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Chapter 8

Mothers and Sons: Using Memory-work to Explore the Subjectivities and Practices of Profeminist Men

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In this chapter I will outline the application of memory-work to understanding the subjectivities and practices of profeminist men. Profeminism for men involves a sense of responsibility to our own and other men’s sexism, and a commitment to work with women to end men’s violence (Douglas, 1993). It acknowledges that men benefit from the oppression of women, drawing men’s attention to the privileges we receive as men and the harmful effects these privileges have on women (Thorne-Finch, 1992).

The research was undertaken as my PhD thesis and it began with questions that have been a personal challenge in my search to understand my place as a white, heterosexual man who is committed to a profeminist position. What does it mean to be a profeminist man? What is the experience of endeavoring to live out a profeminist commitment? What do these experiences tell us about reforming men’s subjectivities and practices towards gender equality?

I believe that men’s subjectivity is crucial to the maintenance and reproduction of gender domination and hence to its change. The purpose of the research was thus to theorize men’s subjectivities and practices to inform a profeminist men’s practice and to enact strategies that will, in themselves, promote the proc-
ess of change. So the research was driven by practical concerns as well as by the imperatives of intellectual inquiry.

**Context of the study**

The nature of my research interests and my commitment to praxis and change led me to develop a participatory approach to this exploration. This participatory approach was informed by feminist critiques of mainstream masculinist research. While it is generally accepted that men cannot do feminist research, they are encouraged to evolve approaches based on feminist standpoint epistemology to research men’s lives and, in so doing, they must develop “their own standards, directions, meanings, space and name for what it is they are doing” (Kremer, 1990, p. 466). Wadsworth and Hargreaves suggest that “the methodological approaches of feminism will be relevant to men... seeking to transform subordinating practice” (1993, p. 5), whilst Maguire (1987) also encourages men to use participatory research to uncover their own modes of domination of women.

Inspired by these participatory approaches, to begin the research, I drew up a list of 20 men whom I knew personally from my involvement in profeminist politics and who I believed would identify with a profeminist stance. Ten of these men were, at the time of the research, active in Men Against Sexual Assault (MASA); the others were from a range of activist backgrounds including the non-violence movement, perpetrator counselling, and non-sexist educational programs of boys in schools. Because my focus was on both personal change and political strategy, I believed that it was important to choose men who were in some way taking a public stance with their profeminism.

I contacted each of the men, outlined the project to them and asked them whether they would like to receive a copy of a discussion paper outlining the project and come to a meeting to discuss it. All of the men I contacted expressed interest in the project and of the 20 men contacted, 15 men attended the initial meeting. Of those, 11 men committed themselves to the full project over a period of 15 months and 22 meetings.

Thus, I did not begin the study as a memory-work project. Rather, memory-work was one of three research methods that the group developed to carry out the intentions of the research. The other research methods were consciousness raising, and sociological intervention based on the social movement research by Alain Touraine (1977, 1988). All three methods involved group work, a precondition for participatory research and a preferred methodology for enacting the action component of the research process. Furthermore, the combination of the three methods provided a basis to bridge the gap between the individual and the social and between the subjective and the structural. Together, they avoided the danger of psychologizing masculine subjectivities at the expense of structural change, while at the same time grounding the discussion of political strategies in the subjective realities of men’s lives.
Although memory work is a liberationist method (Onyx & Small, 2001), my concern was that the use of the method on its own would emphasize the individual biographies of the men at the expense of the collective social relations of patriarchy. By utilizing memory work alongside the social movement methodology of sociological intervention, which emphasized dialogues with interlocutors and collective strategizing about ways to challenge patriarchy, I was able to ensure that the links between the men’s lives and their positioning with the hierarchies of gender were not lost.

**The use of memory-work in the study**

In many ways, memory-work was an obvious method to choose for the study. I had read Haug’s (1987, 1992) work and the adaptations to the method developed by Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault and Benton (1992). It seemed to complement the practice of consciousness raising, which I had originally formulated as the main research methodology. We used consciousness-raising as a method to deal collectively with what it means to identify oneself as a profeminist man. We started by generating a series of questions. What are the basic problems that profeminist men face? What are the dilemmas and issues we grapple with as profeminist men? What accounts for these problems and dilemmas, given the gendered structure of society? Why is it that some men take up a profeminist subject position? What kind of subjectivities will support profeminist men’s politics?

For many men who support feminism, there is confusion about how they are supposed to act. So, we began the process of identifying dilemmas associated with attempts at living out a profeminist commitment and arising within our own psyches, in personal relationships, in workplaces or connected to our political activism. No attempt was made to resolve the dilemmas we identified; rather, this phase of the research sets the scene for the more in-depth exploration of the issues through memory-work and the further explication of them through dialogues with allies and opponents of profeminism.

The aim of this phase in the research process, following Vorlicky (1990), was to analyze our position and develop “a strategy for how [our] awareness of the difficult and contradictory position in relation to feminism can be made explicit in discourse and practice” (p. 277). This necessarily involved an interrogation of our masculinity and a questioning of the privileges that are afforded to us by our gender.

The men in this study were thus involved in a process of re-forming their subjectivities and their practices in the wake of feminist critique and challenge. Through the conversations recorded in my research, these men revealed what it means for them to be profeminist. They tell us something about the personal and political implications of being a profeminist man at this historical moment, thus demonstrating that non-patriarchal subjectivities are available to men. These
subjectivities, however, involve dilemmas and contradictions, for they are formed out of conflicting discourses and practices.

Giddens (1992) has observed that men have been “unable to construct a narrative of self that allows them to come to terms with an increasingly democratized and reordered sphere of personal life” (p. 117). The stories that the men told to the group are stories in which they are attempting to do just this. As such, these stories also provide new narratives, which in turn have the potential to influence future stories and future lives. These men were self-consciously living the changes in gender relations.

It seemed to us that memory-work provided a vehicle to explore some of the unconscious elements of gender socialization. Haug (1987) had used memory-work to gain greater understanding of the resistance to the dominant ideology at the level of the individual, as well as how women internalize dominant values and how their reactions are colonized by dominant patterns of thought. Haug describes memory-work as “a method for the unravelling of gender socialization” (1987, p. 13). Her argument is that it is essential to examine subjective memories if we want to discover anything about how people appropriate objective structures (Haug, 1992).

By sharing and comparing memories from their own lives, Haug and her groups (1987, 1992) hope to uncover the workings of hegemonic ideology in their subjectivities. Her particular concern is with the ways in which people construct their identities through experiences that become subjectively significant to them. The premise is that everything we remember is a significant basis for the formation of identity.

By illustrating the ways in which people participate in their own socialization, their potential to intervene in and change the world is expanded. By making conscious the way in which we have previously unconsciously interpreted the world, we are more able to develop resistance against this “normality” (Haug, 1987) and thus develop ways of subverting our own socialization.

In my search of the literature on memory-work at that time, however, I was struck by the dearth of accounts by men using this method. Those accounts that were inspired by Haug’s political project always focused on internalized gender identities of the oppressed and not on the dominant and privileged group. What would it mean to use memory-work to explore accommodations and resistances to privilege and social dominance? Onyx and Small (2001) raise the question of whether men can use the method as effectively as women and whether men’s use of the method negates its designation as a feminist method. As I have indicated earlier, I think that men can use feminist methods to uncover men’s modes of domination over women and to transform subordinating practices. Since publishing other accounts of this memory-work project (Pease, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c), Hearn (2005) has been inspired to use memory-work to interrogate and deconstruct his own experiences of nationalism and gender dominance in the context of colonialism and imperialism.
In the context of this research, we developed four memory-work projects to explore aspects of internalized domination. These projects focused on father-son and mother-son relationships and experiences of homophobia and sexual objectification. In this chapter I will illustrate the application of the method to mother-son relationships.

**Mother-son relationships and the “mother wound”**

There is a widespread view that mothers are a problem for men in Western societies. Men’s distancing patterns are said to connect to unresolved issues involving mothers (Gurian, 1994). Similarly, Osherson (1992, p. 175) maintains that men’s struggles with women in relationships are often based on “unfinished attachment struggles with mother—their simultaneous desire to be close and separate.

The tension between a desire for intimacy and connectedness with women and a desire to withdraw and shut them out was evident in a comment by Tony in the context of a discussion about our relationships with women. This comment was instrumental in our decision to explore the connection between our relationships with our mothers and our partners through memory work.

I was thinking of how I relate to women and my sexuality... even how I define what being in a relationship is all about. One of the things I’ve been thinking lately is wanting to be intimate and relate to Pam and then wanting to withdraw from her, shut her out of my life. It seems like a real roller coaster. Sometimes I’m in it really deeply. Other times I start tuning out. I start removing myself. Sometimes I want it all my own way. Sort of like wanting to feel safe and secure at the same time.

Tony’s dilemma goes to the heart of many issues between men and women. A number of writers have commented on the tension men feel between their desire for intimacy with women and their fear of dependency, associated with their unresolved experiences with their mothers. Men fear dependency and commitment and are terrified of their own vulnerability (Jukes, 1993). They associate dependency with their mothers and the resultant feelings this generates hinder their ability to form intimate relationships with women.

The question is: What is the source of this problem? Is it too much of mother or not enough? A number of writers posit that separation from the mother is necessary and healthy for men (Keen, 1991; Farmer, 1991). Separating from mother is seen as the only way to manhood. Thus, mothers are seen by some writers as getting in the way of masculinity and are regarded as inevitablyemasculating boys.

Whilst the men and masculinity literature admits that the boy’s separation from the mother is a wounding experience, one has to ask whether boys need to separate from their mothers? Do boys need to repress closeness with their mothers to become masculine? Defining the issue in such terms portrays mothers as the problem.
One consequence of separation without attachment is that men are often unable to develop a sense of empathic identity with women. Furthermore, as some men distance themselves from their mothers and do not get enough nurturing, they later feel needy of women. On the other hand, while many men recognize their need for mother, they are often unable to openly express it (Osherson, 1992).

Men’s unresolved feelings about their mothers have implications for men’s capacity for loving and accepting women’s love and consequently, men keep their emotional distance from women for fear of both entrapment and abandonment (O’Connor, 1993). Benjamin (1988, p. 52) even goes so far as to argue that domination “begins with the attempt to deny dependency.”

In the context of the preceding, we were curious about the links between our relationship with our mothers and with women partners. I was mindful of Jardine’s (1987, p. 61) comment, that “men have not even begun to think about their mothers.” While men’s relationships with their fathers have received considerable attention in writing about men and masculinity, there has been a resounding silence by men on their relationships with their mothers. It is certainly rare to see any examination of men’s experience of the ambivalence and pain associated with distancing and separation.

**Applying memory-work to mother-son relationships**

At this particular session, five men (including myself), were present. All of us identified as profeminist. We are all white, heterosexual and middle-class and at the time of the inquiry ranged in age from 30 to 56 years. All of the memories were written prior to the session. Each of them was read out loud to other participants. In this session, five memories were read and analyzed over a period of four hours.

The cue we used to evoke the memories was to recall a situation with our mothers in which we felt a sense of discomfort. The aim was to analyze memories in which there was a sense of distancing ourselves from our mothers, in order to explore the meanings we gave to those processes of distancing. What would memories of distancing from mothers tell us about our relationships with women?

**Distancing mothers.** The following memory from Tony demonstrates the theme of distancing:

*Tony was about 13 and he was walking down the main street of Frankston (an outer-suburb of Melbourne in Victoria, Australia) with his mother. He didn’t want to be there. He was annoyed with his mother that he was there. He was going shopping with her to buy clothes for him, which he didn’t want to do. He didn’t want to have new school clothes because he didn’t like new clothes. He didn’t want to be seen by his school mates. So he physically distanced himself from his mother. He was walking a few steps back in a similar way to which he*
had seen a school friend of his do the previous year but he could tell by the way
the boy was walking, that he was with his mother.

In discussing the memory later, Tony said that he lapped up his mother’s
company when he was at home. He talked about how much he appreciated her
cooking and ironing and cleaning clothes but why did he have to go shopping
with her? Why couldn’t she go out and buy the clothes without him? In an at-
tempt to explain his experience he says: “I was meant to be a boy and I was
meant to have some sort of power. And my mother still seemed to have control
over me and I hated that.”

It seemed to Tony at the time, that to accept his mother’s authority was to
lose his self respect. He was asked whether there were any similarities in that
experience and his experience of shopping for clothing for himself with his part-
ner:
just cringe like anything. It bugs me. I can really feel myself well up and think:
Oh hell. I suppose it is something about smothering or something. Wanting to
be grown up, feeling self-sufficient and feeling like I can look after myself.

The issue of women’s perceived power in the domestic sphere brings up a
number of issues for men. Some of men’s responses to doing their share of do-
mestic work may be related to not accommodating to what they perceive as
women’s control. As Tony pointed out, they are meant to be men and to have
some sort of power.

In the following memory, Michael recalls a similar experience:

Michael was about 13. He was living in a country town in New South Wales (in
Australia), going to a state secondary school. His parents lived on the fringe of
the town. It was too far to walk. Although there was an irregular bus service
that passed near the school, his mother insisted on driving him to and from the
school. It seemed as though he was the only boy in his grade who was driven to
and from school by his mother and his class mates commented negatively upon
this on various occasions. “Your mother drives you to school. Are you a
mummy’ boy.” After a while he went to his mother and said “Mum I would like
to take the bus to and from school.” His mother said “Don’t be silly Michael. I
don’t mind driving you.” Michael said “But mum I would prefer to go on the
bus.” And his mother asked him why “Well I would just rather go on by bus
that’s all,” he said. And she said “No I’ll drive you. It is quicker and safer.”
His mother was adamant about it. There was nothing more to be said. The next
afternoon the school bell went and he walked out of the school building and
saw his mother’s car parked near the school entrance. He ran more quickly
than usual, got in the front seat beside his mother and as he sat down, however,
he slid slightly forward so that he was not riding so high in the car. Over time,
he would gradually slide more and more forward. So that eventually his head
was about level with the dashboard. If he had to be driven by his mother, he
would decrease the likelihood of being seen.
Following Michael's memory, the group explored the significance of his being called a mummy's boy:

Tony: So you didn't like being called a mummy's boy?
Michael: No.
Harry: Was it true?
Michael: Well I guess it must have been true. If it was true, it wasn't something that I was wanting to embrace.
Harry: More importantly, what does it mean? Does it mean that mum loved you and cared for you and was close to you and wanted a close relationship, and that this was inconceivable given the peer pressure? Was there comfort in your relationship with her?
Michael: Well, it is a bit similar to what Tony was saying. I saw all sorts of parallels between my story and yours.... Yes, there were comforts that were provided by my mother at home. And while those comforts were provided in the context of the home that was fine. But I didn't like those comforts to be seen more publicly outside the home.

Harry identified the issue clearly. Michael was torn between enjoyment of his mother's nurturance and the stigma of being referred to as a "mummy's boy." To be called a "mummy's boy" can be experienced by boys as being one of "the worst things in the world" (Osherson, 1992, p. 175). "Mummy's boys" are taunted by other boys and consequently, boys are forced to separate from their mothers by the threat of humiliation, otherwise they would not choose to make the separation (Kreiner, 1991, p. 6). There is thus a split between the private and the public manifested in the tension between the experience of the mother and the experience of peer group culture.

As can be seen from this brief dialogue, the memories stimulated conversations between the men about the meaning of the memories. While on one level the responsibility for interpretation rested with me as the narrator of our journey, interpretation of the memories also took place within the group by the participants as they theorized the memories. This represents a form of what Kvale (1995) call "communicative validity," where the validity of knowledge claims is tested in dialogue through conversation and argument about the phenomena under investigation.

Devaluing mothers. As stated earlier, most boys observe their fathers' attitude of superiority towards their mothers. This is the context in which boys have to decide whether to identify with their mother or with their father. A boy learns that if he wants to be accepted into male society, he has to turn his back on his mother. The following memory from Alan demonstrates this process:

Alan was about 12 or 13 years old. It was tea time and he was sitting around the kitchen table with some of his siblings and his father. His mother was cooking dinner. They were discussing an issue that was not of particular importance. However, his mother said something that might have been construed as silly, that she didn't understand. So Alan and the others started hassling her,
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implying that she was stupid. Then to his surprise, his mother ran out of the room in tears.

I discussing the memory later, Alan described a strong sense of collusion in the incident, of men ganging up on the woman. He said:

I recollect having a very close relationship and it really struck me as being so insensitive to her, being cruel. I feel like I was so cruel. I felt very ashamed, even now.

In Alan’s memory, the mother was constructed as stupid based on an assumption about “male knowledge” being superior or “right.” Michael related closely to this memory. His mother was a full-time housewife and while both his mother and father were poorly educated, his father read widely and was informed about the state of the world. His mother did not read as widely. She was only semi-literate and the story Alan told about his mother being seen as stupid occurred in his house as well; his father would be very condescending towards her. Before becoming critical of what was happening, he perceived his mother as being not very intelligent. There was pain in his voice as he recalled this experience and his inability then to feel proud of his mother, because of the way in which women were devalued.

Depending on mothers. How do sons address their dependency needs in relation to their mothers? We explored this question in discussing issues arising from other memories. Phillip’s memory reveals his fear of having lost his mother’s love:

Phillip was fighting with his brother, while the dining room at his house was being painted. He was 9 or 10. The crockery from the dining room was stored in his brother’s bedroom. During the fight, Phillip threw a book at his brother. He remembers, in slow motion, the arch the book made as it slithered through a line of plates and cups. These plates and cups were special because his mum had saved up for them during the war, when her husband was away. So Phillip was a very sorry boy and was sent to bed that night without any tea.

About 9:00 at night he came downstairs and saw his mum was sitting at the kitchen table crying. He hopped on her knee and they had a big cry together. Then he understood that it was alright. He was not going to be persecuted for this.

In commenting on the memory afterwards, Phillip remembered crying in distress because he thought “I have really blown it this time.” He has felt that feeling many times since then: “Feeling like a chastised little boy can be a big thing for me.” When that happens, he feels defensive and wants to fight.

The reference to feeling like a little boy was a recurrent theme throughout the discussion about mothers. Phillip’s memory elicited a recent experience from Michael; he had accidentally broken a special vase his partner had owned
for several years. When he told her about the breakage, she was upset but he did
not want to take responsibility for breaking it and emphasized that it was not his
fault. In that situation, he described how he felt like a little boy who needed to
be told that it was alright.

Phillip says that, in his view most men have not got over their reliance upon
their mothers; they have shifted the focus to partners for emotional support and
emotional security. When he has left or been left by a partner, feelings “of losing
mum” come back to him. Michael reflected how some of the ways in which he
cuddles with a woman were to do with his “unresolved dependency needs.”
Whilst many men are unable to accept their dependency needs, describing them
as unresolved suggests a psychological weakness, whereas the notion of interde.
pendence tends to affirm that in some situations we will be dependent and that is
acceptable.

The following memory from Peter illustrates the tension between being de­
pended upon and having one’s own dependency needs:

Peter was about 20. He had a really good relationship with his mother. They
had become quite close since his father died about 3 years earlier. He had been
quite supportive providing some stability in an otherwise difficult few years for
his mum. But she didn’t have to worry about him. He was fine. Not so fine were
a few of his siblings who for various reasons were having difficulties of one
sort or another. His mother took an active interest in checking in with them, ar­
ranging dinners with them to offer an ear and to get to know how they were go­
ing. Peter had his own problems and it was at this time that he became aware
that he needed support as well. He found it quite difficult to ask. This would go
against the normal pattern of events, the normal way they related. He was too
busy listening and supporting his mum. It was hard to change the dynamics of
this relationship. She was a very busy and very giving woman and he knew that
she needed to have this space. But he couldn’t help feeling a bit resentful. He
was supportive, stable, calm and had things under control.

Interestingly, Peter’s response to the cue of discomfort was more focused
on a state of mind during a particular period in his life rather than a particular
incident. In discussing the memory later, Peter connected this experience with
his mother to his current relationship, where it is much easier for him to be sup­
portive and to listen than to be supported. He says that the hardest thing for him
is to acknowledge “that I am not in control, that I am in need and it is not all
stable and calm.”

The other group members could identify with this experience. Tony related
his experience of working with partners of women who had been sexually
abused as children. These men were able to be supportive with their partners,
but at the expense of acknowledging their own needs and feelings and at times
this became destructive in their relationships: “Of course I can’t relate to that at
all,” he said sarcastically.
Michael recalled instances where in relationships with women he had put his own needs aside to be supportive to his partner’s needs but his own neediness would “erupt” and he would then want her to put her needs aside. This would not always happen and he would experience himself saying “It is not fair. What about my needs?” This experience elicits an immediate response from Phillip:

That is exactly what happens to me too. Unfortunately I am less conscious of it than I want to be, so it sort of comes up. I really enjoy that steadiness, you know. And then it comes up. It is totally demanding and the way I do it is very little boy demanding.

As men we are often unable to accept that at different times and in different contexts we need what women are able to offer us. To acknowledge our dependency at these times does not mean that we are weak men. However, because dependence on others, particularly women, is seen as a sign of weakness, men frequently are unable to develop genuinely interdependent relationships with women and often end up expressing their needs in a demanding rather than interactive way.

**Blaming mothers.** The memory work on one aspect of our relationship with our mothers enabled us to interrogate some aspects of men’s tendency to blame mothers and the ways in which we had internalized dominant views about mother-son relationships. Mothers are often accused of dangerously enmeshing their own identities with those of their sons and of over-protecting them whereby they “indulge for their own gratification, in compensation for an unsatisfactory marriage” (Gomez, 1991, p. 49). Bly (1990, p. 18) posits that mothers typically exercise possessiveness over their sons.

A number of writers attribute the estrangement of sons from their fathers to the involvement of mothers. Biddulph (1994, p. 35) argues that a mother will often turn her son against his father and Bly (1990) blames mothers for getting in the way of boys’ relationships with their fathers. In his view, this constitutes a conspiracy between mother and son. Tony responds to Bly’s charge of conspiracy:

To me it was about safety. It wasn’t a conspiracy. It was more like a necessity, my relationship with my mother. I just saw my father for ten minutes a day and sometimes that ten minutes was something to dread. What’s dad going to do when he gets home tonight? Is he going to be volatile? Is he going to be friendly? Sure I had a closer bond with my mother than my father, but I wouldn’t call that a conspiracy.

As discussed previously, the major consequence of such over mothering is seen to be the creation of mothers’ boys. Men who become “mummy’s boys” are said to be “dominated by the desire to perform well to gain approval and to avoid female anger or rejection” (Keen, 1991, p. 21). Bly (1990, pp. 2-3) argues
that “mummy’s boys” were “too tied to women as children, and then as adults are too tender, too empathic, too interested in women’s issues.”

Profeminist men are often criticized by other men as mothers’ boys. Corneau (1991) questions his profeminist client’s reasons for embracing feminism. He argues that his client used feminism to ingratiate himself with women and the reason for this involvement with feminism was based on his desire to be rewarded with maternal affection.

Similarly, Forrester (1992, p. 106) suggests that the desire of one his clients to be a feminist man was “really a desire to be underneath, to be dominated sexually and politically by the feminist women he admires.” His profeminism was regarded as “a kind of masochism, or a kind of fascination with the all-powerful woman figure.”

It is important to challenge the framework within which these comments are made and to shift the terms of the debate about profeminism. It is likely that profeminist men will be closer to their mothers than their fathers and it is important for these men to acknowledge the strong influence of women, rather than to dis-identify with them. Such men can perhaps contribute the most to changing gender relations.

Reflections on the use of memory-work on mother-son relationships

In response to the cue of discomfort with mothers, the men produced memories of distancing, devaluing and dependence. In all of the memories there were connections between dependency issues with mothers and these men’s relationships with women. The reference to feeling like a “little boy,” at times, was a recurrent theme throughout the discussions. Through the memory-work, it was evident that there was a lot of ambivalence in these men’s relationships with mothers. They, like most males, had received strong messages that they should distance themselves from their mothers or else risk ridicule as mothers’ boys. Unlike most males though, who want to suppress the ways that they are like their mothers, these men had struggled to own the positive influences their mothers had upon their lives, although they were initially denied a framework within which they could easily do that. Profeminism would come to provide such a framework.

Given that the majority of men are pressured to distance themselves from their mothers, what can be done in working with men on these issues? Men can reflect on “how they would be different if they did not have to separate” (Carey, 1992, p. 68). Considering that, in losing touch with their mothers, men may have lost touch with parts of themselves could itself be a powerful force in provoking change.

It is also important that men endeavour to understand their mothers as women with their own life histories, expectations and needs. Such analysis can enrich their perception of women as a whole. Men can get to know their mothers
better, to ask them about their experiences before they became mothers, especially in relation to experiences such as discrimination and harassment (Pasick, 1992). A lot of men have difficulty seeing their mothers as women with separate lives before and apart from motherhood. To acknowledge the truth of our mothers' lives requires us to recognize their oppression and our institutional power over women. To the extent to which we are able to do this, we will enhance the potential for partnership with women.

Reframing our childhood memories enables us to reconnect with our emotional histories and enables a critical stocktaking. Memory-work enabled us to examine the emotional and psychological basis of our relationships with women, including our unconscious feelings about them. Remembering is not only an attempt “to understand the past better but to understand it differently” and it enables us to challenge dominant social relations (McLaren & da Silva, 1993, pp. 75-76).

Memory-work enables men to reflect upon and shape their own experiences and, in so doing, it can contribute to the formation of non-patriarchal subjectivities and practices. The memory-work recorded here reflects sons’ experiences of family life and, following Hearn (1987, p. 187), I believe that to reclaim our experience as sons, “through the self recognition of sonhood” is to challenge patriarchal constructions of fatherhood and manhood. Naming ourselves as sons, as threatening as it may be to some men, can provide the basis for the formation of alternative non-patriarchal subjectivities by allowing us to reposition ourselves against the dominant mode of identity reproduction.

**Reflections on the method in the context of collaborative inquiry**

Throughout the course of this inquiry, I occupied a number of conflicting roles at times: convenor, secretary, theorist, researcher and participant. Undertaking memory-work as part of a collaborative inquiry within the context of a doctoral thesis posed numerous problems. As a doctoral candidate, I was required to formulate a coherent research proposal that would then be translated into practice, interpret the results and draw original conclusions to sustain a thesis argument. As a facilitator of participatory research, however, I was required to be open to the interests and needs of the participants and to modify my research agenda, as appropriate, during the conduct of the study. While the participants and I shared a common interest in exploring personal and political issues facing pro-feminist men, the participants were not bound by my concerns about whether or not our inquiry would result in a successful thesis.

From the beginning, I was committed to share power with the participants, although this was always constrained by my greater investment in the outcomes of the group process. Towards this, I relinquished the role of facilitator after the first two sessions. Each subsequent session was facilitated by other participants on a rotating basis. While this was effective in sharing control of the research, it also meant that, at times, the sessions drifted into areas that were less relevant to
the major issues as I perceived them. Thus, the initial meetings of the group became open-ended exploratory discussions in which we canvassed issues and dilemmas associated with living out our profeminist stance, as we experienced them. During some group sessions, others identified particular issues and dilemmas that I would have liked to explore more fully but, as I was not facilitating, I was not always able to bring the group back to them, leaving many issues insufficiently explored.

Furthermore, although I had the ability to raise issues for discussion along with other participants, I was reluctant to actively influence the direction of the group discussions. The questions that I did raise and the comments that I made during the group discussions obviously reflected my evolving theoretical framework. While it was recognized that I was spending more time between group sessions reflecting on the discussions, I refrained from bringing what might be regarded as abstract understandings to bear on our conversations. Nevertheless, as my theoretical understanding developed, I became a more powerful influence in the group.

In the early stages of the inquiry, the collaborative group process and my intellectual immersion in the theoretical literature felt like two separate, parallel journeys with little connection between them. As I had not initially set out to test a particular theoretical framework, at times I seemed to be inhabiting two different worlds. This was not unusual, given the structural division of labor that usually separates theorists from practitioners. As the inquiry proceeded, however, I found these two worlds coming together. My evolving theoretical framework started to elucidate what was being said in the group and the issues arising out of the group started to focus my theoretical work. Eventually, throughout the latter stages of the process, the experiences in the group and the theoretical ideas were constantly influencing each other in a dialogical relationship.

While there were limitations to the open-ended group discussion format, it enabled issues to be articulated that would otherwise have remained submerged. For those participants who took part in the memory-work, a high level of trust developed within the group. This led to a great depth of self disclosure, as was evidenced in the recorded memories and the subsequent stories that were elicited from participants.

I also struggled with the issue of my own voice in the text. In the thesis, I defended the view that the personal self has a place in scholarly writing and I argued that it is important to write from inside the research situation rather than from outside. Thus, I wrote the thesis in the form of a first person narrative. Furthermore, since this thesis was concerned with men's subjectivities, I considered it essential that I identify how my own subjectivity influenced this research process and has been influenced by it.

I had a dilemma, though, in using the first person plural “we” when discussing men and masculinities. Do I, as a male author, write about men in terms of “we” or “they”? “We,” in some contexts, may imply a false community between
men or suggest a connection with other men that I do not share. On the other hand, consistently referring to "they" implies a separation that denies my shared experience with other men and denies my own presence within the object of my analysis, whilst "we/they" is clumsy and does not address either of these issues. I chose, albeit with reservations, to write "we" when referring to both profeminist men and the men in the study and "they" when referring to men in general or men with whom I do not identify.

There was an additional dilemma related to my multiple voices in this research. As an active participant in the group and as a subject in my own research, my experiences, dilemmas and memories were data and my ideas as they were formulated during the group process were a part of the dialogues within the group and with the interlocutors. Notwithstanding my comments about writing personally, to describe my personal memories and stories disclosed in the group process I chose a pseudonym, giving myself, and my friends and family the same degree of anonymity as the other participants. There was no reason to separate myself out in that part of the research, as I allowed myself to be immersed within the group process. I retained my own identity, though, when I was talking in the group as a self-conscious actor in dialogue with other participants and interlocutors.

I was also in the group as a participant-observer, commenting on the process from my own subjective position. As I was engaged in a study of "my own people," my membership role in the group was what Adler and Adler (1987) call "complete membership," as distinct from peripheral and active forms of membership in field research.

Thus, there were multiple tenses and senses of self in this research: first, there were memories and biographical experiences told through my pseudonym; second, there were dialogues with participants told through an "I" in the past tense and third, there was the "I" as writer and interpreter of the research experience spoken through the present tense. Within each of these levels, there were further multiple "I's", as I moved between total immersion as a participant and as a self-conscious researcher-participant in the group process and as I moved between disclosure of my personal self and scholarly narrator of the research experience. Undertaking research of the kind required a constant monitoring of subjectivities throughout all stages of the research process.

I was also aware that I had not followed the memory-work method strictly throughout the research because I was using it to complement other methods. Thus, my collaborative inquiry group was not strictly a memory-work group anymore than it was strictly a consciousness-raising group or a social movement intervention group. We did not always follow the rules that ideally pertain to any of these three approaches. Rather, we used each methodology as it became relevant to our collective project as we proceeded. Given the practical concerns of the research, noted earlier, I was interested in constructing research methodolo-
gies that would in themselves assist in the process of reconstituting men's subjectivities.

Memory-work provided an opportunity for the research participants to reframe some of the content of our memories. The process of recalling memories enabled us to elevate unconscious elements of our experiences to the conscious, as the immersion within a discourse "has implications for the unconscious as well as conscious remembered subjectivity" (Weedon, 1987, p. 112). Such remembering facilitates a process of challenging dominant social relations. By asking men to reflect on their understandings of the ways in which they accommodated to or resisted the dominant constructions of masculinity, through the process of memory-work we were able to understand the ways in which new subject positions could be created. The memory-work made more visible the discursive threads by which our masculinities were produced and it assisted us to identify forms of resistance to dominant masculinities.

One of the purposes of the research was to produce a praxis of how men can change and the methodological approaches employed became some of the very strategies being sought. That is, memory-work and the other methods used each represented pedagogical strategies for profeminist politics for men. Thus, in addition to contributing to theorizing men's subjectivities and to the insights about issues and dilemmas in profeminist men's lives, the research contributed to the development of these methodologies, both as research tools and as strategies for change in gender relations.

Postscript

When I finished this research project, I was very interested in using memory work again without the constraints imposed by the data analysis and writing up imperatives of a PhD thesis. Because I was so impressed with the impact that the memories had upon the participants (including myself) and the conversations that flowed from them, I was interested in setting up a memory work group with no specific research agenda in mind. Towards that end, since the completion of the research, I have used memory work to explore experiences of my body, reflections on the aging process and experiences of bereavement. No longer required to transform these memory group meetings into research papers, I have been free to experience the benefits without the tensions and pitfalls identified by Koutroulis (1993) and Onyx and Small (2001) as well as myself in this chapter. While the distinction is often made between memory-work and therapy, I have personally found memory-work as having the capacity to initiate a process of "unconsciousness raising," which brings the social dimensions of one's experience into the foreground. That being so, I think that memory-work warrants further investigation as a method of intervention in assisting people to link private troubles to public issues as C. Wright Mills (1959) encouraged us to do so many years ago.
Notes

1. The full research project is reported in Pease (2000a). An earlier version of some sections of this chapter appear in this book.

2. See Pease 2000b and 2000c for discussions of memory-work in relation to father-son relationships and men’s experiences of objectification.

3. I used a pseudonym for myself in this study.

References


