

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

### **Collective Memory Work. A Methodology for Learning *With* and *From* Lived Experience**

**Corey W. Johnson (ed.)**

**2018**

**166 pages**

**ISBN: 978-1-138-23791-9 (hbk) £ 120.00**

**ISBN: 978-1-138-23792-6 (pbk) £ 38.99**

**ISBN: 978-1-315-29871-9 (ebk) £ 18.50**

**Published by Routledge, New York and Abingdon**

**Review by Brigitte Hipfl**

This collected volume edited by Corey Johnson is very stimulating in several ways. It provides the insights of Johnson's decade long use of collective memory work as a research method and activist tool, based on his own research-activism and on his role as methodological supervisor of doctoral research. The fact that collective memory work is a collaborative process is affirmed by the fact that all the chapters are co-authored, with Johnson always being one of the authors. Through both theoretical contextualizations and thorough discussions of questions regarding the implementation of collective memory work in various research examples, the reader learns what this method can accomplish, and what the challenges are when working with this specific methodological approach.

The first chapter by Corey Johnson, Dana Kivel and Luc Cousineau, gives a concise introduction to Frigga Haug's development of collective memory work, stressing the epistemological roots in social constructionism and feminism and its emancipatory intentions. The authors position collective memory work as one version of participatory action research. They do a good job in showing how Haug's approach has been taken up in Australia, New Zealand and the US, focussing, in particular, on the expansion from women's issues to men's, queer, and transgender issues. The chapter ends with the authors' own experiences with collective memory work—which is a feature that characterizes all chapters. All of the chapters include author's reflections and/or the discussion of their experiences.

Part II of the book comprises six chapters, all of which utilize collective memory work for in-depth explorations of gender- and race-related experiences of inequalities, marginalisation and domination. Each chapter also puts the focus on specific elements of

collective memory work, and shows how connections can be made to relevant theories. Two chapters deal with men's experiences: Rudy Dunlap and Johnson elaborate on the insights gained in four groups of men examining their experiences with media portrayals of masculinity. Chris Hanson and Johnson analyse the gendered privileges of men as elementary teachers. Here, the complex tasks of acting as a facilitator of collective memory work is discussed; also how this method can be adjusted to specific formal research requirements as, in this particular case, for doctoral research. Rebecca Eaker's research on how adults remember their parents' reactions to gender non-conformity illustrates, amongst other things, the importance of continuous self-reflection of the primary researcher throughout the research process. The chapter by Needham Yancey Gulley, Anthony Patterson and Corey Johnson investigates the experiences of white faculty at colleges and universities which historically have been black. The reader is introduced to the specific adjustments that were needed, like the inclusionary perspective of a black scholar as well as the implementation of a multi-user, web-based telecommunication platform for group conversations. The last two chapters in part II make the transformative potential of collective memory work, and its double role as a tool for research and activism evident. Jemelleh Coes, Needham Yancey Gulley and Corey Johnson in their research on what motivates black and LGBTQ activists, explicate the invigorating and empowering effects of the discussions of the participants' memories for the activists' network. They also point to the importance for participants to reflect on the often, quite emotional aspects of being an activist. In their double-role as scholar-activists, Anneliese Singh and Corey Johnson used collective memory work as a liberation methodology in their project with LGBTQ youth to create safer schools. In this project, two documentaries were produced to make collective memories of LGBTQ youth accessible for broader use.

The two chapters in part III of the book are a summary of the key requirements and methodological foundations for collective memory work. These two chapters are also designed to answer potential questions from novices interested in using the method. Nikki Laird's failed attempt to employ collective memory work in her doctoral research makes clear that the method cannot be used when the specific contexts of the social group makes disclosures of personal experiences difficult (her research was on gay men in student fraternities). The chapter includes a set of questions that help avoid such pitfalls. The book ends with Harrison Oaks interviewing Corey Johnson regarding the implementation of collective memory work in his doctoral study. The chapter starts with a check list (p. 130) of the common elements of collective memory work, followed by Johnson answers to questions regarding ontology and epistemology, moving to more pragmatic issues like the planning of reflexive processes and the facilitation of the group activities.

This is a well structured and readerly textbook that does not just give the readers a wealth of information about the potentials and challenges of this specific method. It also expresses the enthusiasm that collective memory work is more than merely production of knowledge, but also a tool for social activists, able to be used for reflecting on and transforming contemporary inequities. Even though the authors stress, again and again, the foundation of collective memory work in social constructionism and point to representational logic, there are many

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passages in the book which would connect to current discussions about (post)qualitative research. Collective memory work is so much more than just coding and categorizing data. Ontology, epistemology and axiology are not separated from one another; the researchers become creative thinkers with one another in their collectives. This is a performative method where research is a process of becoming, thus disrupting ideas of fixed identities. The book is a very good resource for anybody doing qualitative research interested in working with this approach. This definitely could be graduate students since most of the research discussed in the book is doctoral research. But the book is also highly recommended for researchers and social activists in the broad field of education and social work. If the readers are not already convinced of what collective memory work can do, this book definitely will convince them!

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