Collaborative Research to Support Reflexive Feminist Professional Work

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Abstract

Possibilities for postmodern emergence [Somerville, M. (2007). Postmodern emergence. International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 20(2), 225–243] in professional practice were explored by a group of tertiary educators working together on a collaborative memory project. This allowed new possibilities for informing and extending practice beyond taken-for-granted norms circumscribed by the neoliberal university environment. Each author branched off from an initial study to work further with their constituent professional groups: early childhood educators, teachers, counsellors and educational psychologists. The collaborative method involves theoretical provocations for analysing positionings within dominant discourses that shape contemporary educational practices, providing support for reflexive insight into professional work. Findings indicated the fruitfulness of collaborative support for theoretical explorations into diverse domains of inquiry relevant for practice. There were also challenges associated with collaborative theorising in the individualistic setting of the university, including difficulties in embracing group coherence without homogenising intra-group differences. This process could be used in other settings to renew the research, discoveries and future becomings of academic or professional selves.

Keywords: collaborative methods, early childhood education, secondary education, higher education

Remembering is complex work. In this paper we describe some of the pleasures and dangers that emerged out of a collaborative examination of ways that of a group of women academics have been privileged or constrained by dominant discourses. We look specifically at how our professional selves have been constructed through our memories, by using a collaborative research process that troubles notions of individual

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embodiment. Here, we use the notion of embodiment employed by feminist philosophers to disrupt Cartesian dualisms that separate psychic interiority from the corporeal, as an external material aspect. Instead, we position ourselves as enmeshed in the material world (see Braidotti, 2002; Grosz, 1999). Such a process is a potential means for reshaping views of educational practice as well as ourselves as researchers and academics. By unravelling our separate strands in a shared process of re-storying the past, we have become convinced of the transformative (if risky, as we will show) possibilities of collaborative memory research. This paper looks at some of the theoretical and methodological implications of our approach, which points to important ways that widening circles of work give room for participants to become both authors and subjects of their own research.

Following Somerville’s (2007) call for researchers to facilitate an unravelling of our as-usual academic selves, we used a methodology that draws explicitly on earlier feminist processes involving group elicitation and shared re-writing of memories to explore the historical and political shaping of what we think of as our own experiences as individuals. The approach builds on Haug’s (1987, 1992) technique of foregrounding history and culture in an examination of the selves constituted through dominant discourses. The emphasis of ‘collective biography’ is not on the individual narrative but on the reworked account that offers another definition of ‘memory’ altogether: memory that has rich, temporally specific embodied detail while being set into the course of social history rather than the unfolding of an individual life.

The version of memory work we have found most useful with professional groups reflecting on their own practices draws specifically on negotiated theoretical understandings as part of our collaborative work of writing, which we call a hybrid collaborative biographical memory work (CBM) project. In some ways this approach could be called a process of collaborative theorising through a process of exploring the normatively perceived ‘ownership’ of individual, embodied memories. We think that spaces left open within the long traditions of collaboration in various forms of feminist theorising and methodology have an increasingly important contribution to make and, in particular, CBM is a promising means of engagement across disciplines.

In this paper we reflect collaboratively and reflexively on four memory projects each of us conducted earlier with different professional groups: early childhood educators, teachers, counsellors and educational psychologists. Our comments, then, are further reflexive analyses of an interlinked set of CBM projects for their productive strengths and difficulties. Working collaboratively was a challenging task within academic settings that still have a strong tendency to emphasise the production of individually authored research outputs in a timely fashion. In this paper we describe some of the associated complexities encountered regarding leadership, equity, and participation in all groups as painful production of our work. While recognising these and other constraints, we celebrate the possibilities for collaborative research using this methodology—as ways to support professionals and spread the ‘collective intelligence’ of the research group, for example, saving participants time and stress. We also contend that the generation of collective biography gives rise to new ways of thinking about our complex and contested work across different domains. Through this route we recognise the transformative potential for CBM as a relevant means of engaging with ideas and concepts within and between
complex and often challenging (perhaps previously silenced) discourses across time and space.

Multiple Theories, Singular Voice?

In our initial project (Claiborne, Cornforth, Milligan, & White, 2009), we explored the notions of mastery and inclusion, sharing our separate memories via the figuration of a fictional character, X. We looked to collaborative possibilities in the reshaping of our memories for their potential to ‘take up these ideas of making provisional new forms that deconstruct the binary constructions of self and of knowledge’ (Somerville, 2007, p. 236). Like Somerville, we drew on Deleuze and Guattari’s (1988) notion of becoming, expanding it through the work of Patti Lather (1991) and Elizabeth Grosz (1999), to suggest that our becoming might become an ‘unravelling’ through methods with a ‘postmodern emergence’. Recently Davies et al. (2013) have added questions about materialism and ontogeny from the feminist work of Barad into an analysis of collective biography around difference and recognition. It was to this emphasis that we turned.

While we were avid students of the memory work legacy, our experiences generated significant adjustments as we explored ways to emphasise the biographical setting possible for the memories of a diverse group. Each came with a legacy of theoretical and experiential differences that underpinned their discipline and influenced their approach to the memories and their meanings. We came to the conclusion that our memories could be considered aspects of a particular shared biography by having them spoken by a fictional figuration to emphasise fluidity and change (Claiborne et al., 2009). We saw this figuration as a device that held possibilities of multiple selves rather than reproducing a biographical narrative. This figuration enabled us to establish our shared ‘I-ness’ and provided a mechanism through which we were able to write in first person while upholding our shared subjectivity (Cornforth, White, Milligan, & Claiborne, 2009). Through this mechanism, each of us sought to establish intersubjectivity by engaging with memories that represented the figuration’s shared experience of exclusion, inclusion and mastery.

Foregrounded by a number of factors (disciplines of participants, differences in status, ethnicities, age and gender), there was a greater awareness of potential ethical problems and need for particular sensitivity in the handling of memories in our work. A particularly poignant aspect of the process surrounded the point of separation: of letting go one’s previously ‘self-owned’ experiences in order to focus instead on the conditions of their emergence. This was not always easily achieved. Indeed, in some cases this was never achieved and, where this was evident, memories remained in the notebook of their ‘owner’. Whilst necessary in determining their impact and allowing others to read their significance (both as part of the collective and as readers in the published work), attachment to specific memories one has initiated can become a hindrance in the later stage of collaborative ownership and theorising. Some skilful attention is therefore needed on the part of research facilitators to ensure that individual participants are not left feeling hurt, or criticised, or that their experience has been diminished. Subsequently, we found that being able to let go of individual ownership and de-personalise our memories was, in itself, surprisingly liberating. This ‘unravelling’, for us, became one of the greatest strengths of the methodology.
Having become convinced of the transformative potential of CBM for ourselves, our academic lives, and our audience, we then sought to involve our colleagues across the range of disciplines we represented in this work. We invited participation beyond our particular educational institutions to consider the relevance of CBM for psychology, counselling and education professionals, in particular regarding its potential to inform professional practice. Each of us had a facilitator role in the four new collaborative projects, and came together at intervals to report back on progress, share readings and consider ways forward with any difficulties in the dynamics and facilitation of the groups. One ‘triggering’ exploration was common to all groups, namely the notion of transition, a topic that emerged in the discussions among the authors as we explored possibilities that might link all our groups, despite the different theoretical positionings and professional positions held by each facilitator.

**Unfolding Engagements with CBM**

Somerville (2007, p. 225) describes the ‘irrational, messy, embodied and unfolding of the becoming self’. We describe the four projects here as a series of unfoldings that offer new questions about professional practice. Each iteration of our collaborative project is an unfolding that indicates moves both towards and away from our original concerns as a group, since project facilitators were informed by different discursive moves dominant in our areas of educational practice. At the same time, we were all committed to reflexive critique of these discourses that helped to define us, particularly through using poststructurally leaning discursive frameworks. In the following sections we explore the dominant professional discourses that positioned each of the groups and how an emphasis on embodiment collapsed, temporarily, these strongholds.

**First Unfolding: Dangerous Territories for Counsellor Educators**

For counselling educators, working with memories can be dangerous territory involving both restoration and possible litigation. The heated and often impassioned legacy of the recovered memory debate has resulted in guidelines about how potentially traumatic memories are to be handled. Since it is not possible to know in advance which triggered memories might be traumatic, precautionary advice accompanies any exploration of memory (e.g. Contratto & Gutfreund, 1997/2014). Consequently, therapists recognise the impact of memories, whilst also being wary of their influence. The facilitator, formerly a counselling educator and now a poststructurally oriented academic, was interested in the potential of CBM to provide an alternative approach to working with memory in restorying problematic events. She invited a counselling academic of each gender (from another university) to join her in a CBM project. All shared a common history of migration. Influenced by the theme of transition, and aware of our often uncomfortable liminal positioning as ‘outsiders’, we focused on the common experience of migration and the restorying of ‘ourselves’ in relation to a new land.

The ethical component of this work was founded in a critique of anthropocentrism that directs the Foucauldian project of unsettling the self into what Anderson (2009) called a ‘post-natural’ direction. Many environmental ethicists (e.g. Irwin, 2010), deep ecologists (e.g. Naess, 1984) and educators (e.g. Furman & Gruenwald, 2004), see
anthropocentrism with its attendant speciesism, competitive individualism and resource exploitation as a barrier to addressing eco/social justice. Consequently, much work has already been done in deconstructing the modernist separation of the ‘human’ from the ‘natural’. Drawing on some of the literature in emotional geography that argues for a human/nature convergence, based on the recognition of our inter-relationship with the natural world (e.g. Anderson, 2009), we explored the influence of landscape in memories of finding a place in a new country. This perspective affords the environment some agency, whilst arguing for the crucial importance of embodied emotions in mediating this inter-relationship. In this way, the project became an ontological experiment in which we explored the possibility of using CBM as a way of unsettling the dominant and divisive anthropocentric master story from which we struggle to escape.

Alive to the possibility of the natural environment ‘speaking’ to us in various embodied memories, we decided to use poetry and photographs to attempt to express what was often beyond (rational) words (see Cornforth, Lang, & Wright, 2011; Wright, Lang, & Cornforth, 2011). However, although we all enjoyed writing poetry, and were all committed to collaborative ethical work, our diverse theoretical perspectives proved challenging in the analysis. Both new counselling academics were strongly embedded in humanistic traditions. Although having some understanding of narrative counselling, the influence of language and positionality in the (re)formulation of ‘problems’ (White & Epston, 1990), they were not familiar with the Foucauldian (e.g. 1980) discursive concepts that inform such an approach. This created some difficulty in releasing ownership of the poems in order to focus on the contributing discourses, whilst leading to some intriguing discussions—in which we did not always agree—about the pull of phallocentric discourses, the viability of the Cartesian subject, and the therapeutic usefulness of a discursive perspective.

We found some theoretical commonality in reading our collaborative experiences through a bi-cultural lens (Wilson & Yeatman, 1995) which acknowledges our place as newcomers in relation to Maori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa. We all struggled with ‘speaking right’ and ‘speaking rights’ in relation to the land. What inscriptions and grammars can we use when ownership is a contested term, and more enticing indigenous views of speaking the land ultimately unavailable to the coloniser? The group went through several discursive transitions as we grappled with the possibilities of our identities beyond dominant constructions, notably with the indigenous people of our country.

We all acknowledged that CBM had scaffolded a framework for a rich and multi-layered investigation into unfamiliar territory, allowing us to ‘open up the unthinkable’ (Lather, 2008, p. 183) in an extremely enjoyable fashion. We all also admitted to having been changed through our participation, feeling less alone and isolated in our academic silos. The project had taken us out of ‘ourselves’, and provided the opportunity for some healing of the occasionally traumatic effects of migration. CBM here became a healing and enjoyable way of engaging with theory, even if group members remained tentative about the usefulness of a discursive lens.

Second Unfolding: Early Childhood Educators Challenge the Dominant

For early childhood teacher educators, working with memories appeared less problematic at the outset. The notion of drawing on memories as a primary source of insight into early
childhood experience seemed to offer an exciting opportunity for the sector and the emphasis on embodiment was already under examination in the field of education (Bresler, 2004). While discourse analysis was also not new to early years research, it was a process that typically took place outside of the ‘self’—focused on the experience of research subjects (other, usually children or teachers), organisations and systems. At that time only two of the group had prior experience of poststructuralist theory; most were well versed in Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory that frames the New Zealand early childhood education curriculum. Most participants saw the CBM experience as a means of analysing personal experience in order to promote a shared agenda for examining transition—a ‘hot topic’ in early childhood education. The group quickly decided to focus on transitions for very young children through embodied memories of their own transition experiences across the lifespan. There was a problem, however, in the prevailing assumption that the transition is an uncontestable concept. The theoretical stronghold that underpinned this assumption was thus painful to relocate, pulling many women back into the dominant psychological discourses that enshrined our professional lives.

Participants were under pressure from their organisation to engage in research for publication in order to achieve status and credibility for the profession. This group, all women, included both indigenous Maori and Samoan contributors, though most were from the dominant anglophone cultural group. All were well known to each other, having worked together for many years. The similar viewpoints offered both strength and weakness. An implied homogeneity featured strongly in the initial discussions, based on an assumed shared discourse and way of working together—both of which were unsettled, and as a result, unsettling, through the CBM process. Like the theories that were privileged at the outset of this study, these shared assumptions of ‘what we do’ served to monologise the dominant discourse on the topic.

One of the challenges we faced concerns those who were less familiar with Foucault’s (e.g. 1980) notions of discourse, who struggled to find the language to articulate our embodied responses to the challenges that arose. We came to appreciate that this is a highly skilled process that requires strong leadership, a commitment to questioning oneself and others, and an ability to encounter and rest with uncertain terrain. Moreover, it cannot merely be layered over existing subjectivities. Due to the intensity of this process, memories were complete by the end of this period and an analytic writing process began which spanned the subsequent 18 months. Some members felt that the two-day period had achieved its purpose, and that the theorisation required was too intense or time-consuming and/or that they had moved on to other projects. In all such cases they were able to relinquish their memories for others in the group to record on the proviso that they were acknowledged in any published works. Despite the fact that rigorous informed consent processes were in place at the time, the remaining members were keen to avoid the danger of colonising the work of others when memories are (perhaps unwittingly) employed for personal or professional gain by some on the part of others. Great care was taken to present memories in ways that did not compromise any member of the original group. Where the memories were distinctly identifiable, from a cultural perspective, this was especially important. It was decided not to employ the artistic device of a figuration as a single rememberer, as to do so might produce the homogeneity we sought to avoid.
We would later describe the confronting and time-consuming CBM process as ‘hard labour’, as it involved a painful and challenging process of interrupting dominant discourses that had defined us over the many years that spanned our careers. CBM enabled us to prise open the discourses surrounding our theoretical standpoints. These were often located in sociocultural hegemonies that neatly packaged transition as an experience defined by the expert teacher, assuming the same transition for every child. The dominant view in the literature—that ongoing educational success is linked to smooth transition at such moments—was radically disturbed by our discoveries that our own transitions were surprisingly undefined and often oppositional. We began to recognise the limitations of traditional constructivist views of transition and the associated role of the teacher within discourses that lodged transitory experience as little more than an enculturation exercise (Rosewarne, White, & Wright, 2011). The result was alarming, provocative and deeply confronting process that became much more than a research ‘output’.

**Third Unfolding: Emergence for Teachers**

The usual first assignment for initial teacher education students is usually an educational autobiography that explores students’ assumptions about teaching and their desires to become a teacher. This task seeks to surface an apprenticeship of observation (Lortie, 1975) in order to help students to see their limited/limiting notions of teaching. The teacher education programme’s role then became partly one of a progressive interaction with the students’ memories in order to reconstruct their misconceptions about teaching (e.g. as ‘transmission’). This process assumes that the ‘rectification’ of students’ memories supports their future practice.

This group began with the facilitator and two other teacher education academics at the same institution. We thought CBM could offer teachers new opportunities for transformation through their memories, and wanted to explore the relevance of this methodology for professional learning. An additional three practicing teachers joined the group. Thus there were six educators (one man, most from the dominant cultural group), who had 5 to 20 years of early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary and/or community education experience.

Over an 18-month period, after work and on weekends, we explored the notion of the ‘emerging’ teacher through our own embodied experiences as beginning teachers. We focused our writing collaboratively around the memories of one figurative educator. The use of the figuration challenged traditional, linear and deterministic notions of our beginnings and development as teachers. In the remembered world of the rumpus room, for example, the figuration was already learning on the job: establishing relationships with pupils, maintaining regularity and order, and playing with power to nurture, control and subvert. There were no misconceptions to be reworked here; instead the figuration’s mimesis was open to the complexities and contradictions of teaching.

The collaborative process of co-research and publication was compelling and sustaining for us all, right to the end. The initial process of analysing our memories—around concepts such as vulnerability, order and escape—unfolded relatively quickly in a process that sometimes surprised us, sometimes delighted us and sometimes moved us to tears. In witnessing vulnerability and order in the memories and our present lives, we found (re)
negotiation in creativity, play, imagination, resistance and defiance. However, beyond this first phase, a notable challenge was in deciding how to move into theory. The group was entirely open to reading academic literature and theorising around the collaborative memories, but to move into a space of discursive analysis risked losing the three members of the group who were unfamiliar with poststructuralism. Initial and tentative forays into the linguistically demanding and complex theoretical landscape of discourse appeared to exclude the very people we were seeking to include in this process: practicing teachers. The group commitment to writing collaboratively required an alternative way forward.

For this reason, we adopted a rather more bricoleur and emergent theoretical approach (see Somerville, 2007) which enabled all members of the group to ‘bring theory to the table’ in a way that expressed their own professional engagements in new ways made possible through the questioning processes of the reflexive collaboration. We progressed with only those that resonated with us all. For example, the notion of binaries was an important concept for the three practicing teachers, and the process of identifying and questioning these utterly transformed all our frames of thinking about emerging as a teacher. Similarly, the concept of liminality offered a window into a theoretical space through which to explore the process of CBM.

As we wrote together, our group became committed to questioning, tentativeness, complexity and the ‘aha’ moment. Our group felt a considerable amount of pride and transformation from our CBM adventure (Beals et al., 2013), and we hoped that the memories voiced by our figuration might evoke embodied connections in teacher readers. At the same time, this joyous facilitation experience, enabled by the over-riding commitment to the group, brought an ethical dilemma into view. The differing theoretical orientations and professional concerns of the practising and academic teachers led to a significant departure from a feminist and poststructural framing envisaged by CBM (e.g. Davies & Gannon, 2006), leaving the facilitator with a sense of being ‘outside the fold’ of CBM.

Fourth Unfolding: Grappling with Resistance

Educational psychologists work with students whose subjectivities claim space outside the norms of expected classroom learning and behaviour. In recent times there has been something of a resurgence of the field formerly critiqued as unreflective in its use of scaled tests for surveillance and exclusion of groups of students (e.g. Rose, 1990). Possibilities for including more discursive reflexivity on the part of professionals and more attention to the political grounding and constraints of practice offer further innovations for critical practice (e.g. see Corcoran, 2014). One author with interests in this area was joined by another of the present authors to work with four other tertiary educators (one male) who had strong connections to educational psychology, either from working in this capacity in schools or through university teaching. It was our experiences of co-educational or single gender schooling that proved the most insightful for considering our diverse responses to fraught situations that called for a new self as we transitioned to a new school. Memories of being a ‘gendered outsider’ or a student newly constituted as a gendered adult were especially relevant for two participants who were immigrants, while ethnic positioning had greater insider/outside consequences for a ‘local’ participant who...
moved in and out of indigenous settings at various times both at home and at school. In this sense there was productive diversity in the group.

A goal of CBM research is the discursive analysis of memory in a shared collaborative process. This proved problematic with participants who identified as critical in their profession without engaging in discursive considerations. This CBM group never achieved consensus about memories so that a coherent narrative structure could be built around the key notion of transformation. Tricky problems can arise when a CBM group is facilitated by an experienced discursive researcher working with participants not only less experienced but with little interest in discovering what the discursive approach has to offer (see Davies & Gannon, 2006). This was a particular problem with the educational psychology group, since it included researchers already well established in non-discursive conceptual framing. Despite concerns about social justice shared by all in this group, some participants embraced evidence-based educational research as an unproblematic way to address concerns around economically disadvantaged or disabled students. Memories contributed by these experienced practitioners were voiced from strong positions of competence and effectiveness in their professional lives. Perhaps the work of unravelling such positions, for example by more reflexive questioning of our own unintended collusion within dominant discourses in education, was too painful or too difficult without some embodied promise that such transformative work might pay off in benefits to participants.

Because participants were busy academics, we were unable to find a time off campus to meet, and instead met in a quiet room in our workplace. The facilitator should perhaps have foreseen the ironies emergent in our focus on ‘transition’ at a time when the institution was determinedly involved in downsizing. Senior members of the group heavily involved in meetings about restructuring might have experienced considerable stress just by sitting in a room at their workplace. These colleagues might also have been very careful not to reveal any of their own doubts or angst about the ‘transitions’ proposed for workplace colleagues outside the group. Greater consensus about process and analysis might have been possible had the group been able to get away from the workplace for a retreat, but in the already discursively constrained neoliberal workplace (see Davies & Bansel, 2007), where finding a meeting time was almost miraculous, this was unrealistic. People’s working lives were already under the strain of possible redundancy or redeployment, so further reconsideration of the way that our selves had been shaped by larger discursive forces could have been dangerous territory for many in the group who were resistant to ways of looking at social reality differently.

**Professional Emergence? Cautionary Tales**

We sought an inclusive collaboration throughout the process of writing in all groups, yet this did not guarantee feelings of ‘safety’ for participants. Although working collaboratively provided some safety from positions of individual responsibility for things beyond our control, there was also the possibility of analytic distance from the most pressing concerns raised. While early experiences of fear and lack of understanding could be explored together, there was not always a shared emphasis on this process as research—as opposed to an experience of ‘individuals’ sharing.
While theoretically informed CBM (see also Davies et al., 2013) is based on discursive exploration, some groups had strong allegiances to paradigms such as sociocultural theorising that were positioned as competing with the discursive. Instead of a reflexive both/and engagement with discourse, some groups continued to position memories solely within their initial paradigm that did not appear to be altered in any way by the group process or, if there was movement, it was accompanied by tension, discomfort and (in some cases) participant withdrawal. This seemed to be particularly difficult for the struggles of the group of educational psychologists, who were mostly already comfortably positioned in frameworks that seemed to participants to be best for practice. There were difficulties involved for the facilitator in balancing how the group process was gently led and supported and challenging the group at least to consider new theoretical spaces. The process of ‘leadership’ itself became troubling as we sought to revision rather than simply resist hierarchical assumptions about expertise and precedence. Our reflexive questioning within each group helped us to trouble our taken-for-granted ideas about our own or other group member’s ‘rights’ to facilitate the sessions or to speak to/for/about a particular group. Yet it was often only in its aftermath that these emergences became accessible imaginings. Surely even these difficulties indicate that CBM offers transformative possibilities for our various communities of practice. All the authors have found that our work with students preparing to be early childhood or secondary teachers, counsellors or educational psychologists has been subtly transformed as we have become different educators to our performative selves of so many years.

There are many limitations to CBM, but three stand out as significant. First, the reflexivity of the method can lead to group perceptions of an inward gaze experienced as excluding of those outside the group. In one symposium about CBM given by two of the authors, an audience member said that she found it difficult to ask the panel a question, because it felt as though she was observing ‘people in their own sitting room [at home]’. The same intimacy that might be seen to characterise such work is a source of both insight and risks. By working collaboratively across these several projects, with the support of ‘outsiders’, we have found a way to draw on the intensity of collaborative work while also gaining some distance from each group with the critical oversight of this larger organising group.

A second limitation of the method pertains to cultural positioning. Norms can emerge in groups through the collaborative acts of remembering that, while working against the individualising nature of memory in Euro-Western understandings, could be exclusive of certain cultural understandings. In our reflexive work within and across groups, we tried to challenge homogenising tendencies that any one of us might have spotted, but our own reflexivity carries the constraints of our own cultural positionings.

This need for constant reflexivity also raises the biggest limitation of this method: the sheer amount of time that is needed to do this kind of work, as pleasurable and fulfilling as it can be. All the competitive pressures of academe creep in to affect our processes, as do the pressures of time across work and family commitments. There were emotional risks involved for all of us in sharing our vulnerabilities in areas of particular passion in our research. These were sometimes related to health risks that some of us manage in public spaces. So it is not only time that is needed in groups doing CBM; it is also the
trust between group members that must, it seems, grow positively in order to facilitate the research.

Some of these limitations also supported unexpected strengths. In discussing which memories to emphasise in collaborative discussion, we inevitably chose some and avoided others. However, the specific content of these memories was not the focus, since CBM research is not aimed at accuracy of recall. Through collaborative processes of weaving across threads in discussion, and emphasising aspects that resonated with more people, we aimed for a kind of collaborative, embodied shared recognition of something unsaid that was nevertheless important, giving voice to what was before a silence. Perhaps the most difficult aspect for all of us whose subjectivities are informed by dominant global individualism, was to let go of presumed ownership of a personal memory in order to see it re-crafted towards the embodied detail of a more generic yet highly personalised ‘subjective’ experience.

The CBM method eschews explanation and justification in the search for simple truths. Our painful discussions of ‘heartfelt’ comments that were identified as cultural norms, even clichés, were often difficult yet led to enormous insights about the way we have all been unwittingly shaped by the cultural forces around us. As one person noted, it was a shock finding herself ‘using Ministry buzz words’. Perhaps that is one reason that the use of memories from early in life is so useful in CBM groups. Even though we are in some of the writing exercises positioning ourselves as young children—without claiming to be of such an age or knowing from the inside how a child might view the situation—the process allows us as participants to imagine returning to a time when social norms and rules were not as well known. The process of adding embodied detail to these memories assists in this figurative device of suspending our professional selves and returning to description that avoids the clichéd adult forms we have all come to rely on.

Clearly our experiences with CBM exceeded our expectations and provided us with rich interpretative layers that we were able to bring to bear on our theorising, despite many challenges faced. A key problem pointed out by Stephenson and Kippax (2008) is that there are likely to be participants who are not interested in feminist theory (much less post-structural or discursive questions) or the wider cultural implications of the memories analysed, raising questions about authorship and final efforts towards completing and disseminating the work of the group. Several members left the wider early childhood group due to workload, redundancy or employment elsewhere that required a geographical shift. While those who left gave permission for the memories to be published, there were additional anxieties over potential cultural capture, given the fact that those who remained in the group were from the dominant culture. Memory exploration across cultures could have potential to take a homogenising, and ultimately colonising gaze (see White & Mika, 2013) or could offer a means of border encounter that is seen as so important for professionals working in increasingly diverse societies (White, 2013).

The experience of several groups raises some important questions around the negotiation of leadership. A commitment to the ongoing engagement by all participants sometimes meant including everyone’s theoretical perspectives, creating tension between maintaining a theoretical stronghold throughout the process and opening the process of analysis to multiple frameworks. Furthermore, to uphold the group commitment to a collaborative writing process risked compromising academic standards required for
publication. This facilitation might be seen as simultaneously a relinquishing of (poststruc-
tural) theoretical leadership and an invitational style of leadership that could facilitate
reflexive movement from all in the group.

We argue that CBM is a highly skilled process that sometimes requires decisive facili-
tation, a commitment to questioning oneself and others, and an ability to encounter and
rest within uncertain terrain. We also recognize the problematic importance of the educative
work required of someone who can facilitate the participants’ engagement with the discus-
sive analyses typical of the work by Haug, Davies and their associates. We further
acknowledge the time CBM takes within the busy lives of professionals and suggest that
this is not a methodology that would be successful with large groups, done in a rush, or
for purely instrumental purposes.

There is also a challenge to move if not beyond discourses, then between them. Some
groups chose poetry and the indigenous language to facilitate this movement. This is
the challenge of new feminist materialisms (e.g. Grosz, 1999). Questions about the
selves doing this research and strategies involved in how to locate ourselves and our
group in the process are ongoing. Recently some of us have taken the CBM process to
an online format, in work on ethical difficulties facing doctoral supervisors and advisors
(see CODIS, 2013).

**Conclusion: New Strengths**

Our work with CBM has allowed us to discover new strengths not outlined in Stephenson
and Kippax’s (2008) review. There were certain theoretical tools we drew on across
various group settings, notably in using the theoretical work of Davies and Grosz in chal-
lenging dualisms. In this version of CBM, groups did not explore theoretical issues
directly, as happened in groups of academics involved in collective biography of the
kind described by Davies and Gannon (2006). Instead, we worked with the materials of
everyday life, with facilitators pointing to ways that discourses might be emergent in our
collaborative memories. This involved a focus on discourse as underpinning practice
rather than requiring a detailed description of practice from our diverse participants.

There were unexpected resonances between groups, who found that CBM unleashed
previously under-considered approaches that allowed transformative insights into the
process of becoming professional. Sensitively facilitated CBM was also found by many
in the group to be emotionally satisfying, a satisfaction that paradoxically emerged
through the unravelling (see Somerville, 2007) of the personal hold on memories set
within the time and space of long-established family narratives. The resonances across
the very different groups described here suggest that CBM might have potential in
group work with either clients and/or students. Specifically, it might be used as an exercise
in de-personalising and re-centring specific memories of marginalisation, helping to shift
the focus from individual guilt/pain/responsibility of the daily practice under discussion to
overlay it with recognition, however fleeting, of solidarity—provided that there is a com-
mitment to diversity within the group.

Finally, we see this method fitting Somerville’s (2007, p. 225) hopes for methodology
that has possibilities for ‘postmodern emergence’. Citing the work of Patti Lather
(1991), Somerville suggests that rather than critique that deconstructs, methodologies
may open up new knowledge and research practices, proposing we consider ways to think of becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Grosz, 1999) that ‘emphasize[s] the irrational, messy, embodied and unfolding of the becoming self in this research’ (Somerville, 2007, p. 225). We are not sure we have lived up to her disclosure that ‘[t]o do the sort of research I associate with emergent methodologies I need to de-authorize myself each time; it is about a process of undoing’ (Somerville, 2007, p. 230). Perhaps, though, in our collaborative work together, we have undone some of the fixed notions of our individual academic selves towards new directions suggested by our collaborative becoming.

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