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Ageing, Gender Politics and Masculinities: Reflections on Collective Memory Work with Older Men

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9 **AGEING, GENDER POLITICS AND MASCULINITIES:**
10 **REFLECTIONS ON COLLECTIVE MEMORY WORK WITH OLDER MEN**
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13 **Abstract**
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15 **Purpose** This paper reflects on the process of participating in a long-term collective memory
16 work group of older men, focusing on the making/unmaking of older men and masculinities, and
17 the potential of memory work with older men.
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20 **Design/methodology/approach** Participant review and reflection on collective memory work
21 with a group of older men.
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24 **Findings and social implications** Collective memory work provides a novel way to explore
25 ageing, gendering, men, and masculinities. Its potential for working with older men is examined
26 critically in relation to gender politics, power and (in)equalities, interconnections and
27 contradictions of men's ageing and gendering, the personal and the political, as well as working
28 with older men more generally, including those in transition and crisis.
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33 **Originality/value** There is little previous writing on this approach to ageing, men and
34 masculinities. The paper aims to stimulate wider applications of this approach.
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37 **Paper type** Conceptual and practice paper.
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39 **Keywords** Ageing, Gender, Men, Masculinities, Memory work, Older people, Writing
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42 In this article, we draw on our experiences of collective memory work in a group of older men,
43 inspired initially by the work of Frigga Haug and colleagues in *Female Sexualisation* (1987).
44 Our first group meeting was in April 2002 when seven of us gathered, after which we met at
45 least twice a year until February 2015, with another five attending over that period, and ending
46 with an overlapping, but different, seven, which then, through the death of one of us, became six
47 in the final months. Following our various earlier and current political activisms, we came
48 together to do reflective written memory work on the connections between ageing and gendering,
49 naming ourselves the Older Men's Memory Work Group.
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10 Drawing on various personal experiences, our memories and dialogues (or metalogues), we
11 became especially interested in exploring, individually but mainly collectively, the gendered
12 ageing of men and masculinities or aged gendering of men and masculinities. Our focus was the
13 making and unmaking of old(er) men and masculinities through age, ageing, gender, gendering,
14 and other intersections, along with other social divisions and experiences, including disability,
15 nation, and sexuality. Within this approach, we agreed, through group discussion, topics or
16 themes that were important, sometimes deeply emotive for us, for writing down our memories
17 and then for analysis by the group.
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23 One result of this process was the collective book, *Men's Stories for a Change: Ageing Men*
24 *Remember* (Barber et al., 2016). In a previous article in *WWOP* (Blake et al., 2016), we
25 addressed the method and some of its uses for working with older people. Here, we stand back
26 and consider more general questions and what may have been learnt in reflecting on this process
27 over 15 years. We may wonder what, if anything, we have achieved working together as ageing
28 men, now in our late 60s or 70s. We address the main issues that we grappled with; the impact of
29 age, gender and the intersections of age and gender; and what have we learnt about memory
30 work.
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36 Main issues

37 *What were the main issues that we grappled with – explicitly and easily, more implicitly and less*
38 *easily? What was predictable, and what was surprising about our discussions? What agreements*
39 *and disagreements surfaced?*
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43 The main topic themes we wrote memories on, in their approximate order, were: ageing; hair;
44 clothes; peeing; school and schooling; disruptive bodily changes; sport; sisters; food; intimacy
45 with men; love; saying goodbye to mothers; political moments; power; violence; fathers and
46 fathering; work; sexuality and relationships; and ending the group. In some cases, we wrote on
47 certain topics more than once, and on a few occasions, where one of us was absent from the
48 original meeting, their stories were written later. In practice, the exact specifying of the topic was
49 agreed with some care, for example the first topic, ageing, was phrased as “a time when you
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9 were conscious of your age". Many of the topics were predictable enough. Some more difficult
10 topics, especially power, violence, and sexuality, were addressed towards the end of the group
11 after a high level of trust had been established. In some cases, previously 'raw and undigested'
12 material was critically re-visited, helping to come to terms with some of its troubling effects and
13 perhaps change direction. More surprisingly, some topics, notably death and relations within the
14 group, were not addressed explicitly as topics for writing.
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19 We tried to work by consensus and generally succeeded, but disagreements sometimes arose in
20 deciding the topic, how it should be worded, interpretations of particular pieces of writing, and
21 general orientations to the group: therapeutic, experimental, political, supportive, deconstructive,
22 and so on, in various combinations for different individuals at different times. We also disagreed
23 towards the end of the group whether to invite more members or not and, for some time, when to
24 end the group. Moreover, the memory work group went through many shifts and contradictions
25 in its own processes of change. Change was never linear or hierarchical but erratic and
26 fragmentary; the possibilities opened up were not given. These processes are more about a zig-
27 zagging disorder than a coherent 'onwards-and-upwards' (or downwards) progression.
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33 Over time, health issues became increasingly prominent in our discussions as some of us found
34 ourselves physically less able to travel or cope with our whole-day meetings. In some cases,
35 chronic pain was the problem, causing us to think more carefully about seating arrangements and
36 the like; in others, more general age-related health issues encroached, for example, as one
37 member found he needed to take a lunch-time nap. In addition, we were increasingly affected by
38 our need to care for ageing partners and/or family members and friends; thus, the issue of caring
39 became a much more significant element of discussions and the subject of a more focused gender
40 analysis.
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46 These processes were never purely interpersonal or inward-looking, or relevant only among
47 ourselves, but were reflective of wider social and political changes. While attempting to address
48 the need for gender change and the means by which we might achieve this, our bodies and the
49 world around us were also changing, presenting us with fresh surprises and issues to be
50 addressed. Meanwhile, as the inevitable signs of ageing started to take their toll upon some of us
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9 and/or those close to us, the declining state of care for older people, specifically in the UK,
10 became a worrying political backdrop. The fact is that we and our lives were changing, like it or
11 not; the question became how we could best facilitate and accommodate to this. The
12 acknowledgement of this was a meta-theme.
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16 Furthering awareness of gender power and (in)equalities

17 *Have the combined processes of talking, writing, reading, commenting and critiquing helped us*
18 *to think and behave differently as men in our personal relations and our gender relations*
19 *particularly?*
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23 None of us came into this project ‘raw’, in that we were all already committed to a wider
24 emancipatory project, especially in terms of (pro)feminism and anti-sexism. Many of us, for
25 example, had academic, professional and/or activist backgrounds reflecting this commitment,
26 and indeed this informed the original membership. As a self-selected group of men, the objective
27 of ‘changing men’ had already been taken on board to some extent.
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31 In our written stories and the discussions arising from these, there was much opportunity to
32 identify and re-evaluate our past and present lives. In doing so, a further locus of change was
33 opened up: that of changing our masculinities in the present, in the here and now. Listening to
34 someone telling their story, not interrupting, waiting one’s turn, complementing or criticising the
35 teller in non-competitive, non-damaging ways when the time arose, ‘holding’ and supporting
36 them during difficult moments, and then putting oneself through the same process, are all
37 interpersonal qualities not widely associated with men, but necessary in changing men. The
38 memory-writing, combined with critical discussion, helped us to cast a more critical eye over our
39 pasts and challenged our taken-for-granted assumptions on our gendered life stories. Personal
40 awakenings to gender-awareness were revisited in seemingly ‘safe’ accounts relating, for
41 example, to clothes, hair or food, as well as more difficult areas. The basic issue of gender power
42 was put clearly by one group member:
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9 I know that down the years this [memories and feelings of early subordination] has made it
10 difficult for me to see my own power so that I have imagined myself to be power-less when
11 in fact I may have been in a very powerful situation.
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14 Rather than attempt a falsely comprehensive overview, in order to illustrate the twists and turns
15 of some of such changes, we take one extended example of one member, writing on domesticity.
16 This begins with the ignorance and selfishness of his youth, and then goes on to show how those
17 early tendencies and crude insights became disrupted and overturned over time:
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21 When I was young I avoided all household tasks like the plague. Somehow they had become
22 associated with a dull, tedious and apparently meaningless world that belonged to adults –
23 especially my parents. Domesticity seemed to ‘bring you down’ even though at another
24 level I fantasised about a better life with a better house which was bigger and more luxurious
25 but which was also clean, tidy, warm, comfortable etc., completely failing to appreciate the
26 reality that such things actually depended on functioning levels of tedious domesticity being
27 applied to them.
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33 Ironically, it was when he was in the army that these assumptions first began to change:
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36 There I was expected – on pain of severe punishment – to wash and iron clothes
37 meticulously, make my bed, keep my bed space and room spotlessly clean and tidy, and so
38 on.
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41 On reflection, the writer later commented that, on leaving the army during his early twenties:
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44 I was an ordinary civilian again and on a steep learning curve. At this time I wasn’t really
45 aware of the gender debate: feminists were bra-burning women’s-libbers and were there to
46 be ridiculed and mocked; gay men were still ‘queers’ or ‘poofs’ – predatory (or pathetic) and
47 (either way) dangerous, and lesbian women just hadn’t met the right man yet. In spite of my
48 still-gnawing, deep-down sense of inadequacy and failure and my wish to become a more
49 modern, peaceful and ‘liberated’ kind of male, it seems that the various cultural process of
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9 'masculinisation' had actually done a pretty thorough job on me without my even realising
10 it.
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13 Thereafter, he writes of needing to look after himself, but the most significant transition comes
14 after he gets married and when he is looking after his son. Until then, he had been concerned
15 with his own responses to domestic labour in terms of 'personal pride' and 'independent self-
16 respect', but in his newly married state he begins to become more other-directed and more
17 gender-aware, conscious of the need for a more equal partnership. What his partner was doing
18 for him and his son was something he felt unable to ignore:
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23 ... it became a matter of personal pride that I shouldn't need or expect a woman to take on
24 primary domestic responsibility for me or my son.
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27 The possibility that this may have been in part a control mechanism or masculine defence against
28 feelings of vulnerability that can accompany dependency was not lost on the group. Awakening
29 to gendered difference is not easy, and may involve contradictions and paradoxes.
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33 Learning from past experiences and leaving established gender assumptions behind were
34 common themes in the memory writings, but this was not always easy. Gender and gender
35 differentiation are deeply rooted in cultural forces and often a fundamental organising principle
36 for our sense of who we are. Gender situates us and our view of ourselves, so it is not surprising
37 that so many of us invest so much in it. Even when we are committed to the need for change and
38 are positive about changing personally, it can be hard to get our heads around, difficult to know
39 how exactly to go about this. Political willingness to change, no matter how sincere, is only part
40 of the equation; for doing gender change, we need to become aware of what this means, what
41 this requires. In the memory work group, we took up the collective task of critical self-reflexivity
42 to address these questions in our own and others' lives. These experiences fed, albeit unevenly,
43 into developing an awareness and enacting a wider culture of gender equality and respect for
44 women.
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51 Age and ageism
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9 *What have we learnt about age, ageing, ageism, and older men and masculinities?*

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11 The memory work experiences provided much first-hand material on age, ageing, ageism,
12 embodiment, bodily change, loss, as well as the contradictions of ageing, gendering and power,
13 then to be reflected upon, personally, politically, theoretically. As we tried to understand our
14 pasts more clearly and critically, the dynamic interactions between individual life histories and
15 wider shifts in gender politics over the last 50 to 60 years came into sharper focus. As we looked
16 back, individually and collectively, we became increasingly reminded that time is running out,
17 even more so after the sudden, deeply saddening death of one of our group. Perhaps inevitably,
18 our sense of our own physical and emotional vulnerabilities became increasingly important, so
19 that health concerns became a more pressing feature in the group. One member wrote,

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26 It's true that with medication things are much better now and I have had no accidents for a
27 year or more. Yet my body is no longer the one I was in my forties. It is ageing. I am
28 ageing, which is more difficult to realise.
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32 Another member struggled to cope with hearing problems, respiratory problems and chest
33 infections, skin cancer and skin graft operations and blurred vision. These physical and
34 emotional struggles made him much more aware of his own limitations, particularly in relation to
35 his participation in the group – thus near the end of group he sent this email around the group:
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39 First I want to acknowledge that I can't keep on doing a 10-4 commitment to this group.
40 Instead I'm trying to forge new, realistic limits for myself, and I hope for others in this
41 group. Now I can manage the morning session (say, 3-4 hours) but I need to rest and sleep in
42 the afternoon.
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46 Others have had to cope variously with the traumatic effects of breakdown, prostate cancer,
47 chronic pain and chest infections, as well as with the emotional, health and physical needs of
48 loved-ones. This has highlighted self-caring, caring for others, and caring masculinities (Hanlon,
49 2012; Kramer and Thompson, 2005). Accordingly, we have attempted to produce an anti-ageist
50 and anti-sexist space that has been nurturing and caring in a way that is unusual in dominant
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9 forms of men's relations with others. This is a sentiment we are sure our lost member would very
10 much have wanted to emphasise.
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13 Inevitably, any misconceptions we may have had about just how robust we really were in our
14 masculine selves needed to be re-thought and come to terms with, as did our changing feelings
15 and concerns for one another as the need to support each other increased. As we aged and
16 reflected differently, some of us became more conscious of popular stereotypes about older men
17 in the social landscape, for example, in relation to sexuality, changing attitudes, or toileting, as
18 in: 'dirty', 'smelly' or 'grumpy' old man. On occasions, this awareness surfaced in our stories,
19 on peeing, for example, while at times a more assertive edge to ageing took hold in discussions.
20 Stagnant, ageist representations and media stereotypes of ageing men do not do justice to older
21 men generally and are not borne out by the energy and vitality of the various representations of
22 ageing men found in some of our stories.
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29 We also became aware of how the ageing process can bring about a relaxing of the more arduous
30 performative aspects of masculinity. Our increased longevity over that of our fathers opened up a
31 space for us in which we were able let go many of the pressing concerns of our earlier masculine
32 selves. We found ourselves working through the complicated balance between sense of loss and
33 sense of release that had the potential at least for opening up a fresh sense of perspective on
34 masculinity, especially in its hegemonic forms. While some of us became noticeably more frail
35 as time wore on, there was no sense whatsoever of our conceding to wider processes of being
36 demeaned or 'frailed' (Higgs and Gilleard, 2015; Sandberg, 2001; Jackson, 2016) by others'
37 attitudes. Indeed, some of us would say we became more radicalised by the experience, even
38 more determined to play our part in social change.
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45 Older men are not worn-out, passive, static subjects. Although from a distance their lives may
46 seem to be hardly moving, they are in fact characterised by rapid shifts and changes in their
47 bodies and their personal circumstances, thus promoting ambivalent and newly-emerging selves.
48 Frequent life events, such as severe illness, breakdown, hospitalisation, loss of job security and
49 status, or the infirmity or death of a spouse, force adjustments in later life. Alongside these
50 uneven processes of ageing and bodily adaptations go changes in the meanings and experiences
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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

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9 intended. Thus, one writer warns about too much complacency in these matters, considering
10 what a feminist perspective might have made of our memory work:
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13 One feminist reading of these stories might conclude that they show how unconscious many
14 men are of the power which they themselves exercise, especially in relationships with
15 women, unconscious too of the systemic nature of male privilege.
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19 A possible criticism of our memory work is that we may not have been quite as challenging as
20 we could have been. Sometimes we were probably anxious not to damage the group with its
21 warmth and support, a feature often all too absent among groups of men. But in our case – did its
22 presence serve to reduce our attempts to be candidly gender-critical? Perhaps the choice of
23 stories may have been bit ‘safe’ for those reasons? For example, even though being a relatively
24 privileged group, quite a few of the memories concern being on the ‘receiving end of power’
25 rather than early, taken-for-granted, male-dominant actions. But, then, the stories themselves are
26 only one part of the process of memory work, of understanding the past and imagining the future
27 differently. Bob Pease (2000, p. 75) observes: “Remembering is not only an attempt ‘to
28 understand the past better but to understand it differently’”. Some of the group found that as they
29 changed over the 13 years of meetings that their viewpoints shifted; they weren’t just recalling
30 the past more clearly but they were remembering it through a different lens. One member later
31 reflected on how difficult this process of moving on from past mistakes could be:
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35 Naïve and unworldly, I didn’t know where to begin and so made a real hash of it while
36 desperately wanting to learn from [his father’s] mistakes and be a kind and loving – truly
37 fulfilling father to my own children. Instead, and in spite of myself, I became angry, selfish,
38 domineering and even heavy-handed, just like him. *‘The bee stings and then dies itself,’* I
39 wrote many years later in a poem.
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47 This writer does talk of changing, of being more reflexive and less hard on himself, but the
48 process of change is never complete. We are, and to some extent remain, our pasts, even if we
49 can become more than that by learning to forge a different and better future for ourselves and
50 others. Critiquing the past is one thing; it is another thing entirely to carry any lessons learned
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9 into the present and translate these meaningfully into present and future practice. In critically
10 examining our pasts, we opened up not only past errors, we also took on board our vulnerabilities
11 and contradictory inner lives with all this implies for our changing relationships with one another
12 'as men', with women and with other gender identities.

13 14 15 16 **Implications for practice**

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

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

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41 • collective memory work may be especially useful with groups of older men whose lives
42 have been disrupted through transition or crisis. They might have experienced a health or
43 relationship crisis, have become unemployed/unemployable, or are having a difficult
44 retirement. Some men may find themselves thrown suddenly into a world of domesticity,
45 with its 'feminine' associations, but for which they may feel ill-equipped, requiring
46 different kinds of personal/domestic relationships. Others may be dealing with loneliness,
47 lack of self-worth or new disabilities. Such men might well benefit from collective
48 critical reflection as a catalyst for dealing with change in their lives and in society.

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Comment [JH1]: Could this section in yellow, or part of it, be in a box be headed "Implications for practice", as in the journal house style

- 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,

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9 we are to reach out further with the memory work method, we need to consider that the capacity
10 or desire for critical self-reflection and change is not universally shared, and can be diminished
11 by, for example, lack of confidence or over-confidence, or even enhanced among so-called
12 'meta-reflexives' (Archer, 2003), as might include ourselves.
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16 Although the process of change begins for us with making visible to ourselves and others how
17 we became the men we are, it is through deepening our understanding of ageing processes and
18 masculinities that we can become aware of how to *un*-make and/or move on from the past. This
19 includes moving on from those emotional investments and practices that encouraged clumsy,
20 sometimes damaging, commitment to dominant masculine identities in the first place. If we can
21 learn to understand how it is and why it was that we have actively bound ourselves into
22 particular masculine cultures, then real change becomes possible, not just for ourselves but for
23 others with whom we come into contact. When *we* change, others have to deal with the
24 implications of this. This process necessarily involves degrees of intimacy, self-examination and
25 critical self-exposure that, arguably, many men would find daunting:
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31 There seem to be rules about this kind of stuff, rules that have dark origins that are
32 dangerous to explore.
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36 And, from an early story ...
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38 I am resisting adding this, but dammit I trust you. As a youngish teenager I found a woman's
39 swimsuit that my mother never wore. I put it on occasionally when I was at home alone.
40 Once I did it when my sister was there and went to show her. As I remember it there was no
41 hint of condemnation from her. I look back on it as an important moment of trust between
42 us.
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47 Trying to effect change at the political level raises the risk of this becoming disingenuous and
48 hypocritical if this is not equally borne out in our personal lives. If real meaningful change in our
49 gender practices is to come about, we have to be able to show it can be done, that it works as a
50 better way forward, for others too. Struggle for change at the political, structural, economic and
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