

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Cornerstones in Collective Memory-Work: Talking about Method, Approach and Attitude Melanie Stitz, Franziska Stier, Robert Hamm

Robert

What are we talking about when we use the term Memory-Work? Are we talking about an approach? Are we talking about a particular method? And if it was a case of talking about a method, is this a method with a set of particular steps that follow each other in a logical manner? And does the term Memory-Work refer specifically to working with the texts, or does it refer to the entire process from finding a topic to the final reference back to the initial discussion? How do you use the term?

Franziska

I got to know Memory-Work through the Dialectic-Women, which is a group of women who meet regularly once a year to work theoretically on different topics. For me it is first of all a collective way of working with the aim to think of changes of self and changes in society as one. It is connected to a particular attitude towards processes of teaching and learning. I also tried it as a research method in the context of a university project with refugees and sans-papiers. As a research group we approached the method step by step. But due to time constraints it was impossible to

implement the collective learning process with the participants.

A learning collective that functions on eye level is hardly possible if there is time pressure. At the end the research process and the results were rich in insights, but not identical with what everyone would have learned if the analysis had been done with all of the authors. The process of collective learning that was central in the original version of the method remained limited and we did not meet our own target of conducting the entire research process together with the sans-papiers.

Viewed from this side it was not "Collective Memory-Work." And yet, it was a piece of work committed to an attitude of doing research not from top down, rather including as much as possible the perspectives of both researchers and researched in the process. We also wrote a memory-scene and they became part of the entire work. During the project we exposed our own history, experiences, constructions of self to a reflexive view.

And here, I believe, it is a question of attitude. Memory-Work is not only a series of steps. The method can be adapted to suit many research questions and circumstances. The point is not simply to

follow a correct succession of steps. It is more a matter of a collective desire for research and an interest in new insights that is also directed towards the own self.

Melanie

Several of Frigga's texts and her theoretical findings are based on what she describes as the void of experience in science, and at the same time the speechlessness of experiences. She has used Memory-Work often to close theoretical gaps and fill blank spaces. I find this especially clear in her work on the topic of fear. She looks at what theories are there about fear, in psychoanalysis, in critical psychology, and in behaviourism. But all of them don't explain why women can fear everything and nothing. And she says, we need to tackle this somehow differently. It is a structural problem that the existing theory is full of these gaps. Women in particular experience this as a challenge to translate the theories, or else project their experiences and concepts onto them. Memory-Work is a research method that aims to start with experiences in developing theory.

Another point is the connection of the method to a desire to learn that is articulated by the people themselves, and actually the desire for a capacity to act. It is about gaining a better understanding of how we are part of our own subjectification within the social relations.

At the same time Memory-Work is not a protected term. I come across the term Memory-Work for other methods in other contexts simply as working with memories in different forms. And I can think of contexts in which I use Memory-Work more in terms of everyday speech. It is required then to make clear what we are

talking about. I have a similar problem with peer coaching. Nearly every casual chat amongst colleagues is labelled peer coaching. Peer coaching is also a method. There may be variables in it, but there are also a couple of basic principles.

Robert

What would be the cornerstones for you in the method Collective Memory-Work?

Melanie

It is working collectively with self-generated texts. The authors of those texts are actively involved in working with the texts. To me it seems quite strange to have others writing a memory-scene and then analyse it somewhere else and draw conclusions from it. The basis for me is that the researchers, the learners take their own experiences as their material, and they don't talk about "the others." It makes them change, and also the matter at hand changes in the process. The producers are actively involved in the process of deconstruction and analysis. And it doesn't mean to find something like the real message or the correct question. Instead the criteria for me is, what is useful for the participants.

I realised that clearly when we were working with a scene in which we found as a significant white spot the topic of parting. It is possible that another group constellation at another point in time would have found a different focus in the same story.

Robert

You mean in the analysis?

Melanie

Exactly. What we want to know, the cognitive interest is historical and

determined in the present. But being involved in the process, overcoming the divide between researcher and researched, that for me is central. There can be modifications, for example in relation to writing the texts spontaneously or editing them several times, are they read silently or read out aloud? There are countless possibilities for variations.

For me another part of Memory-Work is that the writing task is collectively agreed upon, and that it is embedded in a collective investigation, starting with a question that is of interest to everyone. For the insights along the way this question also functions as the point of reference later.

And I would not want to speak of Collective Memory-Work if it is simply asking people to write texts that are analysed by someone else. For me this is nothing else than asking someone to write an essay as their homework but not Memory-Work in a narrower sense.

Robert

What attitude then do you think is needed for Memory-Work?

Melanie

I think there is an ethical responsibility to share it with the participants, to make it transparent. That means also acquiring the basic assumptions when we use this method, or at least present them as proposition that we actively work ourselves into the social relations, that this is a doing, a praxis. As Marxists we take it that as humans we make our history ourselves, but we do not make it as it pleases. We don't do so under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances given and transmitted from the past. Also our

memories do not simply happen to us, we produce them—and we constantly rewrite them in a manner that they seem plausible to ourselves and to others. How we do that has implications for our future actions. Memory-Work in this sense is always a praxis of self-critique. If I don't share this view I will have difficulties finding an avenue into working with these texts.

Robert

Not the same one.

Melanie

Not the same one, correct. Just to say about the attitude that at the beginning facilitation is helpful in Collective Memory-Work. Otherwise a group may turn in circles or be stuck at a certain point wanting to come to a unified view where different aspects can simply stand beside each other. Such facilitation, ideally in a rota system should be justified and collectively agreed upon. For everyone to sit together and simply start works better in groups that are familiar with the method and where the group members have experience working together. If Collective Memory-Work is done for the first time it needs an introduction for everyone, explaining what is going to happen, the basic assumptions and ground rules for working together.

The attitude is quite important. If we compare it to the method of group facilitation. Facilitation is similarly a term that is used differently in everyday speech. The method however relies on a particular attitude and understanding, for example in being “solicitor for the topic” or “midwife for the process.” The point is that topics are defined together, considered and a decision is made together what is our starting point. The method aims for the biggest possible

equality amongst participants to be able to discuss on equal terms as much as possible. Is everyone on the same level of information? It is a matter of bringing everyone along, reduce the impact of different levels of knowledge and make hierarchies ineffective. In this sense it is bound to certain values. Without a corresponding attitude and basic understanding it drifts off into chairing a meeting.

This is what I see also in Collective Memory-Work. I would describe the attitude as one of self-scrutiny, the willingness to expose oneself to a critical reflection. At the same time for this process to work it needs to be done in a caring manner, and the social relations need to be included in the reflection. To recognise oneself as active actors, hence also able to act in the future, is different to, e.g., thinking in terms of “It’s your own fault.” Then the question shifts away from “Why do you want to be stuck in such a harmful relationship?” Instead it starts to ask “What is it that keeps us in such relationships? And what do we need, how do we have to construct ourselves and others to find new ways of being?” I would stress that Collective Memory-Work is not a method for therapy, something that can be done individually to find out one’s blind spots. Instead the learning is always geared towards learning by means of the personal example about the social relations. And changing them is hardly possible on your own. It needs the others. It also creates a level of solidarity and empathy because we don’t talk about this particular individual author. We rather say: Well, what of this do we know? What resonates with us?

Robert

Franziska also made this distinction between attitude and method.

Franziska

Yes. I realised in the context with other students that the attitude is relevant for applying the method. On the one hand because the searching view is not only directed at others but also trying to relate to oneself. On the other hand it is important for being able to deal with the material and to deal with each other, to be able to formulate questions, theses and messages without hurting others or being hurt. Here is where attitude and trust play a big role. Depending on the research question the texts generated can be exciting, or also paralysing and triggering fears. It needs a careful approach. Therefore I have repeatedly pointed out that these texts are only momentary snapshots, not a psychological profile.

Melanie

Of course we are in our stories and sometimes it stirs up something when your own story is analysed. I know with one memory-scene, that wasn’t even my own, it really touched me because I recognised so much in it. And to deal with this in a reflected manner, well, that is easy to say. I think it is helpful to constantly be aware that it is not about finding the “real story” and what “really happened.” We cannot know it. There are so many actors and perspectives. This question about the one and only truth, we cannot answer it, and we don’t need to answer it. What matters is the memory, how it is constructed and if it is constructed exactly in this manner, what are the consequences, what is avoided, what is reaffirmed? The white spots are

often markers for highly explosive stuff. If then you think of the person remembering and in fact expressing what she felt, and what she in fact had wanted in these situations, it gets really hot, and the pressure for action mounts. That means, it really is a matter of construction of memories and the consequences for the future. And for the way we construct our memories we have good reasons, and in many regards it is a shared experience.

In some of the memory scenes we come across the outstanding virtuosity of women to write a full page of text without ever themselves appearing in it, a proper self-erasure. Loads of impersonal subjects, events and circumstances are driving the action in the scene forward without the author being involved at all. Whatever happens seems to be inevitable. But at the same time we know, to organise a strike doesn't just happen, it needs a lot of power. And yet in the memory-scene we read, e.g., "the union" called for a strike. This artistry is systematic. It safeguards something. It may be due to humbleness, the attempt not to make a fuss about oneself. Anger or many other emotions and motifs instead are not really welcome. How reasonable then is such an approach to ourselves in the existing social relations? As long as the disadvantages prevail and we don't feel the capacity of acting we have reasons for better not inscribing ourselves into our own histories.

Our dealing with experiences of harassment or violence is sometimes similar. If for instance we don't even dare to see an assault as such, instead we convince ourselves, no, that is not a hand on my bum, I only imagine it, and no, he didn't say this at all, I'm surely too precious here. If I was to realise and accept

it, the ball would be with me, I would have to act. But this contradiction is hardly bearable if you are alone, and it is difficult to solve it. If I see that the setting is such that I can only lose, and if I think I am on my own and will be left isolated, I go tampering my perception and my memory for not to realise it. This is a strategy that we also found in some of the reports made public through #metoo. There women are asked to justify why they only now come out with their stories of situations that date back some five years. I suppose these women had a very clear picture of social reality and knew that in the context at the time they could only lose. And now there are others who eventually make it appear possible to remember and speak in that manner.

That is what Frigga writes about. In our memories we try to render our acting plausible and we eliminate contradiction not only for others but also for ourselves. The collective is needed to get the feeling of being supported by others so that I can actually look at these things.

It is not always as dramatic. We don't always talk about heavy trauma. But this censorship of the own perception becomes very obvious in many memory-scenes, as well as the taboo around the own needs and contradictory and conflicting emotions. Then one prefers to write "Without me doing anything it happened that..."

Robert

You just said the collective is needed to develop a feeling of being supported, probably also to feel a kind of solidarity. Franziska spoke of a collective in the context of university. These seem to be two different types of collective.

Melanie

Yes, one is the collective, the other is working collectively in that first of all a realisation happens that others see different messages in the texts and ask different questions. For me these are two different levels, whether we talk about a collective that, e.g., is also involved in politics together, or a group that is working collectively together.

Franziska

Obviously Memory-Work is more fruitful if we have a collective working together with a shared political vision. But I don't think the method is meant for "the collective" only. The contexts in which we apply Memory-Work show that. When we use Memory-Work in the workshops at the Autumn Academy we have shared visions, but only very few of us share their everyday life. Thus it is possible in groups also where the participants don't work together on a daily basis, or are in contact with each other for decades. And a group of students who work together on a project for a semester can use Memory-Work as a research method. The central question seems to be the shared interest in the research project, not how the group comes together.

Robert

There is a lot of material about groups that come together to work on a topic, and afterwards they dissolve again. Obviously they have a shared experience and if they want they can try to meet again some time but in their everyday life they are not together.

Melanie

But they are there voluntarily, they have a certain commitment to use this method. They know what their questions are. They are not led through a process without clarity about it, it is made transparent. There is a commitment and a shared agreement in the group.

Robert

I would like to change perspectives a bit. *Other Education* is a journal that deals with educational topics. Education (Bildung) is always context-bound, there is a particular space and a particular time. Collective Memory-Work has its roots in feminist politics, feminists struggling with Marxism, conflicts over positions within feminism also, and struggles with science, social sciences as a whole. It is about 40 years now since the method has been developed first. How far does Collective Memory-Work as a method fit into the educational landscape in 2020?

Melanie

I think it fits as much as digital detox. I experience great interest in it in many places. I think it is on a rise, and at the same time it meets a great sadness. Take the response to our seminar on politics and everyday life—that was booked out in no time—or when I presented Collective Memory-Work at the conference of Critical Psychology, or at the Marxism-Feminism conference in Lund. My impression was, many who did not know about it yet were really touched by the method. And quite a few said they would like to try it once. And they asked what is necessary for it.

Then I always answered, two or three friends to start with, and you get going. That sounds so simple. But try to find three

friends who are available at the same time to come together to learn. There is the first obstacle.

After it was probably mainstream talk—if you allow the exaggeration—to blame the circumstances for everything and to see us as pure victims, carrying no responsibility, today we have to deal with another extreme. I mean this neo-liberal narrative of being sole architects of our own fortune, whereby we need to constantly optimise ourselves, become our own shareholders, and somehow manage to fit in the Yoga-class, then we will be able to also deal with all the other impositions.

Both narratives are totally constraining. In the one I set myself up as completely incapable of acting, in the other as omnipotent. In reality I fail in both. I think there is a really strong desire to think differently about it, to see changing oneself and changing social relations not exclusive of each other, rather going hand in hand and mutually presupposing each other.

In that respect I think Collective Memory-Work is spot on. But it remains a praxis of resistance to fight in everyday life for the space and the conditions and particularly the time to do it. That is my experience also in other contexts where everyone says, it is so good to have a space where we can learn together, read something, acquire knowledge, and there is pleasure in mastering these challenges, and to see that is so much easier together. But our everyday life is not built like that, spaces are not readily available or time isn't structured in a way to simply go and do it. That is also why with the four-in-one perspective we are struggling for four hours every day to learn together. This is where resistance starts already.

Robert

Franziska, is your experience similar to what Melanie describes?

Franziska

I would say, yes. For a long time I was looking for groups to apply Memory-Work. I always heard, “Oh, I'd love to, it sounds fascinating. Can you give me information? What books do I have to read?”

But the time is missing to work as a collective. Isn't that strange, we ask what books could we read? But we don't have time enough for the collective work of shaping those learning processes together. Yet, I also believe that for collectives, but also for many others it is quite exciting to think about self-changing and changing society in conjunction, not always move one side only and take the other to be set in stone. I always found Memory-Work enriching. There is no pressure to smoothen yourself and be perfect, you rather experience yourself as something contradictory. That was a new experience that can be painful by times, but it can also be absolutely pleasant.

Robert

At present you are a student at the university. When I talk with students in Ireland I often find, there is an orientation on exchange value. What do I get from it? Do I get credits, points, certs? What is my gain? And if the answer is insight, understanding, cognition, well, that won't buy me anything.

Franziska

Students with such an attitude are unlikely to come to a seminar with Memory-Work. And the method is not suitable for a compulsory course either. In the context of

university it seems to me the framing is important and what leeway is there to plan a seminar, to convey the method, and of course also for research.

I would imagine that Memory-Work as a research method can have something incredibly beneficial particularly for a promotion. Whoever works for a promotion spends most of their time on their own, somewhere, in the library. And Memory-Work offers the chance to enter into a collective research process, to accompany a group, constantly engage in feedback, share experiences and knowledge. That is a chance that would probably save a good few half completed dissertations prior to the candidates heading into individual despair.

Melanie

University can also be a place where you can meet people who discover their passion for learning and studying. There are rooms that can be used, self-organised or in autonomous tutorials or whatever. It is much easier to find like-minded people there than being outside of such a learning apparatus.

Robert

Your field of work at present is not university. You are in an environment of political adult education. How does Memory-Work fit in with this area?

Melanie

This would in fact be a good starting position. We reach out to people with an interest in politics, or even activists who want to confront topics and who want to better understand social relations. To be interested in political education I guess

there has to be always at least an anticipation of the capacity of acting.

But Memory-Work also needs a basic level of trust and reliability, a group that works together for a slightly longer period of time. To organise such a framework is not as easy. Even in reading circles I think there is too much fluctuation. It works well in the context of our Autumn Academy. There during the weekend we always include a full day workshop with Memory-Work.

Robert

Well, there are other groups using Collective Memory-Work outside of institutionally framed adult education. That is possible, too. And there seem to be quite different experiences.

Melanie

Yes, fortunately so! But it often remains a challenge for everyone to feel responsible and organise their framework together. I believe that we often still need to learn, or re-learn the abilities to be part of a collective. I reckon they are absolutely necessary, but I also often miss them. On the one hand people form groups out of a pressing need or for some actionistic motive, to organise the women's strike, to organise a demonstration etc. But there we sometimes do not have the time for reflection. Bringing together activism and permanent reflection and learning, that is a challenge also in social movements.

Robert

And how does that relate back to Memory-Work?

Melanie

I use Memory-Work not solely for looking at the way I construct my memories. In looking at this I want to find out how we work our way into the social relations and what it means for my possibilities to intervene. It is always looking back in hope for the future. The question is also, how do “the others” actually appear in the memory scenes: for instance as white spots, without emotions and motivations? Mostly we are well trained in seeing ourselves as isolated individuals. What happens or what becomes possible it instead I recognise in others potential allies?

Franziska

What factors stand in the way of understanding oneself and others differently, as Marx describes it, e.g., in the Paris Manuscripts? How come we tend to see the freedom of others as a threat to our own freedom and that we even construct other people as a danger for ourselves? We could hold Marx’ vision from the Paris Manuscripts against it, where he speaks impressively about different human relationships: *“Let us suppose that we had carried out production as human beings. Each of us would have in two ways affirmed himself and the other person ...”* (Marx, 1844) and so on. The question arises, how do we get there and how do we need to change ourselves and the circumstances that prevent us from getting there. Memory-Work does that quite personally, without individualising the conditions that we live in.

Melanie

You had asked the other day, would it not be possible also in a different way? I thought about it. I know methods in which

work is done with pictures. With them it is also possible to see how you draw yourself in the past. Where are others at all in the picture? Or, how you see yourself all on your own on a boat out at high seas. The disadvantage is, you don’t have the inner processes, the emotions, the motivations, they are difficult to draw. Then I thought, what about transactional analysis? There in some way it is also about more or less useful basic assumptions, and the question, what are your scripts in the world? What do you do to make sure it will actually happen as laid out in the script? And if you change the script or leave it behind, you can retrospectively organise and evaluate experience differently, which also allows for different capacities to act. And then there is NLP and the neuro-logical levels where you can say, it will be difficult to get a driving licence if I assume on the logical level of my identity that I am not a driver. There is the work with timelines, where by following the history of my life in space I experience: It makes a difference whether I do so assuming I was always a child that wasn’t loved by anyone, or else I have a different dogma in my bag. Working on and with such beliefs has implications for the future because I may allow myself to have different experiences, see things differently. I suppose these are methods that go in a similar direction as far as the question of construction of experiences is concerned. What then is the advantage of Collective Memory-Work and what is special about it? I believe it is indeed this collective element, and the fact that the social relations are part of the reflection. On a level of therapy the other methods are certainly quite useful. But in them there is little notion, or in fact none at all that there are certain invocations in the social

relations that suggest to build our capacities to act in a state of separation from and enmity to others, and to better hold back our emotions so as to be able to keep staying adjusted.

Robert

Working with the texts then can bear different results, depending on the composition of a group, and also who is able to convince the others in the collective discussions that their interpretation is most valid. Working with the texts in Collective Memory-Work is also a process of negotiation. The matter negotiated is the interpretation of the latent content of the texts.

Melanie

That is exactly why the method needs to be made transparent for participants. It makes it democratic to some extent. But I also see the problem of power to legitimise interpretation. Discussion needs to end at some point. There are times where it could go on endlessly over certain formulations. Then it needs someone in the group to be able say, "We may leave it at this for now and let us move on."

It is helpful to come to an agreement in the group that the focus is not on this one interpretation or emphasis, hence not on defining right or wrong. The question is more how useful is it, and what else we can learn by, e.g., continuing a discussion about the message of a memory-scene?

In one of our projects we had the situation where four or five groups all worked with the same story. It was quite different what transpired as messages. But maybe at the end of the day this result isn't actually the key point, it may be rather the process as such.

Robert

Writing down results, or preliminary results along the way is a help to keep track of the chain of thoughts. In writing down you assert a position where you define legitimacy. Whoever doesn't accept what you write would have to make you write differently, or else write themselves. But as long as it isn't written differently it stays the same, and two years later you pull out the document and you say, here, this is our result.

Melanie

If we look at our everyday life, how often do we accept hegemonic definitions? That's a bit like saying that you cannot not communicate. Maybe we similarly cannot not interpret. But then, the alternative would only be not to write down anything at all to avoid a definition. That leads nowhere either. Once something is written down it can be criticised, expanded and revised, and thus continue being in the process.

Robert

If we look at Collective Memory-Work as a learning method, it necessarily includes the chance for those who take part in it, to draw results from it. Whereby results does not mean the one and only correct result, rather like the four groups working with the same text, they get four results, and all of them are right.

Melanie

And they all have learnt something from it.

Robert

If these results are documented they can also be conveyed to others. Only on the basis of the documentation can the four

groups continue working. If it is not written down the problem arises that no-one else can take it up, and no further learning processes take place.

That is why this intermediate step of documentation is another element that has to be part of the method. And it is also a process of acquiring this skill, to learn and to practice it. In the early volume of *Frauenformen* this is explicitly mentioned. (see: Haug, F., 1980)

But I see that a lot depends on the context in which Collective Memory-Work is applied, the institutional framework, space and time, the conditions on which the people come together. In a group of students in a university seminar that is easier than in a group of people who meet in the context of continuing professional development. In their context they don't have the time to go and write up.

Melanie

I think, that is nicely documented in the little red volume with the workshop report by Pro:Fem (2006). They in fact have a collective authorship. But these women were in a retreat together for weeks and they had this common goal. That's a fabulous basis. As long as such a framework isn't a given, I think it is just as well to say, I don't include the whole spectrum of issues that was covered, rather I focus on one aspect. That is not to assume that everything is said about this memory-scene or all the material.

That is another important point. The learning process is not only about the content, how do I construct myself and others and so on, it is also about remembering as a praxis. The more often I write memory-scenes, the more I also learn

to consider white spots. I intervene in a productive manner in my memories.

And quite important is the option after analysing a memory-scene to remember the same situation anew, and write it again, probably fill the white spots, write out the contradictions in full and see how do I change my memory. Particularly the contradictions give us hope—they point to the cracks, the moments at which we experience ourselves as strange and where we are not in agreement with the social relations. These are the moments in everyday life at which we often bend ourselves to be able to continue functioning. We know that from real life. If I describe my childhood today it differs from what I would have said ten years ago, because I have a different view today.

To learn writing, telling and remembering in this manner, there is a political level to it also. Time again as feminists we point to the scandal how we don't appear in historiography, in the canon, in the theories. And then we may discover in Memory-Work that we don't even write ourselves into our stories. Well, if we don't do it, who else should do it?

Developing a culture of collective remembering is also a historical political project. Narrating history from below, and how contradictory it was and that matters were not at all clear and unambiguous, but quite conflictual and contested, then as much as today.

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