

The personal is still political: Collective biographical memory work and feminist practice

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Abstract

We are a group of women working across a variety of domains within a tertiary education context, in a time of transition in tertiary education, who are using a process of collective biographical memory work in our research. Working with our memory of co-constructed fictional characters from our childhood, we trace our development as a diversity of third wave feminists sensitive to the privileges and exclusions of our positions. What were the gendered influences at play in our early memory and how have these shaped who we have now become? In particular, how have these influences positioned us as women academics in the current regime of performance-based accountability and multiple redundancies? Our analysis uncovers layers of negotiation between expected behaviour and new possible selves.

Introduction

We are a group of academic women with strong commitments to collegiality and inclusive practice, working together to develop research capability within university programmes of education. In this paper we share the experiences of our research team as we engaged in a process of collective biography in order to explore our early inscriptions as ‘good girl’ students. We found this process at the same time risky, transformative and highly pleasurable. We argue that this approach located us, at least temporarily, as third wave feminists. Patti Lather describes (post)feminist research as “unsettl(ing) any concept of a fixed or finite view of ‘evidence’”, and citing Wilson (1998, p. 65), feminist practice as “always, already re-writing itself” (Lather, 2008, p.182). The re-writing in which we are (still) engaged disrupts the coherence of the stable subject from whom evidence might be collected. In this paper we recall an early co-constructed memory, unused in our previous collective biography work, and re-search our own reactions to this story. Our ‘evidence’ is thus collected from a fictional character, Ricky Larson, who provides the nexus for a variety of standpoints from which we began to negotiate becoming academic women: three of us were new to academia; two had backgrounds in teaching; one in counselling/psychotherapy; and two of us worked in adult/higher education, one in secondary and one in early childhood education. Ricky’s ontology emerged from a memory originally provided by one of our collective. His later form emerged through the echoes of similar memories evoked viscerally in the rest of the group. This revealing caused us to recount “what we can bear to learn from” (Lather, 2008, p. 182), and engage in a risky, but pleasurable exploration of the unintelligible. The research project thus situates us, four women of disparate ages, origins, bodies, academic experience, and backgrounds, on feminist terrain. Furthermore, we were attempting to re-write ourselves as women academics through an innovative methodology, whilst, at the same time, our professional practices and conditions of employment were being re-written on the terms of a new discourse. (Our approach owes much to Foucauldian discursive analysis; see Foucault, 1980.) Both the chosen methodology (that is, collective biographical memory work) and the context within which it took place (that is, an institutional merger) imbricates the “theoretical and methodological interruptions” within which Denzin

and Giardina (2008, p. 31) locate feminist research.

The authors first met during the process of a previous, but still ongoing, research project in which they used a process of modified collective biography. During that project we generated a number of early co-constructed memories which took as their focus the complex, contradictory practice of inclusion and mastery in educational policies and practices (Claiborne, Cornforth, Davies, Milligan & White, 2009). The memory we use in this piece was generated at that time, but previously unused. Collective biography has a feminist genealogy, drawing on memory work as developed by Frigga Haug and colleagues (Haug, 1992; Haug et al., 1987), and subsequently taken up by others in psychology (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault & Benton, 1992; Onyx & Small, 2001) and education (Davies & Gannon, 2006). In contrast to its earlier origins, collective biography focuses more on discourse and power than on the individual and liberation. The associated ‘unsettling’ of humanist versions of memories as interior and personal draws on the work of Judith Butler (1995, 1997) to interrogate the processes of ‘subjectification’ through which researchers are subjected in their own lives and, as a result, become participants themselves. One benefit of taking this embodied, but non-humanist, approach in researching our subjectification is its potential to remove guilt and pain from individual participants. Since the focus is on the discourses within which revelations were ‘materialised’ rather than our capacity to express individual agency, the collective was rendered a safe place within which to share. Of course there are always residual humanistic impulses that work against self-exposure, and these were addressed by defining our work at the beginning by developing a collective working agreement. In our case, this resulted in a research collective that continued to work satisfactorily together on a variety of projects over a period of several years. Davies (2006) places this line of enquiry in the ethical arena, maintaining that social research scientists have a responsibility “to understand the complex conditions of our mutual formation...and our own contributions to creating and withholding the conditions of possibility of particular lives” (p. 182, our emphasis). Our “reinscriptions” (Lather, 2008, p. 182) of collective biography were described in the previously mentioned paper (Claiborne et al., 2009). In this paper, more specifically, we trace our development as academic women through the collective biography experience. We draw on a close analysis of one of our original, but unpublished, collective memories to explore gendered influences within the narrative. In so doing we follow those ‘lines of flight’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988) through which we subsequently re-invented our practice as professionals, as academics, and as women. We found that the process enabled us to deeply engage with our subjectivities as multiple players in the contemporary and historical educational landscape.

Analysis and re-analysis of the memory work took place in the context of a merger between what was the College of Education (for pre-service and in-service teacher education) and Victoria University of Wellington, at a time when Performance-Based Research Funding (PBRF: see Tertiary Education Commission, undated) had been instituted nationally. We contend that this locale meant that while there was potential to occupy “a unique civic space within which to address questions of moral purpose” (Nixon, 2008, p. 9), due to the university’s claim to be the “critic and conscience of society”, we were simultaneously lodged within a discourse of ‘e-valuation’ more often found in evidence-based discourses. For example, although committed to policies of gender equity, including equal employment opportunities, an over-riding commitment to PBRF rating meant that many women were not strongly positioned to meet the needs of the new organisation. Lerner and Le Heron (2005), commenting on the ‘calculative practices’ that, in their view, are both reforming and being contested in the new universities in an economically stringent ‘neo-liberal’ environment, note that “because of these contestations, the spaces and subjectivities of the neo-liberalising university are multiple and contradictory”

(p. 843). For us this contested space existed, somewhat precariously, between a merger and the accompanying threat of future redundancies. It called for substantial ‘re-writing’ or re-structuring of ourselves and our colleagues as academics, including those formerly positioned as teacher educators. The dominant discourse of ‘mastery’, particularly the mastery of research outputs that accompanied this locale, easily positioned us as vulnerable and therefore compromised. Our inquiries were, therefore, double edged; ‘unsettling’ both subjectivities and institutional formations.

Introducing Ricky

Within this context of vulnerability we returned to the memories that had been generated out of our collective biographical memory work (Claiborne et al., 2009). Since only some memories had previously been published, we were captured by those that remained deeply poignant for us but had previously been overshadowed in our previous focus on mastery and inclusion. One memory, in particular, caught our attention since it offered layers of interpretation that aligned to our understanding of ourselves as vulnerable, yet simultaneously powerful, women within the educational milieu. It is a story of each of us and our experience as subjects within an educational system that seeks to redress imbalances whilst simultaneously perpetuating the very discourses that it seeks to annihilate. The story is set in the 1970s, an era in the aftermath of teacher Jane Elliott’s anti-racism teaching strategy which encouraged children to explore racism through controlled classroom-based experience of brown or blue eyed bias (Peters, 1987). This exercise, a simulated experience of racism for ‘white’ students in the US, has been used in many countries and over time has led to a considerable body of research and commentary about appropriate pedagogies for ‘reducing prejudice’ and increasing inter-group tolerance for majority ethnic students (see Stewart, LaDuke, Bracht, Sweet & Gamarel, 2003). However, its location in the New Zealand context has not been previously explored in the academic domain.

In the memory below, which was worked on collectively by the authors in the memory work process, the experience of being a primary school child taking part in such a programme highlights the complexities of power within such an experimental pursuit. On this day, following the Elliott teaching exercise mentioned above, the teacher has told brown-eyed children that they could ask anything they liked of their blue-eyed peers. Ricky, a protagonist in the narrative, asked for the much coveted home-baked cake of the blue-eyed principal’s daughter. Upon discovery by the principal (who was not part of the experiment), Ricky is punished for his misdemeanour by being made to stand, in full view of the staffroom, in the circular space marked out for miscreants, known to the children as ‘the circles’:

Ricky Larson is standing in the circles painted boldly into the concrete. His hands plunged into his pockets, face preoccupied with kicking a piece of stubborn gravel out of its hiding place. Ricky Larson is standing in the circles, as he has so many days before and no one cares. He is standing there because he ate my cake at morning tea time. He didn’t have a cake, and the teacher had said that he was allowed to ask for anything he wanted today because he has brown eyes and mine are blue. But he took MY cake and I am the Principal’s daughter. It is my fault that he is in the circle and no one cares. My father doesn’t understand that I didn’t really mind about the cake – it was all a game. I don’t know how to make him understand or to get him to listen. Besides, it is too late anyway. Ricky is the naughty boy so it doesn’t matter. Why, then, does it matter so much to me? And why do I find it so hard to look at him across the playground, alone in his circular prison?

Re-entering this memory through Braidotti’s (2003) appropriation of Deleuze’s idea that “sexual difference is the primary axis of differentiation”, the axis of feminism (Braidotti, 2003, p. 47) allowed us to delve deeply into the experiences we brought to our analysis, the subjectivities we wore and the ways in which we were correspondingly unsettled by the narrative itself.

In our explorations we asked ourselves: Why was the narrative so poignant to each woman in our group, in this time, in this place and in this historical and political sea change – this period of profound transition sometimes referred to as the third wave of neo-liberalism, “partnering, performativity and polarisation”? (Larner & Le Heron, 2005, p. 851). Our responses, generated over many pleasurable hours of dialogue and coffee, highlight shifting identities, discursive platforms from which we launched ourselves, and our embodied responses to discourses that were not our own. These are explored in the sections that follow.

Collective memory and feminist reflexivity

For some reason the ‘Ricky memory’ stayed with all of us in the months following our analysis of the original collective memories, even though we had decided not to pursue its implications in our earlier writing. There was something about our consensual feeling of doubt about what this memory meant, and the many ways that we shared a feeling that by being ‘good girl students’, our achievements had no doubt inadvertently led to the exclusion of other students who had been our peers. We were all greatly surprised that we shared this feeling that we had not earlier expressed to anyone else. The memory also brought our strongly remembered feelings of wanting to ‘fit in’ in our primary school years, along with the terror of being excluded. By reflecting together on the Ricky memory, questioning our own assumptions together as feminists in a reflexive way, we hoped to gain further insights into the processes of survival that continue to haunt us in adult working life.

i) Guilt – one woman’s joy is another woman’s sorrow

Amidst colleague redundancies, restructuring meetings and reapplication processes, our frequent meetings became islands of pleasure within a sea of anger, frustration and discontent. Not only were we actually enjoying ourselves but we were also engaging in research which, in turn, positioned each of us as compliant employees, fulfilling our obligations while our colleagues struggled to stay afloat. Our research methodology sanctioned emotional, embodied connection, laughter and generosity towards each other. However, we became profoundly aware that we were rejecting supportive positions outside our group in an effort to maintain our own survival. This was against our desire as women. Caught in a double bind, we realised that the pleasure sanctioned in our research could not be shared with others facing more uncertain futures. At the same time, if we exposed the pleasure of our research to the academe, we ran the risk of not being taken seriously. Either way, we risked being positioned as twice guilty: as ‘bad team players’ or over-indulgent researchers. Research, however, became the line of flight that had the potential to both ensure our own position and throw a life-line to others. Whilst others and we were finding research projects using more traditional methodologies onerous and unedifying, our transgressive writing continued to draw in and sustain new researchers, providing a bridge across multiple uncertainties. The story of Ricky echoed the guilt we had come to associate with this experience. As we watched Ricky become a victim of the system that ostensibly and naively sought to alleviate racism, we found ourselves immobilised within the discourse that privileged us as white, middle class and able to achieve. Our recognition of this subjectification provoked other memories of friendships, painful betrayals and experiences of bullying which we came to describe as a form of reverse discursive slippage, when privilege was overwritten by exclusion. In both of these places there appeared to be no option available to us as children in the playground or adults in the workplace. We were reminded of Vivian Paley’s (2001) childhood memories of despair in an encounter with a teacher’s anger at a child which was interpreted as deeply confrontational and personally threatening, although it was

not directed towards her.

Through the narrative we were confronted with our positioning – in this memory as a powerful man’s daughter, yet in ourselves as without any power at all. We asked ourselves “why didn’t we speak out in support of Ricky,” and found ourselves lingering regretfully over the phrase ‘it doesn’t matter’, a phrase we had also appropriated in our current context as ‘our voices/we don’t matter’ as a means of coping with what seemed inevitable. It occurred to some of us that this indifference, albeit forced through deep anxiety, was a position we took when we felt least powerful as a means of avoiding our own negative consequence. As women, we wondered if this was also what caused us to watch our colleagues from afar, unable to engage in the powerful discourses of our current father, that is, the educational system to which we owed our origin. Sadly, we recognised that the education discourse had replaced the authority of the principal in the Ricky story. Once again, drawing on Lacan (1977), we confronted our position as women in the privileged discourses of the father, realising the ubiquity of:

the word of the fathers. Its authority was already acknowledged in the past. It is a prior discourse. It is therefore not a question of choosing it among other possible discourses that are its equal. It is given [it sounds] in lofty spheres, not those of familiar contact. (Bakhtin, 1981, cited in Freedman & Ball, 2004, p. 7)

We recognised, to our dismay, that we were still the principal’s daughter and our immobilisation was as pertinent to us as now as it was then.

Our positioning in relation to Ricky also exposed slippery interfaces between age, class, gender and ethnicity. Discourses emphasising our marginalised position as children lured us away from gendered positions. The law of the father, after all, magnanimously extends its influence over the less developed and the less fortunate alike, as we had been taught to appreciate. We were ‘only children’ yet it was we who had privileged access to material possessions (such as home-baked cake in our lunch box). Our marginalisation was thus complex and contradictory. Supposedly privileged, we began to associate being girls with other forms of exclusion, and with some confusion. For example, the phrase ‘principal’s daughter’ echoed familiar marked girl child positions from our childhood liaison with fairy tales imbued with similar titles such as ‘king’s daughter’ and ‘woodcutter’s daughter’, each with their magical associations of entrapment. Re-visiting Ricky, we were struck by the potency of the visible circle that encased him (in the 1970s circles were painted on the concrete in the school playground for punishment and public humiliation) and the possibility of other, more magical, and less visible circles. Perhaps, we speculated, Ricky actually gained brown-eyed status from his exposure and the person who was really trapped was not Ricky, but the principal’s daughter. Some invisible slight of hand had placed Ricky in the circle, yet, as the blue-eyed, gendered and subservient daughter, we felt ourselves somehow guilty yet simultaneously immobilised from action.

ii) Using the game and playing it back

Some of us reacted to the label ‘feminist’, saying “there’s more to us than that”, yet as we delved deeper into this memory and its provocations we began to recall recent memories when we, and others, had been positioned as good girls. These reminded us of our struggles in the previous paper, through the fictional character of Varia (Claiborne et al., 2009) who had to learn to discursively comply with adult protocols before she could be released to do what she liked. As we turned to our current situation we recognised Varia in some of our colleagues and the way they had obediently complied with the institutional agenda (manifested physically in a significant formalisation of their work clothing) in order to ‘play the game’. Like them, we realised we had metaphorically learned to play the game, to ‘wear a suit’ and, in doing so, please our father whilst simultaneously meeting our own needs behind the scenes. We were

struck by our own location as women who had ostensibly ‘made it’, but yet who lacked the power to speak out for Ricky or any other, instead finding ways through our discursive activities to protect ourselves. We were horrified by our futile efforts of advocacy to make the father understand the plight of another, since we conceded that we did not understand it ourselves. Although we felt we had broken the traditional mould of woman, introducing other threads to the weave of self, as academics, we were confounded by the authorities that had created us as such. The silence was deafening.

Again, our gaze at Ricky and his capture in the punishment circles of the playground brought our plight to mind. We had not asked to be good girls but had unwittingly (or perhaps wittingly) played a role in which we cast ourselves in the shade of authority. In this place, we enjoyed privilege, and were allowed our cake, whilst simultaneously forging careers out of issues of equality and deep concern to ensure equity and tolerance – perhaps the experiment had worked? We realised that it was experiences like these that have rankled in our adult lives as feminists, generating a feeling of being unaccountably and inexplicably privileged, placed above a valued peer simply on the basis of some sort of category (such as ‘race’, age, gender, or publication record). This puzzling continues to inform our work as teachers and academics, giving a particularly personal slant to concerns about social justice.

iii) I can't do everything any more

Despite our desire to make a difference, we were overwhelmed by the weight of this task. Foundational to our studied retreat was a shift in position from all-capable to a reviewing of the core business of what it means to be a woman who cares about other. Our dialogue caused us to speculate over the extent to which any of us can ever truly ‘walk in another person’s shoes’ to empathise with the difficulties in another person’s life. We could agonise more easily over the principal’s daughter’s confusion than imagine exactly what Ricky might have felt. Returning to the experiment at the heart of the Ricky experience we wondered if it had fulfilled its purpose of offering more understanding of racism as it is lived by people of colour in Aotearoa. Feminists in the 1980s (e.g., Greenspan, 1986) assumed that having ‘antennae’ for understanding the plights of others was a key factor in distinguishing feminist education from mainstream practices. But how far do these sensitivities to others take us in our own practice as feminists? We found ourselves more aligned with Lather and Smithies’ (1997, p. 52) methodology of “getting lost”, of confronting our own epistemic “not knowing” and finding there the beginning of ethical knowing. In doing so, we found we were “open(ing) up present frames of knowing to the possibilities of thinking differently” (as cited in Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 902). In not knowing how Ricky would position himself in this analysis, we realised we had lost sight of the face of the Other, becoming subsumed by our own guilt, and that as a result, Ricky, like our colleagues, confronted our sense of self painfully from a position of outsiderness.

A variety of simulation exercises, often created by passionate women educators like Jane Elliott, cannot give people the actual experience of oppression. Even the experience of Grace Halsell (1969) who followed Black like Me author John H. Griffiths (1962) in the 1970s was not really experiencing the ethnicity of African Americans; simply changing her skin colour through chemical means in order to experience (mostly) other white people’s intolerant reactions. Of course, a woman’s experience would have been entirely different to that of the man, but such comment is beyond the scope of this paper. Similarly, simulation exercises are widely used in disability awareness, for example, when students use a wheelchair, blindfolds or earmuffs for a day. Disabled feminists such as Sally French (1992) have argued that such simulated experiences are patronising to disabled people, providing only a disabled holiday for the

able-bodied; the real issues surrounding the disability are not engaged with. The student who meets an inaccessible kerb, for example, can simply get off and haul the wheelchair up. Yet surely the attempt to understand another person's life is worthwhile? Otherwise there is surely little possibility of communication across our differences or social change. Perhaps it is simply the possibility of questions raised and the associated acknowledgement of 'getting lost' that these exercises offer to the feminist with 'antennae' (see Greenspan, 1986).

In raising and responding to these questions we recognised that, as women, we had to let go of being able to do everything and understand everything. We remembered ourselves again in the playground and what we had had to do in order to survive, then recalled more recent experiences which bore a remarkable resemblance to these childhood struggles. We were amazed at this Herculean task. We recognised that now, saturated by guilt, we had finally reached points of resistance. We did not want to be all-knowing, perfectly-performing, predictably rational academics and simultaneously all-caring women. We did not want to work, and be accounted for, in isolation. We wanted to resist "being routinised, static and predictable" (Lather, 2008, p. 182). We wanted to make waves and meet the other through raising difficult questions about difference. We wondered if we were cresting the fourth wave of feminism.

iv) Becoming women

At this point we felt we had reached a threshold. We were reaching beyond the self-made professional woman of our magnanimous parentage towards an unknown future. We wanted to reject our status as superwomen or good girls and return to communal collectivity. We had a sense of shifting, subfused, identities emerging beyond these fixed narratives. The Deleuzian image of 'lines of flight' took us on its wings and we are always already re-writing ourselves. But, we are doing this together. These re-formations have been made possible through our collective work. They have been rendered thinkable by poststructural theory. We began to see the hidden workings of power made visible (e.g., Foucault, 1980) in the magic circles; we played with the indeterminacy of hyphens, the spaces that exist between self and other (e.g., Fine & Weis, 1998) in our fictitious tale; we challenged ourselves to leave the familiar safety of the humanistic subject with its "depth, finality and interiority" (Hook, 2005, p.17) in our methodology; and we have embarked on an ethic of getting lost with the other (e.g., Lather & Smithies, 1997) in both our sharing and in our concern for Ricky. We are of the mind that both communality and poststructural theory are, for us, very useful ways of rendering thinkable today's complex world.

Final discussion

Memory work has moved us to a deep satisfaction with the space that has been created by collective biographical work, and we have become even more committed to maintaining such safe spaces within our institution. For some of us, this project has been the only institutional space that permits the merging of our multiple identities, the collective, emotive and the academic, as well as a place to make sense of the threads of life's experience. We recognise the "constitutive power of (such a safe) space" which Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005, p. 898) view as an ongoing characteristic of all feminist work. Here we are encouraged to give strong voice to our diverse experiences and at the same time escape the entrapment of not being understood or being taken otherwise. This space has allowed us to think the unthinkable and unintelligible: what are the possibilities offered in taking the standpoint 'woman'?

We have also found collective biography pleasurable in that it removes the isolation and mourning associated with taking things personally. The resultant transgressive space of inau-

thentic knowing allows a confluence of bodies, emotions, and theories and brings to the fore the conditions of our formation. The story of Ricky replayed old themes of isolation, of watching, of occupying favoured positions in the patriarchy whilst at the same time feeling more entrapped than powerful, of betrayal, and of longing to join the collective 'brown eyes'. Collective memory work, however, allowed us to look beyond our individual prisons to the discursive constraints that worked against us being otherwise. We have thus renewed our commitment to collaborative work. As a group of women we have moved forward with this research agenda, inviting our colleagues to join us in collective biography to explore their professional lives as psychologists, early childhood professionals, and teachers. These experiences, in themselves, continue to challenge us to take further lines of flight as we consider what it means to be a feminist in this age, and in this space.

As this work progresses we find ourselves turning increasingly towards a political agenda which foregrounds our struggles as women and men in education within a context of change. We have developed a series of probing questions to support us into deeper and deeper analysis that allows us to step outside of ourselves through collective endeavour – even if just for a moment. We wonder if this collective biography wand will help us see and step out of the circles we stand in as well as consider those we create for others. We see the expectations that come with accepting the privileged position of 'principal's daughter' and wonder, Can we really have our cake and eat it too?

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