



Working with Older People

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Doing memory work with older men: the practicalities, the process, the potential

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to describe the process of setting up and participating in a collective memory work group of older men, with a focus on the making and unmaking of older men and masculinities through age, ageing, gender, gendering, and other intersections.

Design/methodology/approach – Participant review and reflection on collective of memory work group of older men.

Findings – Memory work is located in relation to related but different forms of writing and group work, emphasizing how in this method everyone becomes a writer, an author, a listener, a reader, a discussant, and a commentator. This provides a novel way to explore the constructions and intersections of ageing, gender, men, and masculinities.

Social implications – The potential of memory work, both for working with older men, and more generally is outlined. Key issues are: genuine and collective commitment to substantive change, not just at a personal level, but also at wider social/political/cultural levels; willingness to trust in the other members of the group, an issue that may be difficult for some men; and commitment for caring for one another especially in their moments of greatest vulnerability.

Originality/value – There is little, if any, other writing on this approach to ageing, men, and masculinities. The paper is therefore of great value, and may stimulate wider application of this approach.

Keywords Changing attitudes, Gender, Older people, Writing, Masculinities, Memory work

Paper type Conceptual paper

Over a 13-year period, between 2002 and 2015, we have been part of what we now call the Older Men's Memory Work Group. Memory work is, as the name suggests, work on memories; usually though not necessarily collective; and is focussed on and about some agreed issue(s). In our case, this was the making and unmaking of older men and masculinities through age, ageing, gender, gendering, and other intersections. Within this general approach, topics or themes that are important, and perhaps emotive, are chosen and, through some form of group work, agreed for writing and then analyzing memories.

In this short paper, we first describe the practicalities and the process of our memory work group, before placing the method in broader framework, and considering the potential of the method for working with older people, and specifically older men.

The practicalities and the process

In the early 1990s, a few of us first discussed the idea for a memory work group of older men to examine ageing and gender. We had been involved in various broadly anti-sexist, profeminist activities around changing men and masculinities, and we wanted to try the methods of feminist memory work most well-known from Frigga Haug's (1987) edited book *Female Sexualization*

using collective work on what makes girls and women. In the event it took us ten years to get around to setting up our own group.

Our meetings were almost always away from our homes and usually in a “neutral space”. We generally began at half past nine or ten o’clock in the morning with greetings, tea and coffee, and then a round of usually fairly quick updates, catching up on what had happened to each of us since the last meeting. We would then agree on a common theme or topic for us to write on. In the same or nearby space participants would choose a memory, or some episode/episodes in their lives relevant to the chosen topic and begin writing for between 40 and 60 minutes. It is important to work hard on actually remembering the episode and to be specific and concrete, and not too “detached”. In practice, there were many different ways of establishing a theme and agreeing a topic; sometimes, this was agreed at one meeting for the next meeting; sometimes through e-mail discussions; sometimes with more than one option on the table and disagreement resolved by compromise, and on at least one occasion by voting.

A very powerful discussion on themes, in and between meetings, was often a key motivation in the writing that followed. Writing by hand, rather than via a keyboard, at speed and in certain definite ways and within certain limits, produced work which can then be critically and reflexively interrogated, usually by the writers themselves. First person writing was the main method, but sometimes some of us also used the third person. These written memories were then read out by each of us, without comment from the others. After a shared lunch, we read the memories out again, and then discussed them, and what they were saying, what they were telling us – or not, especially in terms of our broad interest in the making and unmaking of older men and masculinities through ageing, gendering, and other intersections. Listening to others’ written stories was a central part of the process, as was the feedback and comments given to each other. Early on we developed rules of confidentiality and a sense of trust that made for a safe and an invigorating space to work in.

Topic themes were wide-ranging and included: ageing, hair, clothes, peeing, school, disruptive bodily changes, sport, sisters, food, intimacy with men, love, saying goodbye to mothers, political moments, power, violence, fathers and fathering, work, sexuality and relationships, and ending the group.

At times, some of us have had to take rest breaks during the day or have shortened meetings for health reasons. After the meetings, we typed up the memories and circulated them to each other. Sometimes we discussed and analyzed, in writing and/or in discussion, written memories from the previous or earlier meetings. There was also extensive e-mail discussion and at times analysis, in part on possible interpretations of the stories. We also experimented with other ways of working, such as use of photographs from our earlier lives.

Individual and collective reflective processes in and out of the group were important, interconnecting with the actual content of the memory work. Important too was the development of trust, and our growing affection for each other; the mode was one of care and critique, not therapy. As ageing men, we supported each other in reflecting on how our lives were steered by our ever-changing masculinities, helping us to sustain our friendships and resolve conflicts in our personal lives, our personal and family relations, and in political awareness and activity. We developed some shared analysis, but this was quite difficult at times, not least because of differences of approach amongst us, and at some points we downplayed the attempt at a common analysis. In the writing and reflection process everyone becomes a writer, an author, and a listener, a reader, a discussant, a commentator; in our case, this led onto some division of labour in the final stages of the group when preparing a book on the stories and memories generated from the group (Barber *et al.*, 2016).

Locating memory work

One of the fascinating things about memory work is that it is very hard to categorize. It makes writers into both subjects and objects, and cuts across that division too. Similarly, this written production, albeit tidied up to some extent, can be located in various ways and traditions, and

forms of writing (Haug, 1987; Pease, 2000). This raises questions concerning how such memories relate to what happened in the past, how we and others experienced them then, to what extent these memories can be said to be accurate, and indeed whether accuracy is the most appropriate way to think of these writings.

Collective memory work of this kind developed from several different sources: from feminist consciousness-raising, collective study, and auto/biography, from the worker writer movement, from oral and community history, and most generally perhaps from the need to reach beneath the public narratives to subjective feelings about everyday life experience. The collective nature of the process is very important as it maximizes opportunities for reflection, comparison, and challenge. As Frigga Haug (2000) puts it:

Experiences are both the quicksand on which we cannot build and the material with which we do build. We cannot therefore simply rest content with collecting experiences and claiming that these are women's socialization [...]. A method has to be found that makes it possible to work on experiences, and to learn from them (p. 156, our emphasis).

Memory work can be used in a variety of contexts, including research and theory development, experimental writing, personal development, politics, and teaching and learning. For feminist activists and researchers the method had a particular salience, women's experience being often in tension with dominant masculine forms of public knowledge. It gained additional impetus from the growth of interest in all forms of memory, commemoration, and forgetting, particularly from the 1980s onwards. Here, the emphasis shifted from memory and oral history to recover hidden facts and subordinated experiences to the stories themselves as a way of forming subjective identities and anchoring personal change.

There are several differences with both auto/biography and oral history interviewing. The short written pieces are produced on the spot, and can therefore be read and analyzed more immediately and intensively than a long written personal narrative, a long transcript, or a literary work. The "public-ness" of the story is immediately present in the room. Feedback is also immediate, though may be more prolonged afterwards. The experience of writing and reception can therefore be very formative. The meaning of the story for its author can change, sometimes with implications for behaviour or identity. Unlike interviewing or ethnography, however, there is no formal split between "source" and analyst: everyone is a source, everyone comments.

The potential of memory work – with older men

Our age in particular enriched this project. As David Jackson (2016) notes "ageing men are changing men", that is, not just declining men, and we had chosen in which specific direction we wanted this change to go. A breadth of experience and our preparedness to confront candidly and critically the accumulated mistakes and errors of judgement from our past provided a rich field for analysis and re-learning. It made possible a new kind of "internal conversation" (see Archer, 2003) in which our individually reflective deliberations, often obscured, incomplete, even deceptive, can be recovered, put to the test, and given a new sense of purpose.

Memory work can also therefore be used in working with older people more generally. But our overarching commitment to change lent itself especially to this form of inquiry since marked silences around men, masculinity, and ageing could best be broken by careful co-operative group work with men who had come to trust each other, not to compete with, nor criticize each other destructively.

We used diverse forms of writing, some factual, some more descriptive, some autobiographical in tone, some more as story-telling, some more literary in style. Sometimes emphasis was on the social conditions and sources of the writing and knowledge; at other times it might be more about the construction of identity change. Thus, there are differences in how memories are conceived, framed, and expressed. Writings may vary from fragments, shards, of memory to well-formed and written out stories, from recollections from long ago to contemporary experiences. In general, in our group there has been more attention to memories of childhood and growing up, on one hand, and recent ageing, on the other, rather than the in-between periods of adulthood.

This method may also bring up memories and things forgotten, not fully worked out nor consciously planned in advance, even when the topic was known beforehand. Memories can be recalled and valued, but not reified, nor seen as “the truth” or as the only truth. Since we were, and are, in different ways searching for new ways of inhabiting contradictory gender and age relations, the changeful, self-reflective nature of the method, and the support it gave, was appropriate and welcome and gave opportunities for expressing individual points of view on other issues of common concern for older people.

Implications for practice

The experience of memory work and its potential for effecting change is bound to be very different from one group to another, where differences such as age, gender, class, ethnicity, and life experience can have a radical impact on both group identity and outlook. Whereas, in its inception, the collective memory work of Frigga Haug had a great deal to do with consciousness-raising for women with clear potential for their empowerment, using the same methods for men – the already culturally empowered – is a different undertaking, raising obvious questions, and even a sceptical eyebrow about what we were really up to.

The following key points should therefore be considered when using memory work:

- it is difficult to imagine a successful project of this kind without prior genuine and collective commitment to substantive change, not just at a personal level, but also at wider social/political/cultural levels;
- similarly, no such project can succeed without a willingness to trust entirely in the other members of the group, an issue that may be difficult for some men; and
- for this to be possible, and for the project to succeed, those involved would need to be completely committed to caring for one another especially in their moments of greatest vulnerability.

The degree of critical public exposure we subjected ourselves to, facilitated by our members’ backgrounds in anti-sexist activity and development work, along with their analytical and life experiences, meant there were few places for any of us to hide, even if we wanted to. If at times this made for an uncomfortable, even disturbing, experience, it was held together by the collective commitment of the group and the emotionally “holding” environment we were able to develop. Without this, many of the intimate disclosures – what we might call, the soft and contradictory underbelly of masculinity – in our book, *Men’s Stories for a Change* (Barber *et al.*, 2016), might never have been possible.

This is a project that is both finished and unfinished.

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