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**AGEING, GENDER POLITICS AND MASCULINITIES:
REFLECTIONS ON COLLECTIVE MEMORY WORK WITH OLDER MEN**

Vic, Blake, Jeff Hearn, David Jackson, Randy Barber, Richard Johnson and Zbyszek Luczynski

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Abstract

Purpose This paper reflects on the process of participating in a long-term collective memory work group of older men, focusing on the making/unmaking of older men and masculinities, and the potential of memory work with older men.

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

Findings and social implications Collective memory work provides a novel way to explore ageing, gendering, men, and masculinities. Its potential for working with older men is examined critically in relation to gender politics, power and (in)equalities, interconnections and contradictions of men's ageing and gendering, the personal and the political, as well as working with older men more generally, including those in transition and crisis.

Originality/value There is little previous writing on this approach to ageing, men and masculinities. The paper aims to stimulate wider applications of this approach.

Paper type Conceptual and practice paper.

Keywords Ageing, Gender, Men, Masculinities, Memory work, Older people, Writing

In this article, we draw on our experiences of collective memory work in a group of older men, inspired initially by the work of Frigga Haug and colleagues in *Female Sexualisation* (1987). Our first group meeting was in April 2002 when seven of us gathered, after which we met at least twice a year until February 2015, with another five attending over that period, and ending with an overlapping, but different, seven, which then, through the death of one of us, became six in the final months. Following our various earlier and current political activisms, we came together to do reflective written memory work on the connections between ageing and gendering, naming ourselves the Older Men's Memory Work Group.

Drawing on various personal experiences, our memories and dialogues (or metalogues), we became especially interested in exploring, individually but mainly collectively, the gendered ageing of men and masculinities or aged gendering of men and masculinities. Our focus was the making and unmaking of old(er) men and masculinities through age, ageing, gender, gendering, and other intersections, along with other social divisions and experiences, including disability, nation, and sexuality. Within this approach, we agreed, through group discussion, topics or themes that were important, sometimes deeply emotive for us, for writing down our memories and then for analysis by the group.

One result of this process was the collective book, *Men's Stories for a Change: Ageing Men Remember* (Barber et al., 2016). In a previous article in *WWOP* (Blake et al., 2016), we addressed the method and some of its uses for working with older people. Here, we stand back and consider more general questions and what may have been learnt in reflecting on this process over 15 years. We may wonder what, if anything, we have achieved working together as ageing men, now in our late 60s or 70s. We address the main issues that we grappled with; the impact of age, gender and the intersections of age and gender; and what have we learnt about memory work.

Main issues

What were the main issues that we grappled with – explicitly and easily, more implicitly and less easily? What was predictable, and what was surprising about our discussions? What agreements and disagreements surfaced?

The main topic themes we wrote memories on, in their approximate order, were: ageing; hair; clothes; peeing; school and schooling; 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. In some cases, we wrote on certain topics more than once, and on a few occasions, where one of us was absent from the original meeting, their stories were written later. In practice, the exact specifying of the topic was agreed with some care, for example the first topic, ageing, was phrased as “a time when you were conscious of your age”. Many of the topics were predictable enough. Some more difficult topics,

especially power, violence, and sexuality, were addressed towards the end of the group after a high level of trust had been established. In some cases, previously 'raw and undigested' material was critically re-visited, helping to come to terms with some of its troubling effects and perhaps change direction. More surprisingly, some topics, notably death and relations within the group, were not addressed explicitly as topics for writing.

We tried to work by consensus and generally succeeded, but disagreements sometimes arose in deciding the topic, how it should be worded, interpretations of particular pieces of writing, and general orientations to the group: therapeutic, experimental, political, supportive, deconstructive, and so on, in various combinations for different individuals at different times. We also disagreed towards the end of the group whether to invite more members or not and, for some time, when to end the group. Moreover, the memory work group went through many shifts and contradictions in its own processes of change. Change was never linear or hierarchical but erratic and fragmentary; the possibilities opened up were not given. These processes are more about a zig-zagging disorder than a coherent 'onwards-and-upwards' (or downwards) progression.

Over time, health issues became increasingly prominent in our discussions as some of us found ourselves physically less able to travel or cope with our whole-day meetings. In some cases, chronic pain was the problem, causing us to think more carefully about seating arrangements and the like; in others, more general age-related health issues encroached, for example, as one member found he needed to take a lunch-time nap. In addition, we were increasingly affected by our need to care for ageing partners and/or family members and friends; thus, the issue of caring became a much more significant element of discussions and the subject of a more focused gender analysis.

These processes were never purely interpersonal or inward-looking, or relevant only among ourselves, but were reflective of wider social and political changes. While attempting to address the need for gender change and the means by which we might achieve this, our bodies and the world around us were also changing, presenting us with fresh surprises and issues to be addressed. Meanwhile, as the inevitable signs of ageing started to take their toll upon some of us and/or those close to us, the declining state of care for older people, specifically in the UK, became a worrying political backdrop. The fact is that we and our lives were changing, like it or not; the question

became how we could best facilitate and accommodate to this. The acknowledgement of this was a meta-theme.

Furthering awareness of gender power and (in)equalities

Have the combined processes of talking, writing, reading, commenting and critiquing helped us to think and behave differently as men in our personal relations and our gender relations particularly?

None of us came into this project 'raw', in that we were all already committed to a wider emancipatory project, especially in terms of (pro)feminism and anti-sexism. Many of us, for example, had academic, professional and/or activist backgrounds reflecting this commitment, and indeed this informed the original membership. As a self-selected group of men, the objective of 'changing men' had already been taken on board to some extent.

In our written stories and the discussions arising from these, there was much opportunity to identify and re-evaluate our past and present lives. In doing so, a further locus of change was opened up: that of changing our masculinities in the present, in the here and now. Listening to someone telling their story, not interrupting, waiting one's turn, complementing or criticising the teller in non-competitive, non-damaging ways when the time arose, 'holding' and supporting them during difficult moments, and then putting oneself through the same process, are all interpersonal qualities not widely associated with men, but necessary in changing men. The memory-writing, combined with critical discussion, helped us to cast a more critical eye over our pasts and challenged our taken-for-granted assumptions on our gendered life stories. Personal awakenings to gender-awareness were revisited in seemingly 'safe' accounts relating, for example, to clothes, hair or food, as well as more difficult areas. The basic issue of gender power was put clearly by one group member:

I know that down the years this [memories and feelings of early subordination] has made it difficult for me to see my own power so that I have imagined myself to be power-less when in fact I may have been in a very powerful situation.

Rather than attempt a falsely comprehensive overview, in order to illustrate the twists and turns of some of such changes, we take one extended example of one member, writing on domesticity. This begins with the ignorance and selfishness of his youth, and then goes on to show how those early tendencies and crude insights became disrupted and overturned over time:

When I was young I avoided all household tasks like the plague. Somehow they had become associated with a dull, tedious and apparently meaningless world that belonged to adults – especially my parents. Domesticity seemed to ‘bring you down’ even though at another level I fantasised about a better life with a better house which was bigger and more luxurious but which was also clean, tidy, warm, comfortable etc., completely failing to appreciate the reality that such things actually depended on functioning levels of tedious domesticity being applied to them.

Ironically, it was when he was in the army that these assumptions first began to change:

There I was expected – on pain of severe punishment – to wash and iron clothes meticulously, make my bed, keep my bed space and room spotlessly clean and tidy, and so on.

On reflection, the writer later commented that, on leaving the army during his early twenties:

I was an ordinary civilian again and on a steep learning curve. At this time I wasn’t really aware of the gender debate: feminists were bra-burning women’s-libbers and were there to be ridiculed and mocked; gay men were still ‘queers’ or ‘poofs’ – predatory (or pathetic) and (either way) dangerous, and lesbian women just hadn’t met the right man yet. In spite of my still-gnawing, deep-down sense of inadequacy and failure and my wish to become a more modern, peaceful and ‘liberated’ kind of male, it seems that the various cultural process of ‘masculinisation’ had actually done a pretty thorough job on me without my even realising it.

Thereafter, he writes of needing to look after himself, but the most significant transition comes after he gets married and when he is looking after his son. Until then, he had been concerned with his own responses to domestic labour in terms of ‘personal pride’ and ‘independent self-respect’,

but in his newly married state he begins to become more other-directed and more gender-aware, conscious of the need for a more equal partnership. What his partner was doing for him and his son was something he felt unable to ignore:

... it became a matter of personal pride that I shouldn't need or expect a woman to take on primary domestic responsibility for me or my son.

The possibility that this may have been in part a control mechanism or masculine defence against feelings of vulnerability that can accompany dependency was not lost on the group. Awakening to gendered difference is not easy, and may involve contradictions and paradoxes.

Learning from past experiences and leaving established gender assumptions behind were common themes in the memory writings, but this was not always easy. Gender and gender differentiation are deeply rooted in cultural forces and often a fundamental organising principle for our sense of who we are. Gender situates us and our view of ourselves, so it is not surprising that so many of us invest so much in it. Even when we are committed to the need for change and are positive about changing personally, it can be hard to get our heads around, difficult to know how exactly to go about this. Political willingness to change, no matter how sincere, is only part of the equation; for doing gender change, we need to become aware of what this means, what this requires. In the memory work group, we took up the collective task of critical self-reflexivity to address these questions in our own and others' lives. These experiences fed, albeit unevenly, into developing an awareness and enacting a wider culture of gender equality and respect for women.

Age and ageism

What have we learnt about age, ageing, ageism, and older men and masculinities?

The memory work experiences provided much first-hand material on age, ageing, ageism, embodiment, bodily change, loss, as well as the contradictions of ageing, gendering and power, then to be reflected upon, personally, politically, theoretically. As we tried to understand our pasts more clearly and critically, the dynamic interactions between individual life histories and wider shifts in gender politics over the last 50 to 60 years came into sharper focus. As we looked back,

individually and collectively, we became increasingly reminded that time is running out, even more so after the sudden, deeply saddening death of one of our group. Perhaps inevitably, our sense of our own physical and emotional vulnerabilities became increasingly important, so that health concerns became a more pressing feature in the group. One member wrote,

It's true that with medication things are much better now and I have had no accidents for a year or more. Yet my body is no longer the one I was in my forties. It is ageing. I am ageing, which is more difficult to realise.

Another member struggled to cope with hearing problems, respiratory problems and chest infections, skin cancer and skin graft operations and blurred vision. These physical and emotional struggles made him much more aware of his own limitations, particularly in relation to his participation in the group – thus near the end of group he sent this email around the group:

First I want to acknowledge that I can't keep on doing a 10-4 commitment to this group. Instead I'm trying to forge new, realistic limits for myself, and I hope for others in this group. Now I can manage the morning session (say, 3-4 hours) but I need to rest and sleep in the afternoon.

Others have had to cope variously with the traumatic effects of breakdown, prostate cancer, chronic pain and chest infections, as well as with the emotional, health and physical needs of loved-ones. This has highlighted self-caring, caring for others, and caring masculinities (Hanlon, 2012; Kramer and Thompson, 2005). Accordingly, we have attempted to produce an anti-ageist and anti-sexist space that has been nurturing and caring in a way that is unusual in dominant forms of men's relations with others. This is a sentiment we are sure our lost member would very much have wanted to emphasise.

Inevitably, any misconceptions we may have had about just how robust we really were in our masculine selves needed to be re-thought and come to terms with, as did our changing feelings and concerns for one another as the need to support each other increased. As we aged and reflected differently, some of us became more conscious of popular stereotypes about older men in the social

landscape, for example, in relation to sexuality, changing attitudes, or toileting, as in: 'dirty', 'smelly' or 'grumpy' old man. On occasions, this awareness surfaced in our stories, on peeing, for example, while at times a more assertive edge to ageing took hold in discussions. Stagnant, ageist representations and media stereotypes of ageing men do not do justice to older men generally and are not borne out by the energy and vitality of the various representations of ageing men found in some of our stories.

We also became aware of how the ageing process can bring about a relaxing of the more arduous performative aspects of masculinity. Our increased longevity over that of our fathers opened up a space for us in which we were able let go many of the pressing concerns of our earlier masculine selves. We found ourselves working through the complicated balance between sense of loss and sense of release that had the potential at least for opening up a fresh sense of perspective on masculinity, especially in its hegemonic forms. While some of us became noticeably more frail as time wore on, there was no sense whatsoever of our conceding to wider processes of being demeaned or 'frailed' (Higgs and Gilleard, 2015; Sandberg, 2001; Jackson, 2016) by others' attitudes. Indeed, some of us would say we became more radicalised by the experience, even more determined to play our part in social change.

Older men are not worn-out, passive, static subjects. Although from a distance their lives may seem to be hardly moving, they are in fact characterised by rapid shifts and changes in their bodies and their personal circumstances, thus promoting ambivalent and newly-emerging selves. Frequent life events, such as severe illness, breakdown, hospitalisation, loss of job security and status, or the infirmity or death of a spouse, force adjustments in later life. Alongside these uneven processes of ageing and bodily adaptations go changes in the meanings and experiences of masculinity. When we conceive of ageing men as in constant motion and movement, we begin to appreciate more fully the subjectivities of ageing men and catch further glimpses of the surprising richness of their complex and contradictory lives.

Loss of physical function can destabilise masculine identities and assist critical re-assessment of what kind of men we are in a shifting, sometimes bewildering world. Decline of former social power and status, economic productivity, bodily strength and sexual potency that ageing men

encounter in old age may weaken at least some men's attachments to patriarchal relations (Silver, 2003). Ageing men may cling onto old, defensive routines and identities and refuse to acknowledge increasing fragility; however, this can open emancipatory possibilities in moving beyond obsessive concerns with work, success, ambition, competition, individualism, and selfish sexualities for sustaining their belief in their 'masculinity'. Ageing men can develop critical, self-reflexivity regarding how gender power relations operate (Meadows and Davidson, 2006). From this innovatory perspective on old age, tentative movement may be discerned in some ageing men, towards an "ageing men's anti-patriarchal standpoint" (cf. Calasanti and Slevin, 2006; Hearn, 1994; Jackson, 2003).

Memory work

What have we learnt about memory work? How might it be adapted for different groups of men?

Reading back over the memories written over 13 years (Barber et al., 2016) leaves us with mixed feelings. On one hand, there are stories that are (pro)feminist(ic) and/or can be moving to read; on the other, there seem to be recurring themes that can re-instance gender inequalities. Sometimes the moving and the disturbing are in the same moment. Early blinkering to gender and age issues created at some points a form of collusion with taken-for-granted, patriarchal or ageist norms that might well have prevented a gendered, anti-ageist awareness developing in our memory work. At the same time, the fact that these particular stories were recalled and written in the first place, and the very context in which this happened, suggests some prior awareness of or concern with these issues. Still, alternative readings of these written stories are possible and can show them to be more complex and multi-layered than at first appears, or than the writer intended. Thus, one writer warns about too much complacency in these matters, considering what a feminist perspective might have made of our memory work:

One feminist reading of these stories might conclude that they show how unconscious many men are of the power which they themselves exercise, especially in relationships with women, unconscious too of the systemic nature of male privilege.

A possible criticism of our memory work is that we may not have been quite as challenging as we could have been. Sometimes we were probably anxious not to damage the group with its warmth and support, a feature often all too absent among groups of men. But in our case – did its presence serve to reduce our attempts to be candidly gender-critical? Perhaps the choice of stories may have been bit ‘safe’ for those reasons? For example, even though being a relatively privileged group, quite a few of the memories concern being on the ‘receiving end of power’ rather than early, taken-for-granted, male-dominant actions. But, then, the stories themselves are only one part of the process of memory work, of understanding the past and imagining the future differently. Bob Pease (2000, p. 75) observes: “Remembering is not only an attempt ‘to understand the past better but to understand it differently’”. Some of the group found that as they changed over the 13 years of meetings that their viewpoints shifted; they weren’t just recalling the past more clearly but they were remembering it through a different lens. One member later reflected on how difficult this process of moving on from past mistakes could be:

Naïve and unworldly, I didn’t know where to begin and so made a real hash of it while desperately wanting to learn from [his father’s] mistakes and be a kind and loving – truly fulfilling father to my own children. Instead, and in spite of myself, I became angry, selfish, domineering and even heavy-handed, just like him. *‘The bee stings and then dies itself,’* I wrote many years later in a poem.

This writer does talk of changing, of being more reflexive and less hard on himself, but the process of change is never complete. We are, and to some extent remain, our pasts, even if we can become more than that by learning to forge a different and better future for ourselves and others. Critiquing the past is one thing; it is another thing entirely to carry any lessons learned into the present and translate these meaningfully into present and future practice. In critically examining our pasts, we opened up not only past errors, we also took on board our vulnerabilities and contradictory inner lives with all this implies for our changing relationships with one another ‘as men’, with women and with other gender identities.

Implications for practice

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The methodology we have used and developed takes its cue from feminism, but what kind of change have we sought? What kinds of men are we striving to be? Bob Pease (2000) speaks of this in terms of the process of dialogue, discussion, argumentation, critical reflection, theorising from experience, and using feminist standpoint epistemology to research men's lives. But what is the 'standpoint' implicit in or developed in such work, and how does it relate to feminist standpoints? Our work seeks to be feminist, profeminist or feminist-inspired, but it could be characterised as masculine, however critical, as male, or as something else. There are certainly instances where the writer becomes quite assertively male. Perhaps it was not exactly any of these but something more ambiguous, more age-specific, more uncertain, both affirming and subverting. Moreover, we are self-selected, articulate, already committed to gender change, and perhaps more mindful than many of the importance of (our) changing masculinities.

So, what about other ageing men who may not share such a profile? How might collective memory work be of practical use for them? How might they work critically if they have little experience of this kind of work, or even lack the capacity or inclination? In this, the following key points may be considered:

- collective memory work may be especially useful with groups of older men whose lives have been disrupted through transition or crisis. They might have experienced a health or relationship crisis, have become unemployed/unemployable, or are having a difficult retirement. Some men may find themselves thrown suddenly into a world of domesticity, with its 'feminine' associations, but for which they may feel ill-equipped, requiring different kinds of personal/domestic relationships. Others may be dealing with loneliness, lack of self-worth or new disabilities. Such men might well benefit from collective critical reflection as a catalyst for dealing with change in their lives and in society.
- memory work with such groups of men might require input from a convenor figure, which in turn would mean familiarity with the process and group facilitation skills.
- getting a group of, say, eight men who are strangers to work candidly, openly, to learn to listen, share, trust – all this often an anathema to some men – may take a great deal of time,

effort and commitment. Learning to work non-competitively can in itself be a significant hurdle to be overcome.

- recognition of social situatedness is necessary for groups doing memory work. In our work together, we aimed to recognise, theoretically and practically, how we are located in the gender order, and how our masculine subjectivities are constructed and might be reconstructed. The impact of wider social conditions and social divisions, such as class, and their implications for change, were equally important. Accordingly, we needed to identify and take full account of our situatedness, structurally within the status quo, and dynamically within social changes, with a view to different futures.

So is political change the object of memory work? In part, maybe it is, and one group member offered these thoughts on what this means:

I don't see memory work as primarily about reflecting on one's own life; that is one of millions. I remain much more interested in changing men generally rather than seeing the memory group as a question of individual therapeutic change. This is a political position – the search for the loss of ego towards for the great struggle, or if you prefer the Great Struggle.

We all would agree with this emphasis on wider political change, as opposed to a narrower concern with the purely individual or 'therapeutic'. Memory work can make an important contribution to wider gender political change, as well as for ageing men. By its nature, it has potential to increase possibilities of individual agency and change, in critically reflecting upon past experiences and learning to re-evaluate them in the light of the group process. If, however, we are to reach out further with the memory work method, we need to consider that the capacity or desire for critical self-reflection and change is not universally shared, and can be diminished by, for example, lack of confidence or over-confidence, or even enhanced among so-called 'meta-reflexives' (Archer, 2003), as might include ourselves.

Although the process of change begins for us with making visible to ourselves and others how we became the men we are, it is through deepening our understanding of ageing processes and

masculinities that we can become aware of how to *un-make* and/or move on from the past. This includes moving on from those emotional investments and practices that encouraged clumsy, sometimes damaging, commitment to dominant masculine identities in the first place. If we can learn to understand how it is and why it was that we have actively bound ourselves into particular masculine cultures, then real change becomes possible, not just for ourselves but for others with whom we come into contact. When *we* change, others have to deal with the implications of this. This process necessarily involves degrees of intimacy, self-examination and critical self-exposure that, arguably, many men would find daunting:

There seem to be rules about this kind of stuff, rules that have dark origins that are dangerous to explore.

And, from an early story ...

I am resisting adding this, but dammit I trust you. As a youngish teenager I found a woman's swimsuit that my mother never wore. I put it on occasionally when I was at home alone. Once I did it when my sister was there and went to show her. As I remember it there was no hint of condemnation from her. I look back on it as an important moment of trust between us.

Trying to effect change at the political level raises the risk of this becoming disingenuous and hypocritical if this is not equally borne out in our personal lives. If real meaningful change in our gender practices is to come about, we have to be able to show it can be done, that it works as a better way forward, for others too. Struggle for change at the political, structural, economic and ideological levels continues, but we have to do more than this. The personal and the political are inseparable. If men could learn to trust each other more, then there might be less conflict in the world. After all, this is not what *men* do.

The change over time in the nature, intimacy and depth – and tenderness – of some of our stories testifies not only to the presence of some inhibitions early on, but also the extent to which the group members learned to face it, to trust one another, and so change.

Finally, we note something easily glossed over as insignificant, namely, that we were able *at all* to meet in the way we did for an entire day. Yet, we were able not only to work through our agenda productively, but do so in a climate of critical support, without hierarchical structure, competition or conflict, at least not to any appreciable degree. The collective process of critical exposure is not, perhaps *should not* be, confined to personal criticism in the negative sense. It would be unlikely for trust to grow in a narrowly judgmental environment. Instead, criticism, while always needing to seek its mark, has had to be effected within a climate of mutual warmth and care, qualities not always so readily evident among many men. While always critical, this process has helped us in coming to terms more caringly with *ourselves*, our personal histories, as well as in our relationships with other people and in wider politics. One member summed this up for him personally:

We were an actively change-orientated group, supportive, challenging, learning together. We were cooperatively critical and tried to translate that to our relationships with family friends and others. The group fed our relationships and it showed to us that men can support each other without having to rely on partners for emotional and practical problem solving using the reflective methods of memory work. It has made me a stronger and independent man ready to confront ageing.

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