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**EXPLORING COLLECTIVE MEMORY-WORK IN SERBIA:  
CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER AND ETHNICITY  
IN POST-CONFLICT CONTEXT<sup>1</sup>**

**Ana Đorđević and Zorana Antonijević**

**Introduction**

The text explains the application of the Collective Memory-Work (CMW) method in two projects in Serbia, considering the authors' original fields – gender studies and psychology, as well as the objectives of their individual research projects. The paper also observes ways to make CMW useful for understanding socialization through gender and ethnic identities, both at the micro plane of the individual, and on the collective plane of the social group. Both approaches help improve understanding of the ways in which gender patterns and regimes, as well as nationalistic identity politics, multiply and perpetuate.

To understand both approaches, project contexts should be considered, as well as their purpose. The context is post-conflict, post-socialist Serbia, one of the former Yugoslav republics, and one of the main actors of the 1990s nationalist and pro-war politics. The participants of the project that uses gender as basis for CMW belong to the middle generation of women who still remember living in their former homeland – once a single country, who have the experience as refugees, anti-war and feminist activists, as well as direct experience with bombing. The generation participating in ethnic identity-related CMW is the generation that does not remember the former shared country, nor has direct experience of war – other than through their parents' stories and symbolic and often political (distorted) representation of the causes and effects of the break-up of Yugoslavia.

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1 This paper was realized with the support of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia, according to the Agreement on the realization and financing of scientific research.

The text further elaborates on the importance of CMW by introducing an interdisciplinary approach to the authors' fields, although their ambitions regarding the use of the method in their projects were different. The first is used for a doctoral dissertation, to establish interdisciplinary dialogue, but also break down certain prejudices against different methodological approaches in mainstream psychology. The second is driven by the need to use activism and social experiment to establish dialogue among different methods in the memory work area predominant within gender studies in Serbia – such as oral history (Leavy 2011).

It is also interesting that we conducted our projects in solitude and silence, away from the activist and academic communities, unaware that the other one existed working on something similar. However, we were brought together by “chance, the comedian”<sup>2</sup>, and this text is the result of this serendipitous encounter. We start with Ana's project.

## **Collective Memory-Work: Ethnicity**

### *Intro*

The main question that struck me at the beginning of my PhD studies was *What does it mean to be Serb?* This is not a self-evident nor an abstract question, so what follows is a social and academic contextualization of the research itself.

Being born and raised in post-Yugoslav Republic of Serbia brought up different opportunities and challenges for my generation, comparing to the one who lived during Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Even though the societal changes after the Yugoslav wars (1991-2001) were profound, the change from socialism to ethnic nationalism was among the most radical ones. That comes as no surprise, given the fact that the war actions of all sides were legitimized by ethnic nationalism. Not only that, but the violent conflict was also presented as preferable, if need be, to defend one's own nation or fight for its independence. Serbian nationalism was prevailing in the Serbian public sphere, reinforced by its national leader and prominent Serbian intellectuals (Tomić 2014).

Few decades after the dissolution of SFR Yugoslavia, nationalism is still a powerful discursive means in hands of political and religious authorities,

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2 “Slučaj komedijant“ – expression coined by Serbian author, Miloš Crnjanski.

for binding together the citizens of Serbia. However, it is also deeply entwined in the structural institutions of the society, such as police, military, education<sup>3</sup>, and even culture, which is why sociologists claim that we live in an ethno-nationalized society (Boičić 2019). In short, nationalism and ethnocentrism dominate over Serbian society in both symbolic and structural ways. Based on research which shows a widespread importance of national/ethnic group for self-identification among Serbian people (Kalaba 2013; Stjepanović Zaharijevski 2008) it is reasonable to assume that they also dominate over individual experience in some way.

However, most of the research takes this as evidence, without trying to investigate the mechanisms by which ethnic belonging becomes a strong attachment point, the one to “die for,” especially among youth. Serious attempts at social critique of the status quo usually take place in theory, while empirical research mostly accumulates evidence.

Being trained in psychology, me and some other colleagues who are also interested in the psychology of ethnicity and national belonging, were taught to approach the problem from the viewpoint of social psychology, which is highly influenced by positivism, individualism, and experimentalism (Greenwood 2004). As young scholars, we took issue with that because we considered it a highly restrictive research environment, especially when it comes to methodological approaches, and the lack of scientific self-reflection. What are we doing research for, if not for the betterment of society and its members?

### *The project*

On one side, what was interesting to me, given the subject of my doctoral thesis – ethnic identification – were not general and fundamental psychological processes, but situated personal experience in relation to social practices, and the dynamics between experience and discourse. More specifically, some of the questions were: *How do we come to understand and experience self as member of an ethnic community? What social practices give substance to personal meaning of ethnic belonging? And how come that we speak in terms of ethnic or national identity when the only thing we can see around ourselves are different,*

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3 Research shows that national history education is ethnocentric, as is high school students’ knowledge in history (Stojanović 1994, 2010).

mostly anonymous, sometimes even strange people... Are we just an *imagined community*, as Benedict Anderson put it (1983), and if so, *by what cultural means and practices do we become attached to that which we imagine?*

At the time of crystallization of my idea for the PhD research back in 2017, two significant events took place. First, I met Frigga Haug at the PhD course in critical psychology in Copenhagen and was introduced to Collective Memory-Work. Second, a group of undergraduate students approached me with the idea to qualitatively explore the construction of national identity of, or rather *for*, the people in Serbia.

That is how the six of us, three female and three male psychology students, started our memory-work project.

Two significant features of this research, one might say, compromised the traditional practice of Collective Memory-Work, as introduced by Frigga Haug and her colleagues (1999). One of them is the fact that the research idea was already thought through before the gathering of the group. I had the role of primary researcher, someone to provide knowledge on almost entirely unknown methodology, someone to promote the idea, organize the research, but mostly to *animate* other members. Also, I was afraid that if the whole project were collective based, I would not be allowed to defend my thesis... Therefore, due to assumed institutional restrictions, the project was only partly collective.

The other feature is that this research has not dealt with an oppressed or marginalized group, as many Collective Memory-Work projects have. However, it has dealt with a certain kind of submission to power, namely *submission to certain forms of subjection*, as Foucault would say, but also Bronwyn Davies (Foucault 1982; Davies 2008). In other words, I wanted to explore how we become subjects of ethnic socialization, which is part of the dominant normality taken for granted in Serbia. Practical purpose of the study was questioning the hegemonic discourse of ethnocentrism and nationalism, or the conceited idea that “we” are superior or better than other nations. Furthermore, I wanted to explore the possibility of individual emancipation from the collectively based and reinforced *identity logic* and *hatred* of the, imagined, but also real – Other. Or at least, to interrupt it together with my colleagues, which is ambitious enough, if emancipation sounds too utopian (Hyle, Montgomery, and Kaufman 2020).

The Collective Memory-Work project took place in the institutional setting of our faculty, over a period of two months with weekly gatherings. We mostly did memory-work with the aim to explore how it works, and to obtain an empirical basis for my PhD. Practical or political goals were important, but secondary. Therefore, we only did memory writing on one cue, and one round of collective analysis of each memory. Then I turned to another group to do the same. The other group was made of three male history students and myself, and the cue for both groups was the same: "When I felt the most as Serb."

In using this cue, we have not dislocated the research subject, as Frigga Haug and her co-workers did – from sexuality to body parts. We only *transferred*<sup>4</sup> it to a certain situation or a context, similar to Karin Widerberg's project where she asked students to write memories on when they felt like a man or a woman (Widerberg 1998). Transferring here is to explore how people construct themselves, and how they are constructed to *fit a category*, while dislocating would be to explore seemingly banal everyday objects and practices which are related to implicit ethno-national feelings, such as flags, traditional food, clothes, songs etc. However, some of those appeared in our project as well, as important parts of self-construction as member of Serbian ethnic group.

First, both groups gathered to talk about what does it mean to be Serb in general terms, when do we usually feel as Serbs, what kinds of situations evoke our sense of ethnicity, what is the personal and political significance of this subject in our society, and especially for our generation; us who are born during the troubled nineties full of conflicts, exoduses and economic challenges, but who do not have personal memories on them, since we were just babies or toddlers back then. Also, we discussed symbolic and ideological hybridization of Serbian society in transition, in terms of heterogeneous discourses – from monarchism to liberalism, socialism to nationalism – where it is difficult to orient and position oneself.

After all these different aspects which we first tried to explicate in everyday terms – how we perceive the problem of ethnicity in Serbia today – we proceeded to writing our personal memories, each of us for her or himself in their own pace and peace. We used the suggestions for

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4 The distinction between transferring and dislocating the research problem in collective memory work was discussed by Nordic researcher Maria Jansson and her colleagues (Jansson et al., 2008).



writing based on Frigga Haug's chapter on detailed rendering of the method (2008): a specific situation, in third person perspective, in as much detail as possible, and on one typed page. Then we gathered once per week to analyze each memory text, trying to follow the procedure as suggested in the chapter. I admit that, at first, I insisted on following the instructions, because, initially, I lacked experience with the method, and the rest of the group expected that I provide the structure and say what we *should* do. I wanted to see how the method works, what can arise from this type of peculiar and detailed analysis that we could not have seen before – both in theory and in everyday life. That is how new insights began to emerge, while the group started to feel more relaxed and competent, and the process was more flexible, as we headed towards the last gathering. The analyses were exhausting, lasting up to three hours; sometimes they were trivial, sometimes brilliant, but each of us gained something from it: be it a positive experience, a new methodological knowledge, reflection on one's own ethnic belonging or ethnocentrism, or even of one's own egocentrism. Some of us were more than others challenged to learn something new about ourselves – while there were those who refused to accept the challenge<sup>5</sup>.

Unfortunately, we did not go through the comparative analyses and collective theorizing similarities and differences. One reason was that the exam period started, and they all had to study; the other was utter exhaustion from the whole process, since we took as much time as possible for each memory to analyze it thoroughly; the third was my decision to take some time off, take distance, and then compare and theorize on my own, but based on the collective analyses which I later transcribed. After all, we all had in mind that it was my idea for the PhD project, and that it was for the sake of my academic title that we conducted Collective Memory-Work. Because of that, much of the decisions made about this research were driven by the fact that I had to defend the thesis at the Department of Psychology in Belgrade, which, as mentioned before, is mostly positivistic oriented. Apart from the scientific

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5 There was a young man in the group of history students, who was the most nationalistically oriented. He was defending his strong attachment to Serbian people, and he expressed discontent due to his perception that there are no more “genuine nationalists” in Serbia, those who genuinely care for Serbs and are willing to commit themselves to that cause. At the last meeting of the group, he said that he does not want to change his attitude, and that he will certainly raise his children to become nationalists.

and practical matter, which were the most important for my thesis, I had to think about my original contribution as single author, as well as the questions about procedural steps, validity and reliability of the method and generalizability of the research findings.

### *Key results*

In the last analytical steps, I used a theoretical model from cultural psychology (Zittoun 2012) to explore how does the subjectivity of a person evolve within specific social practices and discourses, or by which socialization and subjectification processes does a person emerge as "Serb." Sometimes, that question referred to the process of marking and discursive positioning of a person, within the Us-Them dichotomy and the feeling of *collective threat* and the *need to defend oneself*. Other times, the processes of personal identification with either *collective suffering* or *collective violence*, resulted in feelings of *empathy* and *guilt* (respectively). However, there were processes of *performing* (presenting, hosting) as member of ethnic group, which resulted in the feeling of *pride*; conversely, there were those when a person felt *betrayed and rejected* by other Serbs, as someone who is "not a real Serb," based on his geographical background<sup>6</sup>. Most memories expressed deep concerns for one's place in society which is marked by ambivalence and confusion between feeling that we *need to belong somewhere* and feeling that *belonging should not be taken for granted* and defined by current political, religious, or any, social authority. Most of us took this research as an opportunity to express our *autonomy* regarding the question "what does it mean to be Serb."

Autonomy was one of the main concerns of the original Collective Memory-Work project by Frigga Haug and her group, even though it was based on women's experiences, and not those of the dominant group in society. Here, the resistance to dominant normality was based on *personal and generational belonging*, as opposed to ethnic or national.

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6 The ancestors of a person were settled in places that are or were not historically part of Serbia.

*Reflections on the theoretic and practical potentials of CMW for post-grad ethnicity studies*

The paradox is that even though the co-researchers were affiliated to the dominant ethnic group, the results show that for some of us, that affiliation or identification provokes uncomfortable feelings and unease, but also resistance towards dominant socialization practices. Some of us felt guilty, angry, lonely, and even depressed, within practices of predominant ethnic identification, and refused to settle on those feelings. Some of us even refused to participate in the processes of ethnic identification, thereby expressing dis(s)identification. Therefore, belonging and acting in society, even within practices of dominant normality, can be defined by personal or alternative collective resistance, and not by subordination to the dominant normative in which a person is socialized.

In this research, memory-work exposed the dominant practices of ethnic socialization and identification that shape personal experience, but it also made visible the resistance against social normativity. It maybe even *provoked* that resistance... We can consider that potential of Collective Memory-Work its comparative advantage to other methods used in psychology for this subject, which only provide evidence of these processes, thereby reinforcing the status quo.

In the end, Collective Memory-Work can also be considered a method with broader practical relevance for studying various forms of domination over subjects, and for more subtle forms of self-reflection. However, it should be done not only within, but outside of post-grad studies, due to formal restrictions of various institutional bodies included in the decision on the suitability of the research for the given academic framework. Less restrictive research context can lead to more relevant practical and political outcomes, by providing alternative forms of collectivization.

With this in mind we move on to Zorana's project.

## Collective Memory-Work: Gender

### *The project “Women’s Memories”: how and why we started*

It is unusual to start writing about a project from the end, rather than the beginning. Still, nothing about this project was “usual”, and this is also true for its end. The last meeting of the small group under the name “Women’s Memories” occurred in January 2020. It was held in the festive atmosphere of Orthodox Christmas, without the burden of everyday concerns and tasks. We brought each other little gifts and wrote down a memory on a “gift” to someone or from someone, sometime. By chance, or not, this last meeting, which we did not know would be the last, occurred exactly three years after the first meeting in January 2017.

Following this, in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic started, and we did not meet any more for the project, either virtually or in person. In December 2020, the group—composed (mainly) of feminist activists—split over disagreements around whether to adopt more or less radical resistance strategies to anti-feminist tendencies in Serbia. Two participants left the group. This also tore the fragile friendship ties that had formed among us while working on the project. Therefore, this text, as a form of summary, also has a healing role – to remember how we started and lasted, and less how we ended our project.

The first application of Collective Memory-Work has been in discovering the processes influencing women’s gender socialisation, the creation of their gender identities and roles in the given society (Haug 2008). This was also the intent of our group in Serbia. The initial idea came after a conversation with Professor Jeff Hearn, during my time at the Örebro University in Sweden as gender studies exchange student. The cause was a book by a group of authors, including Hearn, on CMW and ageing men (Barber et al. 2016). On the road between Örebro and Karlstad, finishing the final review of the manuscript, Professor Hearn and I talked about different feminist methods for the collection of memories and experiences and to which extent they related to CMW. One of those methods was oral history (OH), which I had already implemented, and knew a lot about. The OH method was theoretically covered in detail and practically implemented throughout gender studies at Novi Sad University. I learned about the method thoroughly attending the non-academic women’s studies program in the early 2000s (Savić 2001), after

which, due to the institutionalisation of gender studies, the method was often used in master and doctoral theses. This was not always welcomed by university structures, namely, in the case of two doctoral dissertations, which were ultimately not accepted for defence, the method was evaluated as non-scientific, and therefore irrelevant for serious research of social phenomena, such as inequality, for example (Antonijević 2020).

I was drawn to CMW by the possibility to learn about other methods focusing on recording “experience” as relevant and important for understanding, on one hand women’s socialisation, and on the other multiple inequalities perpetuating and deepening their unequal position in society (Scott 1991). In this respect, the intent of the “Women’s Memories” project, was to record and study multiple narratives through personal memories and experiences of being women in turbulent historical times for Serbia, the region, and the world (the break-up of Yugoslavia, the fall of the Berlin wall, Serbia’s economic and political transition). We wanted to make our experiences visible, our memories relevant for a better understanding of the social phenomena that influenced and still influence our lives. I believed that CMW as method can respond to that challenge and provide insights into women’s socialisation during historical events that changed the geography and social circumstances of an entire region. “For feminist activists and researchers, the method had a particular salience, for women’s experience was often in tension with the preferred masculine forms of public knowledge” (Barber et al. 2016: xxii).

In December 2016, I sent emails to a broader group of friends and acquaintances inviting them to join the project. The call presented the project as “informal, personal, non-academic, volunteer memory project” (Antonijević 2016) referring to the foreword in the book on CMW and ageing (Barber et al. 2016). However, the proposal also acknowledged considerable differences between that project and the planned “Women’s Memories” project, primarily in the knowledge of the circumstances of life of women in Serbia, European semi-periphery, and the lives of older men in the UK. The call was sent to younger and middle-aged women (ranging between 35 and 55 years of age), who, understandably, had young children or older parents to care for, and in addition were activists and workers with demanding jobs, with much travel and long working hours. In a word, it took balancing the most difficult area for women in Serbia: private and public spheres, finding enough free time to engage in

personal development. Therefore, the call proposed to hold meetings online, over a (then) available online platform. Writing this in the summer of 2021, after nearly two years working in the online regime under COVID-19, this proposal seems both rational and revolutionary! It was understood that only women could participate in the project.

Nine women responded to the call, two of whom withdrew because they were busy and unable to travel to meetings, as the final decision was made to organise the meetings not virtually, but in person. Due to various living conditions, we decided to make our meetings shorter (between three and four hours) and organise them mainly in the evenings. That was when most of us had free time. This also meant that one of us always had to spend extra time travelling to Belgrade where most of the meetings were held. It was nearly impossible to organise that all of us be there at each meeting, so the number of recorded memories varies from one topic to another. Finally, seven women, myself excluded, agreed to participate, and remained active in the project until its end.

All of us who participated in the project: Aleksandra, Biljana, Jelena, Sanja, Sofija, Višnja, Zorica and Zorana had known one another from before, declared ourselves as feminists and had been active in the women's movement and the human rights movement in Serbia. Also, we all had very firm and clear anti-war and anti-nationalistic attitudes, and as professionals or activists we had been, and still are contributing to further advance women's and human rights in Serbia. An important characteristic is that we are all highly educated, in the fields of law, sociology and economy, languages and literature. Two of us had the academic experience of gender studies (master and doctoral levels). The group dynamics were also considerably influenced by the fact that we were not part of any academic or activist project, thus being able to place our gatherings and CMW somewhere between personal empowerment and awareness-raising, certainly not group therapy, although the work itself did have significant therapeutic effects.

Equality among group members was implied. Within the call for participation in the project, but later also during the work itself, the adopted practice was that each group member had the opportunity to propose the topic, time, and place for the meeting. We also rotated as meeting organisers. Our intent was to meet once in three months, which we were only able to do during the first year of the project, 2017, when we met a total of three times. One of the main challenges was to find

time and space for our meetings. Times were difficult to coordinate, and space needed to be quiet, isolated, private, but it should not be in the house or apartment of one of the participants. The gatherings most often took place in the business premises of one of the participants after business hours and late into the evening.

The issue of voluntary participation was also very important. All group members were from the start informed that they could leave the group whenever they wanted to (which two members did towards the end of 2020), as well as pass on writing on certain topics that they did not agree to, or “veto” a topic, as happened for instance with the topic “Mother”. Confidentiality and the need to feel safe were among the most important principles, as well as to feel free, content, and relaxed while doing CMW. An integral part of the meetings was also going for drinks or dinner after writing, reading, and analysing. It is better to say that the analysis went on, sometimes even late into the night. “The changeful, self-reflective nature of the method, and also the support it gave, was appropriate and welcome” (Barber et al. 2016: xxiii) for our entire group.

Between January 2017 and January 2020, seven meetings were held on the following topics: “I, female”, “Hair”, “The man I do not wish to remember”, “Dance”, “Tits”, “The move” and “Gift”. Memory topics were set at the meetings and often the discussion on the choice went on for longer than the writing itself. Sometimes because we lacked ideas, and sometimes because we postponed some ideas (such as the topic “Tits”, for example) or we could never write about them, such as for example about parents, especially mothers.

The process itself had several stages: 1) the selection of the topic of memories, 2) writing around 45 minutes up to 1 hour in the first person, rather than the third, 3) reading all memories and talking about them. We did not have strict rules of analysis, nor did we structure it in any way as suggested by Haug (2008). The discussion was mainly on similarities and differences among the memories on specific topics, finding patterns or deviations. An advantage of the CMW method compared to the OH method is in the intensity and brief form of the narrative, as well as in the fact that it is presented, read publicly immediately after writing, getting direct feedback without time gaps or delays. In other words, “the publicness of the story is immediately present in the room” (Barber et al. 2016: xxii). Special attention was dedicated to ensuring the comments were not judgemental, referring to the text rather than the person, as

well as not asking additional questions about the details of events, some of which were very unpleasant and painful for the participants.

*Becoming a woman in the post-conflict, post-socialist context*<sup>7</sup>

The selection of topics was a particularly challenging part of our CMW. The first topic we choose and spent more than two hours negotiating, was the memory of a situation when we first became aware we were women. The title was “I, female”. The majority of narratives related to adolescence and concrete physical changes or hints of changes (not only of our own bodies, but also in the treatment by others, most often men, but also other family members, friends), which happened at that age, and which separated women from men.

*The game started in the evenings, at dusk, when the sun starts setting, and ended when it was already dark. This was particularly exciting because it was even harder to find players in the dark. We hid in the barn, the tractor parking garage, workshop, mill, behind the tree, the “other yard” (where the pigs, hens and cows were kept). It was endlessly exciting! Each evening a new place to hide, remain not been found ... That was my favourite part. [memory story 1]*

*The problem began rolling and by far exceeded its initial dimensions: a broken board that needed fixing, turned into there being something wrong with the whole bed, this furniture storm caught up the entire room and unveiled the carefully kept secret about wolves (under the bed, note by Z. A.) and culminated in the terrible judgement: “someone should move out”. Someone should find their way in the wasteland of the new room with oversized furniture. I could not remember if my brother said anything to this sudden change and if he was there at all, present in the drama under the flat roof of the five-floor building with French balconies. My parents were whispering in secret between them and made the decision by consensus: “YOU SHOULD HAVE YOUR OWN ROOM. AFTER ALL, YOU’RE A GIRL.”.[memory story 2]*

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7 All memory texts reproduced with consent of authors.



The predominant feelings and experiences related to changes in bodies, awakening of sexuality were shame, fear, uneasiness about changes to the body, as well as the feeling of alienation and loneliness, without the possibility to get support or advice from other women (friends, sisters, mothers). Complete abandonment in one's own agony of being a woman.

*The knickers were soaked in blood. I was looking at it from above, the knickers stretching between two ankles forming a bridge from which I thought it would spill over and leak all the way to the kitchen, warm with work and smells and worry. I didn't know whence it came and how. My jaw was numb with fear. The plastic had cut into my thighs and my feet were numb after sitting so long. I was nauseous and cold. [memory story 3]*

*This feeling stays with me, the feeling of complete exposure, as if my skin were turned inside out. And then he said something so horrible, it devastated me completely, and opened my eyes in a way. He asked me if I wanted to be his boyfriend. Not girlfriend, but boyfriend! This absolutely devastated me and startled me. Suddenly, I started yelling inside, but I'm not a boy! I'm a girl, a woman, pining over a boy like a proper woman, having the sexual experience of her own sex. I was horrified he didn't see me that way and suddenly it was all clear, all that was written, all these stories and poems, they weren't me! I had to find a way to express myself, this woman inside me..[memory story 4]*

*Let's say it's like that, now it's coming back, in a blur. Having written something, getting up during the break and leaving the notebook somewhere, and when I got back, she had it. But I'm not sure. Anyhow, I remember she was reading parts of my diary to the whole class, including how, I don't know, I think it was C., grabbed my ass and I wasn't sure what to think about it, or whether I liked it. That's what it said. I don't want to embellish it now 25 years later and lie, saying something else was written in it and to relativise my own*

*feelings. So, she read it in front of the entire class. And I remember only I was terribly ashamed. [memory story 5]*

Another topic that particularly stood out were feelings about tits. Within this topic too, the predominant feeling and experience were those of losing control and autonomy over one's own body (breastfeeding, childbearing, physical changes in puberty, examinations by gynaecologists and operation) and shame that this body part does not match some ideas, some images about the way ideal tits should look. As we remembered them, they were either too small, like little nuts, or strikingly hairy. They did not give milk when they were supposed to, we had to hide them with clothes because they were too big, we had to slouch, hide from these new growths on the body. But also, we had to learn to love them and be on good terms with one's own tits when they decided to fall ill.

*The examination looks like this: you go into the changing room and strip to the waste and then go into the office with your tits out. There are two changing rooms, so your tits are not alone. Rather, you stand there next to another woman with naked breasts, and the doctor stands facing you. A.M., beautiful and arrogant. Then you raise your arms, and he grabs these tits like holding apples. Then he squeezes them a little. Just to be clear, I've always found tit-squeezing rather disgusting. And there's always a sort of attack against them. "A-ha, you have a fibroadenoma" - the doctor says. "4x5 tissue. You need surgery." [memory story 6]*

*The nurse, who I had seen for the first (and the last) time, came into the hospital room and asked me and the women I shared the room with - if we had milk. The three of us looked at one another and tried hard to answer this important question. But essentially, we had no idea if the answer to this question was YES or NO. That's why the nurse came to the closest new mother - in this case me - and without a word pushed her hand under my hospital gown, three sizes too big. She squeezed the first tit she got hold of very hard. As if*

*it were a thing and what's more, her thing, with which she could do as she pleased. [memory story 7]*

*So, at some point the first bra/brassiere was to be bought, to tame those frolicking tits, which, by the way, also itched as frolicsome as they were, because they were growing and hurting, and bouncing. I remember my mum always worried repeating how I should be careful so I don't get hit with an elbow in the tits in P.E. or if I did get hit I should make sure to tell her (I think this was her way of talking to me about sex). And so, the day for the bra came. I don't remember how, nor where, nor when, only that it was white, it looked like a top part of a t-shirt, tight, so you could actually see I was wearing a bra. It was very similar to what they sell today for athletes. [memory story 8]*

It is interesting that the topic of "Tits" also found its way into the topic of "Hair" and came together in one great big uneasiness and shame, but also the first time accepting one's own body as it was.

*Then R. was born, I was in the maternity ward, they were supposed to teach me to breastfeed, and again there was hair on my breasts. I'm ashamed, and actually I don't really care, because if I did, I wouldn't have hair on my tits. Then I say like, oh, I feel awkward, so she doesn't think that I think that it's normal to have hair. I know they shouldn't be there, but I don't care. And the midwife says, doesn't matter, it's great that it is there, it's ticklish, so it can keep him awake. I don't know if I find this disgusting or not. And it is not short, but long, like mouse's whiskers, only jagged. .[memory story 9]*

The CMW method allowed us to get to know each other better, but also to get to know ourselves better. Many of us remembered things we didn't really want to remember (as the title of one of our memories says: *Remembering a man I don't want to remember*). CMW gatherings evoked events that, thanks to interpretation, were rationalized, analyzed. The loneliness and isolation of women's lives is gone. Moreover, the

similarities between us, our experiences of growing up, maturing and being a woman, pointed us to the existence of patterns of patriarchy that shape us from childhood and affect our lives to its very end. Perhaps the biggest advantage of CMW over OH is the closeness and connection that is created not only between the research participants themselves, but also between the research subject and the research topic.

*What and how next?*

When two group members decided to leave the group in December 2020, the question arose of what next. It seemed to us who stayed that we could not move on without those with whom the project had started. On the other hand, we spoke about continuing to write down memories on the topics we had not been able to write about, or for which we had not been there, and maybe make a collection of it, a little book of experiences. Or just keep going with new topics. Or gather together one last time and in some way “close down” the project. We still have not decided.

In the meantime, I am thinking about trying to form new groups, with different women from the margins or from the women’s movement – pacifist and ecofeminist initiatives. I still believe that the collective CMW process increases opportunities for reflection, comparison, even challenging someone’s attitudes. Working on one’s experience enables learning from it (Barber et al. 2016: xxii).

The project “Women’s Memories” is unique in both activist and academic circles. In the context of academic disciplines, recording women’s experiences becomes a new, critical perspective in the production of knowledge about genderedness and crisis. Recording and discussing memories would help better understand how power structures, sexuality, gender, and violence formed us as women, activists, and feminists. CMW opens the possibility to initiate, through the process of self-learning through emancipation, the processes of unlearning and deconstructing harmful practices of gender socialisation in a violent and patriarchal society, such as Serbia is.

### Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to outline the ways in which the CMW method can be used in the context of Serbia as a country in transition, given the fact that most CMW projects have been done in developed countries such as Germany, UK, and Australia. The issues raised and explored are the ones we recognized as not only consistent with CMW tradition, but also highly relevant in the context of still patriarchal and nationalistically oriented Serbia.

The two projects described seemingly have two things in common: the social context and the method. However, the research presented show that those are only formal similarities, yet on a more substantial level represent sources of difference. Ana's project is academic, more formal, more structured, and less egalitarian, given her role as a primary researcher and a PhD student back then; Zorana's project is personal, informal, and almost entirely egalitarian, given the roles within a group as friends and activists. Ana's project lasted shorter, was more to the point, analytical and in-depth; Zorana's project lasted much longer, was around many issues regarding the construction of femininity, the analyses were immediate and more extensive. The ways in which the two projects differ expose the multitude of ways in which CMW method can be used, together with its flexibility and heterogeneity, given the various techniques and procedures as resources for tackling the subtle nature of personal experience within the common social structures. We intentionally presented them together to show that how we use CMW in the same context and at the same time can differ so much as to provide a plentitude of new insights into patterns of socialization.

On the other hand, what presents as the same context of the two *projects*, are different contexts of the *memories*. Women's Memories project is about memories of a different historical and political period, than the project on ethnicity in the generation born during the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Some of the women from Zorana's project could even be mothers of the participants in Ana's project. By presenting them together, we connect not only two different topics which are central for socialization in Serbia, but also two historical periods, two generations, and two collections of surprisingly comparable experiences: uneasiness, shame and guilt, alienation and loneliness, the urge for autonomy. From two distinctive generational and disciplinary grounds, we see our projects

as converging towards situated knowledge on personal experience as evidence of (long lasting) faulty social and political regimes of Serbia, in which the quest for personal fulfilment is marked by continuous struggle.

Our common ground is seeking for alternatives, both in society and in social science.

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