

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Exploring embodied and located experience: Memory Work as a method for drug research

Journal Item

How to cite:

Anderson, Katie and Mcgrath, Laura (2014). Exploring embodied and located experience: Memory Work as a method for drug research. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 25(6) pp. 1135–1138.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2014 Elsevier B.V.



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.drugpo.2014.08.008>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Exploring embodied and located experience: Memory Work as a method for drug research.

1. Qualitative drug research

Multiple benefits of qualitative approaches have been recognized by researchers in the field of drug studies (see, e.g., Rhodes & Moore, 2001; Nichter, Quintero, Nichter, Mock & Shakib, 2004; Leneghan, 2011; Duff, 2005). The inductive and iterative nature of qualitative research has been argued to be well suited to exploring and capturing areas of drug use which are outside of dominant discourses or “‘commonsense’ interpretations of drug use” (Rhodes & Moore, 2001, p. 291). Furthermore, the focus on exploring detailed, contextualised personal narratives, rather than generalized categories, has been argued to give richer accounts of living with drug use, which give centre stage to the voices of the drug users’ themselves (e.g. Beck & Rosenbaum, 1994; Hinchliff, 2001; Duff, 2008; Hunt & Evans, 2008). Qualitative research has been argued to be better suited to capturing the complexities and ambiguities of drug experiences, as “lived experience is characterised by meaningfulness that often does not lend itself to quantitative measures” (Rosiek, 2003, p.174). As Duff (2005) has argued, building a complex picture of users’ experiences can also aid in recognising and harnessing pre-existing systems of self-regulation and harm reduction. Building on this strong tradition of qualitative methods in drug research, this report will outline the potential uses of one particular method, Memory Work, drawing on data from a recent study carried out with moderate MDMA users.

2. Memory Work: Using memories to explore embodied experience.

To some extent, all qualitative methods involve some kind of 'memory work'; semi-structured interviews, the most commonly used form of qualitative data collection, for instance, involve asking participants to recall and discuss instances in their lives, usually in response to themed questions. Memory Work (see, Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault & Benton, 1992; Onyx & Small, 2001; Stephenson, 2005), however, is a defined method which takes this idea further, by asking participants to write memories of a specific event. These memories are detailed, with no biographical information and written in the third person, all in response to a trigger. For the study under discussion here, the triggers chosen were 'openness' and 'change' in MDMA experiences.

The memories produced are viewed as subjectively significant by virtue of being remembered and therefore formative in constructing meaning and identity (Haug, 1987). These memories are then discussed and analysed as a group, to bring to light the manner in which they have been socially created. This is done by examining continuity among memories, clichés, cultural constraints and popular conceptions (see, Crawford et al, 1992). The method therefore produces two complementary forms of data: the memories themselves, and the discussion of those memories, which is in turn recorded and transcribed.

This method was developed by Frigga Haug (1987) and colleagues, as a way to explore and analyse emotional experiences collectively, from a specifically feminist perspective. In line with many feminist approaches to research (e.g., Henriques, Hollway, Irwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984; Haraway, 1988; Willig, 2008), the aim of discussing and analysing the memories collectively was to dispel the subject/object dichotomy of research. Rather than taking the view that research should be 'objective', sometimes referred to as the 'God's eye view' (Haraway, 1988), with the researcher being held separate from the object of the

research, Memory Work was developed from a position of researchers and participants as collective 'co-researchers', equals in the production of knowledge.

Memory Work as method, therefore, makes two main claims which could potentially be of interest to drug researchers. The first is that the structure of Memory Work enables participants to have more room to lead the research process, and secondly that the memories themselves are especially rich, embodied and contextualised accounts of experience. These will be discussed in turn.

2.1 Allowing room for alternative accounts of drug use.

As has been widely discussed elsewhere, dominant discourses of drug use tend to be those of pathology and risk, placed within medical and/or legal frameworks (Bright, Marsh, Smith & Bishop, 2008; Forsyth, 2001; Hunt, Evans & Kares, 2007; Moore & Valverde 2000). For qualitative researchers wishing to explore drug users' experiences, there is, therefore, a danger that participants will reproduce dominant discourses, rather than vocalise, or attend to, alternative perspectives. Specifically, it has been argued that the straightforward semi-structured interview is likely to elicit practised, generalised, and normalised narratives of experiences (see Reavey, 2011). These issues with narrative interviews have led to an explosion of interest in alternative forms of data collection over the past fifteen years, such as visual methods, (Knowles & Sweetman, 2004; Pink, 2007; Prosser, 1998; Reavey, 2011) and diaries (Kindon, 2003; Holliday, 2004; Latham, 2002; Laurenceau & Bolger, 2005). The use of Memory Work sits within this move to widen the modes of data collection used in qualitative research, and has specifically been demonstrated to be useful in generating accounts which can puncture normative narratives of experience (Kippax, Crawford, Waldby & Benton, 1990; Gillies et al., 2004; Brown, Cromby, Harper, Johnson, & Reavey,

2011), particularly through the use of counterintuitive triggers to prompt memories. These unusual triggers are designed in order to produce memories which have not been glossed over and represented in a standardised format. For example, the triggers of ‘initiating’ and ‘touching’ resulted in more revealing depictions of sexual events than the commonplace and well-rehearsed story of ‘loss of virginity’ (Kippax, Crawford, Waldby & Benton, 1990). For these reasons, Memory Work has also been used to explore experiences with pathologised and/or marginalised groups, such as mental health service users (McGrath, Reavey & Brown, 2008); both adults (Stephenson, 2005) and children (Denis, 2010) diagnosed with HIV; as well as older women (Mitchell, 1991, 1993, 2000).

It has been widely argued, for instance, that many current drug research paradigms do not allow room for discussions of subjective pleasures and benefits users can experience from drug use (Duff, 2005; Hunt & Evans, 2008). There were many of these kinds of experiences in the memories collected by the first author, for a study conducted with five mixed gender, 23-24 year old participants in London. As an example, here is an extract from one of the memories from the study:

He felt like some of his general ideas and political outset were becoming liberalised from this shared experience with other humans, who he now respected and loved without actually conversing with the vast majority of them. Throughout, his thoughts never brushed with negativity like they normally would and he felt a lasting positive change in himself and his attitude towards other people that would remain with him forever.

(Ben, Memory 2, l. 355-360).

The profound influence on Ben’s “general ideas and political outset” suggests change on a deeper, intellectual level that is not reflected in MDMA’s status as a “party drug”, known for its energy-enhancing and euphoric effects (Kalant, 2001,

p.919). Furthermore, in popular discourses positive effects tend to be characterised as short-term, set against more long-lasting harm. For example, 'Frank' a UK drugs advice agency, describes ecstasy as producing "temporary feelings of love and affection" but emphasises that "long-term users can suffer memory problems and may develop depression and anxiety." Yet Ben is careful to underscore both the permanence and beneficial nature of his shift in outlook: the normalcy of "negativ[e]" thoughts being, for him, dampened "forever" in this "lasting positive change in himself". This is not to argue that this memory conveys a completely new concept; drug use as a tool for spiritual change and transcendence is of course well established (Nicholi, 1983; Rosenbaum, Morgan & Beck, 1989; Smith, 2005; Griffiths, Richards, McCann & Jesse, 2006), and it has previously been noted that particular groups of MDMA users view the drug as a tool for lasting spiritual change rather than pure recreation (Watson & Beck, 1991; Hunt & Evans, 2008). It is, nevertheless, arguably a less prominent discourse when applied to MDMA and other 'party drugs', rather than psychedelic drugs such as LSD. Furthermore, it is also worth noting that the participants were not asked directly about pleasure or benefits for this study, but the targeted yet open-ended nature of the data collection enabled these experiences to be highlighted and discussed by participants.

2.2 Bodies, spaces and settings

The second major advantage of Memory Work for studying drug experiences, is that the method facilitates the production of accounts, and subsequent discussion, of the embodied and situated aspects of experiences. In asking for detailed, specific descriptions, including embodied experiences and the material environment, the method helps to build a more complete picture, including the corporeal, emotional, contextual, and psychological facets of experience (Gillies

et al., 2004). It is hence a useful method for those with theoretical alliances to the growing interest in the material and embodied grounding of the self, identity and experience, which has emerged across the social sciences in recent years (e.g. Bordo, 1999; Burkitt, 1999; Latour, 2005; Brown & Stenner, 2009; Csordos, 1994).

Even without these particular theoretical alliances, it is clear that embodied and contextual elements are central to many drug experiences (Duff, 2008). Drugs, by their nature, involve changes on a physiological level, and so will also induce shifts in embodied experience, which qualitative methods need to be able to capture and account for. This memory from one participant, Toby, can be seen as an example of how rich the located and embodied descriptions given by participants can be:

It takes a little while before they're inside the club, but once inside his fear begins to dissipate. He feels more and more at ease as he takes in his surroundings, the music reverberating through his body - dirty, pulsing saw tooth sounds that remind him of the music his father used to play. A really funky, uplifting, energising kind of music.

Everything feels so easy. Far from being unsure of how to move, he is compelled to dance as the bass takes hold of his body and forces him to rock in time with the beat. This is unquestionably the most incredible music he has ever heard!

His energy is limitless. Every movement feels sharp and fast. He can feel the music, he knows exactly what's coming next and exactly how he's going to move when it comes. It feels as though nobody is watching. He becomes more and more adventurous with his movement. He would never have dreamed of moving like this in front of other people but it feels so right - he's Michael Jackson, he's Justin Timberlake!

(Toby, Memory 1, l. 23-36)

Multiple parts of Toby's experience are recounted here: the material surroundings of the club; the music; his changing embodied experience; and how he consciously makes sense of that experience. Again, this does not open up completely new insights into MDMA use; dancing and club culture have of course been long been associated with MDMA (Release, 1997; Korf et al., 1998 c.f. Winstock, Griffiths & Stewart, 2001). Here though, the detail given in Toby's experience can be seen to enable a particularly rich analysis of the meaning of these embodied changes for Toby. He can be seen as describing a release from a dualist conception of his body as a discrete entity that required controlling by the mind (Leder, 1992; Burkitt, 1999), which is transformed to an enhanced connection with his "lived body" (Moore & Kosut, 2010 p2): a body of flesh and bones, which was also the site of speech, action and experience and not an abstract 'other'. The experience, as described here, is thoroughly contextualised. In addition, the subsequent discussion enables participants to explain, reflect upon and add to the meaning of the memories described, adding an extra depth to the analysis which is not available in a traditional interview.

3. Reflections and conclusions.

Memory Work, therefore, has some clear advantages for exploring drug experiences. There are, of course, also some limitations. Firstly, it is time-consuming and relatively demanding of the participants. The requirement to write a written memory necessitates a certain level of expertise and confidence in writing, which could be exclusionary for some groups of participants. It is perhaps telling, that Memory Work has often been carried out by groups of academic researchers (e.g. Brown et al, 2009; Crawford et al., 1992; Gillies et al., 2004). In addition, the 'co-researcher' dynamic is not always possible to reproduce,

particularly in drug research where the researcher often does not share the experiences under interest. In this case, it is necessary for the researcher to take the role of facilitator, and contributor to the discussion group, rather than provide personal memories (see also, McGrath et al., 2008).

For future drug research, memory work offers an in-depth and detailed picture of drug users' subjective experiences. Such specifics are coupled with participant self-determination, present in their interpretation of open-ended triggers, and analysis of the data as co-researchers. The method would be most useful for experiences with key spatial, embodied or emotive elements, but could be beneficial for any study that seeks to move away from or present a more nuanced picture of dominant ways of thinking about drug use. Memory work can also be endlessly productive: either using different triggers with a new group to explore the same topic or, if there is enough participant commitment, further meetings of the same original group to reconsider their memories.

References

- Beck, J., & Rosenbaum, M. (1994). In Pursuit of Ecstasy: The MDMA Experience. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Bordo, S. (1998). 'Bringing body to theory'. In D. Welton (Ed.), *Body and flesh: A philosophical reader*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Bright, S. J., Marsh, A., Smith, L. M., & Bishop, B. (2008). What can we say about substance use? Dominant discourses and narratives emergent from Australian media. *Addiction Research & Theory*, *16*(2), 135-148.
- Brown, S. D., Cromby, J., Harper, D. J., Johnson, K., & Reavey, P. (2011). Researching "experience": Embodiment, methodology, process. *Theory & Psychology*, *21*(4), 493-515.
- Brown, S. D., Stenner, P. (2009). *Psychology without foundations: History, philosophy and psychosocial theory*. London: Sage.
- Burkitt, I. (1999). *Bodies of thought: Embodiment, identity and modernity*. London: Sage.

- Crawford, J., Kippax, S., Onyx, J., Gault, U., & Benton, P. (1992). *Emotion and gender: Constructing meaning from memory*. London: Sage.
- Csordas, T. J. (Ed.). (1994). *Embodiment and experience: The existential ground of culture and self* (Vol. 2). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Denis, P. (2011) Case Study: Memory Work with Children Affected by HIV/AIDS in South Africa. In Ritchie, D. A. (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of oral history* (pp. 159-169). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Duff, C. (2005). Party drugs and party people: examining the 'normalization' of recreational drug use in Melbourne, Australia. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 16(3), 161-170.
- Duff, C. (2008). The pleasure in context. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 19(5), 384-392.
- Edwards, D. (1994). Script formulations: a study of event descriptions in conversation, *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 13 (3), 211-247.
- Edwards, D. (1995). Two to tango: script formulations, dispositions, and rhetorical symmetry in relationship troubles talk, *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 28 (4), 319-350.
- Forsyth, A. J. (2001). Distorted? A quantitative exploration of drug fatality reports in the popular press. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 12(5), 435-453.
- Gillies, V., Harden, A., Johnson, K., & Reavey, P. Strange, V. and Willig, C. (2004) 'Women's collective constructions of embodied practices through memory work: Cartesian dualism in memories of sweating and pain'. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 43(1), 99-112.
- Gourley, M. (2004). A subcultural study of recreational ecstasy use. *Journal of Sociology*, 40(1), 59-73.
- Gravetter, F. J., & Forzano, L. A. B. (2010). *Research Methods for the Behavioral Sciences (Gravetter)*. London: Cengage Learning.
- Griffiths, R. R., Richards, W. A., McCann, U., & Jesse, R. (2006). Psilocybin can occasion mystical-type experiences having substantial and sustained personal meaning and spiritual significance. *Psychopharmacology*, 187(3), 268-283.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist studies*, 575-599.
- Haug, F. others. 1987. Female sexualization: a collective work of memory. *Trans. Erica Carter*. London: Verso.

- Henriques, J. H., Urwin, W., & Venn, C. (1984). C., Walkerdine, V. Changing the Subject: Psychology. *Social Regulation and Subjectivity*. Methuen: London.
- Hinchliff, S. (2001). The meaning of ecstasy use and clubbing to women in the late 1990s. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 12(5), 455-468.
- Holliday, R. (2004). 'Reflecting the self.' In C. Knowles, P. Sweetman (Eds.), *Picturing the social landscape: visual methods and the sociological imagination*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hunt, G. P., Evans, K., & Kares, F. (2007). Drug use and meanings of risk and pleasure. *Journal of youth studies*, 10(1), 73-96.
- Hunt, G. P., & Evans, K. (2008). 'The great unmentionable': Exploring the pleasures and benefits of ecstasy from the perspectives of drug users. *Drugs: Education, Prevention, and Policy*, 15(4), 329-349.
- Kalant, H. (2001). The pharmacology and toxicology of "ecstasy" (MDMA) and related drugs. *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 165(7), 917-928.
- Kindon, S. (2003). Participatory video in geographic research: a feminist practice of looking, *Area*, 35 (2), 142-153.
- Kippax, S., Crawford, J., Waldby, C., & Benton, P. (1990). Women negotiating heterosex: Implications for AIDS prevention, *Women's Studies International Forum*, 13 (6), 533-542.
- Knowles, C., Sweetman, P. (2004). *Picturing the social landscape: Visual methods and the sociological imagination*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Korf, D.J., Nabben, T., Lettink, D., Bouma, H., 1998. Trend in alcohol, tabak, drugs en gokken. Antenne.
- Latham, A. (2002). Research, performance, and doing human geography: A reflection on the diary-photograph, diary-interview method, *Environment and Planning A*, 35 (11), 1993 - 2017.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social: An introduction to actor-network theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Laurenceau, J-P., & Bolger, N. (2005). Using diary methods to study marital and family process, *Journal of Family Psychology*, 19 (1), 87 - 97.
- Leneghan, S. (2011). *The Varieties of Ecstasy Experience: An Exploration of Person, Mind and Body in Sydney's Club Culture*. Sydney: Lambert Academic Publishing.
- McGrath, L., Reavey, P., & Brown, S. D. (2008). The scenes and spaces of anxiety: embodied expressions of distress in public and private fora. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 1(1), 56-64.

- Mitchell, P. (1991). Memory-work: A primary health care strategy for nurses working with older women. *Science, Reflectivity and Nursing Care: Exploring the Dialect. Proceedings of the National Nursing Conference* (pp. 48-52). Melbourne, Australia.
- Mitchell, P. (1993). *Bridesmaids revisited: Health, older women and memory-work*. Unpublished master's thesis, Flinders University, Australia.
- Mitchell, P. (2000). *Letting your(self) go: Older women use memory-work to explore the impact of relationships on experiences of health*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Flinders University, Australia.
- Moore, L. J., & Kosut, M. (Eds.). (2010). *The body reader: Essential social and cultural readings*. NYU Press.
- Moore, D., & Valverde, M. (2000). Maidens at risk: 'date rape drugs' and the formation of hybrid risk knowledges. *Economy and Society*, 29(4), 514-531.
- Nichter, M., Quintero, G., Nichter, M., Mock, J., Shakib, S. (2004). Qualitative Research: Contributions to the Study of Drug Use, Drug Abuse, and Drug Use(r)-Related Interventions, *Substance Use and Misuse*, 39, 1907-1939.
- Nicholi, A. M. (1983). The nontherapeutic use of psychoactive drugs: A modern epidemic, *The New England journal of medicine*, 308 (16), 925-933.
- Onyx, J., & Small, J. (2001). Memory-work: The method. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(6), 773-786.
- Pink, S. (2007). Walking with video. *Visual Studies*, 22(3), 240-252.
- Potter, J., & Wetherell, M. (1987). *Discourse and social psychology: Beyond attitudes and behaviour*. London: Sage.
- Prosser, J. (Ed.). (1998). *Image-based research: A sourcebook for qualitative researchers*. London: Psychology Press.
- Reavey, P. (Ed.). (2011). *Visual methods in psychology: Using and interpreting images in qualitative research*. London: Routledge.
- Release, 1997. *Release Drugs and Dance Survey: an insight into the culture*. London: Release.
- Rosenbaum, M., Morgan, P., & Beck, J. E. (1989). Ethnographic notes on ecstasy use among professionals. *International Journal on Drug Policy*, 1(2), 16-19.
- Rosiek, J. (2003). A qualitative research methodology psychology can call its own: Dewey's call for qualitative experimentalism. *Educational Psychologist*, 38 (3), 165-175.
- Rhodes, T., Moore, D. (2001). On the qualitative in drugs research: Part one, *Addiction Research and Theory*, 2001, 9, 279-297.

- Smith, D. E. (2005). LSD, Spirituality and the Creative Process. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 37(2), 235-236.
- Stephenson, N. (2005). Living history, undoing linearity: memory-work as a research method in the social sciences. *International journal of social research methodology*, 8(1), 33-45.
- Watson, L., & Beck, J. (1991). New age seekers: MDMA use as an adjunct to spiritual pursuit. *Journal of psychoactive drugs*, 23(3), 261-270.
- Willig, C. (2008). *Introducing qualitative research methods in psychology*. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill.
- Winstock, A. R., Griffiths, P., & Stewart, D. (2001). Drugs and the dance music scene: a survey of current drug use patterns among a sample of dance music enthusiasts in the UK. *Drug and alcohol dependence*, 64(1), 9-17.
- Wooffitt, R. (1992). *Telling tales of the unexpected: The organization of factual discourse*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.