

The world has changed a lot in twenty years. I am now a grandmother, and I often think about what kind of world will be left for my grandchildren and their children, and so on. The individual is collective. I no longer think only about my own feelings, but also my responsibilities. The personal is also a collective responsibility. This can also be applied to the current issues in the world, such as the climate crisis. For example, when I hear that there is no point in acting on the climate crisis as an individual, because my actions are nothing compared to those of big companies and politicians, I cannot think in that way. Experience can be generalised. My responsibility and actions can be generalised. A single human being is responsible for the collective, and vice versa. Collective Memory-Work can be a

way to learn to work by tackling the existing discriminating and destructive structures in society. The collaborative nature of the process, and the theoretical foundation based on everyday experiences in memory-work can push the work into broader contexts and into the wider world, to produce non-hierarchical knowledge and address broader issues of equality (Gannon, 2008).

I have not used the memory-work method after my last experience described above, but that does not mean that I have given up on using it. I am sure that there will be cases where I may use the memory-work method again. My relation to it has changed, and I am sure that my learning experiences help me adapt it even better than before. According to FitzPatrick, Friend and Costley (2008), there is no need to restrict memory-work to certain paradigms or to certain disciplines. Instead, when allowing Collective Memory-Work to flourish as a reciprocal and continuous learning process between the individual and the collective, it may enable opportunities to build a better world for everyone.

I hope that my experiences in combining the arts with Collective Memory-Work can encourage artists to utilise the memory-work method in their own individual development as artists, and by introducing their artistic products and methods into the collective learning processes. This can happen by being open to multiplicity when expanding artists' professional practices for contributing their expertise to a range of interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and trans-professional contexts, from education to organisational development, and from health care to social innovation (Lehikoinen, Pässilä & Owens,

in press).

To make a difference and transform society by using Collective Memory-Work, hybrid artists can begin by introducing ideas, concepts, approaches, methods, and products from the arts to establish a reciprocal and continuous process of learning and working with people from other discourses and cultures. In that way, the artistic expression of an individual hybrid artist becomes collective becomes individual...

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