

# Reclaiming space in family histories: impressionistic memory work as a feminist approach to historiography and storytelling

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article explores memory work and storytelling as an organising tool through family histories, offering theoretical and methodological implications and extending existing conceptualisations of memory work as a feminist method. This approach is termed as impressionist memory work.

**Design/methodology/approach** – To illustrate impressionistic memory work in action, the article presents two family histories set during Second World War and invite the reader to engage in the “undoing” of these stories and dominant ways of knowing through storytelling. This method challenges the taken-for-granted roles, plots and detail of family histories to uncover the obscured or silenced stories within, together with feminine, affective and embodied subjectivities, marginalisation and social inequalities.

**Findings** – This study argues that impressionistic memory work as a feminist method can challenge the silencing and gendering of experiences in co-constructed and co-interpreted narratives (both formal and informal ones).

**Originality/value** – This study shows that engagement with impressionistic memory work can challenge taken-for-granted stories with prominent male actors and masculine narratives to reveal the female actors and feminine narratives within. This approach will offer a more inclusive perspective on family histories and deeper engagement with the marginalised or neglected actors and aspects of our histories.

**Keywords** Family histories, Storytelling, Memory work, Feminist historiography, Life-writing, Impressionism

**Paper type** Original article

## Introduction

The field of organisation studies has been increasingly preoccupied with the importance of memory and history (Decker *et al.*, 2021; Heller, 2023). The “historic turn” (Clark and Rowlinson, 2004) has come to mark aspects of this new area of interest and engagement. Reconceptualizing historical inquiry has been used to challenge the very foundations of organization studies and even destabilize our notions of truth and fact. Prioritizing the narrative approach to history (Usdiken and Kieser, 2004, p. 324–325), engages with historical

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theories and methods in dialogue with organizational memory. This can also be done through historical reflexivity applied to organising and defined as “an engagement with history as a source of theorizing as well as a repertoire of methods for researching the past” (Decker *et al.*, 2021, p. 1125). However, the potential for these interdisciplinary relationships in processes of organising remains underdeveloped, especially in terms of theorizing (Decker *et al.*, 2021), as memory work and historical narratives in organisation studies has often been limited, considered in some instances as just a source of data (Leblebici, 2014), or occasionally as method (Van Lent and Durepos, 2019).

In this paper, we respond to the need for greater engagement from scholars in organization studies with historical narratives and historiographic concepts, methods, categories – first of all to open up the field to “diverse forms of theoretically informed historical writing in organisation studies” (Clark and Rowlinson, 2004, p. 347), and then to offer a “polyphonic approach to study rhetorical uses of the past, to account for multiple and diverse voices that take part in the construction of collective memories” (Foroughi, 2020, p. 1347). In doing so, we further contribute to studies on collective memory work, and to the growing literature of researching and writing differently in organization studies (see Boncori, 2022; Kostera, 2022; Pullen *et al.*, 2020).

Stories are a powerful tool for organising as they can prompt individuals and groups “to act differently because we can also think differently” (Schildrick, 2002, p. 79). Stories of the past can be told through history or memory as “the learned past” and the “the lived past” (Misztal, 2003, p. 99–101), thus representing “two different routes to the past” (Lowenthal, 1985: xvi). Through their socio-political and sensemaking role, personal stories and histories of the “micro” level of everyday life become ways of researching, organising and knowing differently that also embrace difference (Johansson and Jones, 2020; Collins, 1986), especially in relation to silenced people and social phenomena. For example, Savigny (2017) highlights the political importance of disrupting dominant hierarchies and forms of knowledge, while Johansson and Jones (2020) use memory and duoethnography to foster an understanding of gender and class in academic careers.

The way we decide to write and tell stories is a political choice (Rhodes, 2019). Plots are articulated consciously or unconsciously around protagonists (in the foreground) and other figures (in the margins). Dominant narratives and perspectives highlight and reinforce dynamics of power and who is allowed to speak and to act, and for whom. Feminist historiography is an act of resistance against masculine-centric narratives that dominate the past. Feminists engaged in history engage in various forms of resistance from uncovering silences (Haran, 2011) to offering alternative accounts (Wallach Scott and Tilly, 1975), to addressing the neglect of female actors (Mills and Williams, 2021) and more. By untangling grand, taken-for-granted narratives, we can uncover a more nuanced record of lived experience, history and culture (Ruel and Hammel, 2020; de Vaujany *et al.*, 2021). The value and potential of feminist approaches is relevant to both individually constructed and collectively shaped stories, and applicable not only to formally recognised, but also for less known and recorded stories, such as family narratives. The stories we hear, internalise and (re)produce help challenge or maintain power relations, shed light on marginalisation and bear an impact on representation. By embracing ambiguity and difference in storytelling, “monstrous others” (Schildrick, 2002) can be included or even centred, thus uncovering a multitude of narratives, perspectives and contexts.

The socio-political role of everyday individual and co-created narratives can illuminate broader understandings of individual and collective sensemaking processes, with the assumption that knowledge is produced within locations and politicised social loci, and explored through partial or individual perspectives (Haraway, 1990). Boland and Tenkasi (1995) argue that narratives constitute the fundamental organizing principle of human cognition. Histories are often written from the perspective of those who find themselves in a

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privileged position – whether because of race, gender or other characteristics. Those who are different and “othered” are traditionally placed at the margins. Indeed, as suggested by Haug (2008, p. 538) memory “always runs the risk of reflecting dominant perspectives.” This exclusionary approach preserves and perpetuates the centrality and legitimacy of the privileged. The “undoing” of normative ways of knowing and storytelling is indeed a key contribution of researching and writing differently in organisation studies, for example by focussing on personal histories (Johansson and Jones, 2020), antenarratives of the margins (van Hilten and Ruel, 2022) and the embracing of alterity rather than othering (Ericsson and Kostera, 2020).

In this paper, we want to shed light precisely on the margins inhabited by othered individuals. In bringing a focus to the otherwise neglected (people, approaches, detail, plots etc.), we also highlight the fuzziness and ambiguous aspects of memory. Our study contributes to the literature on memory work, storytelling and feminist methodologies in organization studies. We contribute to the body of work considering memory work as a feminist method with theoretical implications. We are inspired by Kuhn’s (1995/2002, p. 5) notion of memory work as a space at the intersection of ‘historical events, structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender, and “personal” memory’. Hidden in the nooks of taken-for-granted stories – illustrated here through war time family histories – are othered female actors and feminine aspects of narratives. In this study, we advocate for a change of perspective in traditional storytelling and memory work, in the organising and “composure” of our histories, to illuminate the power and value of the people and stories relegated to the margins. We promote a feminist approach which opens the possibilities for inclusivity and polyphony. Our contributions include the following (1) we offer an extension to existing feminist historiographic methods through our conceptualising of *impressionist memory work*; (2) in presenting this approach, we offer an intellectual bridge between memory work and Literary Impressionism (theory building); (3) we also explore the implications of this approach in offering agency and multivocality for both subjects of such stories and those who re-story them and finally, (4) we argue that family histories are locations where marginalized narratives can be examined anew. We offer this approach and exploration for contemplation by feminist storytellers and historiographers interested in revisiting masculine and normative narratives.

This paper is structured as follows: first, we discuss the power and potential of memory work as a feminist method before illustrating our concept of *impressionist memory work*. We explore the literatures on memory work and then position family histories as a subject of interest to feminist historiography and writing differently, thus illustrating the importance of informal histories. We follow by building on the theoretical opportunities of *Literary Impressionism* to illustrate the potential of a fusion of memory work and Literary Impressionism for feminist storytellers and historiographers. To illustrate our approach in action, we offer two stories and show what we as authors gleaned anew through the application of *impressionist memory work*. These stories are based on facts but are told as family historical accounts based on collective memory work. The two stories have been passed down for three generations and thus “facts” have been blurred with fictional narrative and the subjectivities of the storytellers. Finally, we return to our key contributions before offering some concluding remarks.

### Memory work

The past, history and memory can often be confused as referring to the same thing and with the same authority. The idea of the past and its actors are embedded in cultural and sensory notions of our prior experience; history is a record of facts, constructed of traces of the past and our interpretations of these traces (Weatherbee *et al.*, 2012). Thus, memory work lives in

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betwixt and between these notions of the past and history. It is both durable, but also unreliable. It is emotive and didactic. It is also both an individual and collective activity that can shape present and future identity and behaviours.

In the field of organisation studies, memory work has been explored in different ways to understand the use of the past, and memories of organisations and processes of organising (for a review see [Rowlinson et al., 2010](#); [Wadhvani et al., 2018](#)). Recent developments informed by the work of Maurice Halbwachs, consider individuals in their role as community members using collective frameworks of remembrance ([Halbwachs, 1980](#)). Collective memory and storytelling have, for instance, been used to study founding stories of organisations ([Linde, 2009](#); [Foroughi, 2020](#)) and are considered important tools of organising and sense-making communicated and institutionalised through repetition. However, research tends to focus on narratives constructed by dominant voices, rather than on multiplicity and polyphony of voices and experiences ([Foroughi, 2020](#); [Smith and Russell, 2016](#)). Critical approaches to the use of narratives have been applied to collective memory work in understanding processes of organising, and political and social control reinforcing behaviours and values ([McConkie and Boss, 1986](#); [Rhodes and Brown, 2005](#)). Fewer studies have explored the inclusive and critical potential of collective histories and memory work (see [Coraiola and Derry, 2020](#); [Linde, 2009](#); [Mena et al., 2016](#); [Ybema, 2014](#)). Recent research by [Coraiola et al. \(2023\)](#) has provided a review of the literature on collective memory in organizational memory studies, focussing on mnemonic communities. Interestingly, they include both families and business organisations as examples of “mnemonic communities” where understandings of the past are key in shaping behaviours and practices of the present.

The term “memory work” usually indicates the understanding of how past or historical memories impact contemporary life and the future. It implies notions of (re)constructions and (re)negotiations of the past, which is not fixed ([Coraiola et al., 2023](#)). It is also used as therapeutic practice, and in research as a method, to interpret and theorise social issues through individual experiences that are analysed collectively ([Haug, 1987](#)). Frigga [Haug \(1987\)](#) conceived memory work as both a methodology and a method (set of methods and or a single method). Memory work can coalesce lived experience, especially those experiences reflected in oral histories of women ([Giles, 2003](#)). [Fraser and Michell \(2015, 322\)](#) show how the literature on memory work is very interdisciplinary, spanning across the arts, humanities and social sciences, often focusing on “how time, space and culture affect identity development but also the re/presentations made about identities.” Memory work has been used to investigate a variety of experiences – for example, the relationship between girls and science ([Kaufman, 2000](#)), the mother-son relationship ([Pease, 2008](#)), the writing of sensitive topics ([Farrar, 2007](#)) and the experience of migration ([Cornforth et al., 2012](#)). Here, like for [Ericsson and Kostera \(2020, p. 1404\)](#), we espouse researching and writing differently in relation to histories and memory work that is “an epistemological approach inextricably linked with a writing style communicating otherness and difference, everything that cannot be patriarchally ordered, including non-hegemonic gender and nationality. It is more than giving voice—it is writing as responsibility towards alterity”.

[Goodall \(2005, p. 497\)](#) suggests that the stories told by elders in our families offer “a framework for understanding our identity through theirs”. The inclusion (or lack thereof) of certain perspectives, voices and experiences is then crucial to the understanding of who we are, and the shaping of our futures, both individually and collectively. Memory work that is nested in personal stories concentrates on unearthing the nexus of individual and collective understandings of experience and place, thus linking the personal to broader socio-political processes ([Haug, 2000](#); [Fraser and Michell, 2015](#)). For some, memory work therefore becomes a process “whereby individuals construct themselves into existing social relations” ([Haug, 1987, p. 33](#)), which can be theorised and challenged. Echoing [Kuhn \(1995/2002\)](#), and building on [Haug’s](#) original method, [Fraser and Michell \(2015, p. 322\)](#) also support the use of memory

work as a feminist method “offering qualitative researchers a useful way into personal insights and an interesting way to connect the personal and political as well as the past with the present and future”. Naturally, feminist memory work is concerned with power relations behind the creation, telling and dissemination of narratives. The potential then lies not only in the uncovering and dismantling of unequal processes of memory making and storytelling, but also in how these dynamics can be related to alterity and characteristics used to marginalise or silence others (e.g. race, gender, class, sexual orientation and disability). Memory work holds strong feminist potential in its political nature (Fraser and Michell, 2015; Ahmed, 2016) as “feminist work is often a memory work” (Ahmed, 2016, p. 22), highlighting “the workings of dominant ideology in their subjectivities” to shed light on marginalised voices and experiences (Pease, 2000, p. 11). By analysing the taken-for-grantedness of histories, and the obscured or silenced stories within, we can uncover the feminine, affective and embodied subjectivities and highlight marginalisation and social inequalities (Fraser and Michell, 2015; Gherardi *et al.*, 2019).

Memory work has been linked to the feminine not only through the presence of women in histories, but also through the inclusion of emotion and the senses [1]. For example, Crawford *et al.* (1992) have focused on emotion and gender; Gannon (2001) on emotional isolation and Lammers *et al.*'s (2005) on emotional abuse. Further, embodiment has also been considered through memory work, for example in Gillies *et al.* (2004) research on sweating and pain. When emotion and embodiment are relegated to subaltern narratives of memory recollection, the value of the feminine is limited, thus privileging and reinforcing the more “masculine”, linear and objective aspects of memory work (Hurd *et al.*, 2019). This means that narratives of “others” that are deemed too emotional, subjective, messy and dirty (Höpfl, 2000; Pullen and Rhodes, 2008) to fit within the dominant narrative, remain relegated to the margins. This erodes the potential of the feminine in our histories because feminine perspectives do not just represent *unimportant* actors, but also *undesirable* ways of being. To our knowledge, the potential of writing differently and the undoing of dominant ways of knowing through storytelling via the centering of the feminine in memory work in organisation studies has not been sufficiently theorised. Informed by feminist concerns of lost writing and lost stories (Hocker, 2010; Williams, 2022) we advocate for the (re)production of histories which is fundamentally entrenched in memory, affect and embodiment.

Here we relate memory work to more informal narratives built and shaped over time within a group, like in the case of family histories. Perhaps surprisingly, these informal stories, and oral histories, have often been inhabited and (re)produced by women (Noakes, 2017), or marginalised and racialised groups (Collins, 1986). We use the term “memory work” to describe a process of collective negotiation, sensemaking and organising that is premised on memory at the individual level and in its interaction with others, not as a structured collective technique led by professionals in the field of psychology or in business. Inspired by the original aim and purpose of the memory work method, rather than the structure and process of the method itself, we adopt and extend a feminist memory work approach to family histories as processes of organising. In Hocker's (2010) terms, we continue to discover who we are in what and who our relatives have been. We do so by unlocking the feminine potential.

### **Family histories and feminist critical historiography**

Family histories are a powerful situ of memory work and an instrument to uncover that which makes up individual and collective narratives of who we are and where we come from (Katila *et al.*, 2020). Collective memory is constructed and maintained through storytelling – often enriched over time – which (re)presents the past as it is interpreted, mediated, co-created and reconstructed by members of a group or society as the history of the group (Bar-Tal, 2013). Family history has recently gained interest and shed light on women's

perspectives (Noakes, 2017). Echoing work on storytelling, oral history and organisational memory (see Boje, 1991, 2001, 2006, 2008; Humle, 2014; Linde, 2001, 2009), we see family histories as an intricacy of stories (re)created, interpreted and negotiated by family members through storytelling to maintain a sense of identity, belonging, legacy and coherence across time and space. Therefore, stories can reinforce social ordering, social hierarchy and gendered roles within a group (Williams, 2022). De Schauwer *et al.* (2018, p. 8) draw on memory work to illuminate “the intra-actions between self and other, through which normative subjects are constituted and nonnormative subjects are abjected”, thus highlighting the political power of memory and storytelling through in/exclusion. Whilst in their research (De Schauwer *et al.*, 2018) people excluded from memory and stories are those with disability, the silencing or neglect of stories “outside the norm” can also be related to othered groups. For instance, masculine, patriarchal, white, cisgender and Western-centric histories can often relegate to the margins of narratives those who are considered “others” such as people of colour, women, gender non-conforming individuals and those whose culture and value do not fit with Western approaches.

We draw on critical historiography to understand family histories as narratives that can be positioned as “taken-for-granted” factual stories of the type that is found in so-called *official* histories. Specifically, we turned to feminist approaches to historiography which incorporate oral histories, personal artifacts such as letters and diaries, and family narratives that focus on gendered roles and power dynamics. Historiography also focuses on how certain stories come to be told, who is privileged and who is neglected. When feminism is combined with historiography, significant epistemic implications appear (Pierson and Prentice, 1982). This invites theoretical implications and new inclusions. In other words, writing and organising history is no longer a matter of simply describing the past, but must also include the challenging of persistent silencing and marginalising. Feminism allows us to turn political questions into historical questions, and vice versa, to uncover socio-political tension in the historical past (Wallach Scott, 2008). This approach enables a more holistic and nuanced perspective of who can speak in history, and whose tales are (re)told, welcoming the more embodied, affective and often fragmented aspects of storytelling as important facets of histories.

### **Linking memory work to Literary Impressionism**

We further theorize memory work by connecting it intellectually to Impressionism – a movement and technique which seeks to not only represent a scene or object, but also evoke an emotional response. Impressionism rose in response to the newly established medium of photography in the 19th century. Our discussion as authors about memory work triggered an intellectual connection to imagery. Memories often figure in the minds’ eye as images, and moments in time can be frozen as photos. However, these images are incomplete and limited. We pondered what was in the recess of these images, hiding behind what was in focus. We wondered, like Impressionists, if we could look at the so-called taken-for-granted images anew. Could we re-examine family histories in much the same way? We were not so much interested in creating new fixedness, but rather, undoing the perceived fixity of family histories to reveal something previously unnoticed.

In Visual Impressionism, of which for instance Claude Monet is a prime example, the lines between what is in the background or the margins, and the main subjects, are often blurred. As such, the margins are less identifiable and so the boundaries between the visible and invisible are less defined, more porous and permeable. Literary Impressionism seeks to document subjective, sensory experiences to create an interpretive synthesis (Clark, 2012). It draws inspiration from Visual Impressionists who invigorate life-drawings with vibrancy and colour while still employing a unifying concept (moment in time), which evokes the

senses in much the same fashion as poetics (Clark, 2012). Like Impressionist paintings, the assemblage of brushwork, and absence of firm articulation is meant to inspire the viewer to not only take in a scene, but examine how the painted scene has come together (Kirschke, as cited in Clark, 2012). Both Literary and Visual Impressionism seek to disrupt our prescribed sensory relationships with objects and subjects (i.e. the signifier and the signified). Objects and subjects become unfixed, having no clear colour (or language) (Joyce, 2014). Words and paint are not just used to describe and articulate the real, but to engage the heart with distinct aesthetics (Joyce, 2014). The language of Impressionism includes “fugitive imaginings of the mind, [and] its shifting colours” and rejects determinism (Joyce, 2014, p. 795). Therefore, Literary Impressionism opens the supposed and assumed to new interpretation and meaning. In this way, both Literary and Visual Impressionism select and rearrange elements and language to direct a different effect and to arouse the audience to make new connections to a “new [and] deeper reality” (Kostkowska, 2011, p. 80). As such, the new reading of form is “not passive . . . but an active agent that induces a vivid imaginative and emotional reaction” (Kostkowska, 2011, p. 80). Given that individuals are “the socio-politically inscribed body as a central site of meaning making” (Spry, 2001, p. 170), we see this dialogic way of feeling, knowing and understanding as deeply affective and embodied.

By drawing on these ideas of memory work and Impressionism, we have created an intellectual fusion, entitled *impressionistic memory work*. We advocate the use of *impressionistic memory work* to blur the normative rules and assumptions around dominant actors, stories, memories and who is allowed to tell them. The composure work (Dawson, 1994) conducted on memory here is intentionally messy and iteratively challenged. Also, it continues to live in the mind’s eye vs on the page or canvas. In our approach, we advocate for the importance of repositioning the narrative focus from the margins to the centre. We propose that this additional layering of an Impressionist reading of taken-for-granted memory work has the potential to illuminate, or bring to the fore, alternative realities which have the potential to de-centre the masculine in favour of the feminine. For instance, Virginia Woolf, a Literary Impressionist who sought to find a new aesthetic order (historical pattern) through her writing, fostered a *new way of seeing* which disrupted our notions of the past (Humm, 2003). We believe that a *new reading* of histories (i.e. family stories) has the potential to do the same (Blair, 2010).

We propose that these taken-for-granted family stories need not necessarily change, need not be re-written, but re-interrogated, re-framed, re-read and re-heard to invite new interpretation. As such, we encourage the reader to resist the temptation to require a new version, a new crystallisation of a story narrated from a different perspective. Further, the writing differently and change potential of our method lies in the “undoing” rather than simply in the offering of one alternative, as this approach aims to disrupt the normative expectations of fixed outputs by focussing on the process. This is the somewhat uncomfortable yet potentially generative space of undoing knowledge and praxis. This is a critical re-reading, not just a critical re-writing. Impressionist artists were able to go back to their subject multiple times, changing the light, the colours, the focus and so on. Due to the constraints of an academic article, this multiplicity is afforded to us through an openness of the methodological process and journey to multiplicity, rather than in the provision of multiple versions of our narratives. We are also reticent to define the potentiality of multiple re-readings in a deterministic fashion. Our conceptualizing of *impressionistic memory work* as a more inclusive method of learning and knowing together is strongly rooted in unlearning, undoing, and unknowing. As suggested by one of our reviewers, it is about “troubling” dominant roles, narratives and ways of knowing for the researcher and the researched, rather than re-assigning those roles. We pose that the socio-political potential and the interdependency of understanding, feeling and existence between the researcher, the

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researched and the stories told, makes it essential for scholars to value modes of knowing and organizing that embrace difference, disruption, feminist dialogue and collectivity.

### **Doing impressionistic memory work: our dialogic approach**

Storytelling is dialogic whereby the storyteller and the audience have active roles. Similarly, we as authors adopted a dialogic approach to sharing and understanding two family history stories and then understanding them anew. To interpret anew, we must contest the *a priori* interpretation of the memory and seek deeper insight, and see histories as unfinished projects, renegotiated, interrogated and challenged. The past must first be understood as unknowable to render it intelligible anew (Kant, 1911). Rejection, ruptures and new acceptances, are common feature of Impressionism and it is this interplay of rejection and acceptance that can result in profound realizations, thus challenging our perceptual limitations and foster new knowledge creation (Clark, 2012). As such, while the traditional plot is not necessarily denied, new details and new compositions are offered that embrace uncertainty and dialogue, moving away from the authoritative realism to embrace difference.

In the writing of this paper, we evoke alternative understandings of (un)knowing and organising knowledge. This is here illustrated by “troubling” the taken-for-granted family stories of the first author, by examining her family stories anew. As feminists, we engaged in this process of “undoing” in a dialogical and relational manner, focusing on the unveiling of power structures, hierarchies of meanings, positionality and sensorial sensemaking. In the field of management and organization studies, a similar dialogic approach to personal histories has been used in memory work (Mandalaki and Daou, 2021); the sharing of autoethnographic memories (Boncori and Smith, 2019) and dialogic writing in conversation with the literature and participants (Helin, 2019). This feminist approach also highlights the socio-political potential of this type of research in connecting the individual to the plural. We considered all actors, plots, the silenced, and the socio-cultural background, and we challenged our own and each other’s interpretations.

The original narratives used in this article were (re)told by the first author’s parents in a manner that they had themselves received before, and through their own lens. As such, the *researched* play a crucial role in the making of knowledge, and in the further troubling of it with the *researcher*. Here the stories are employed as an illustration of family histories which have been constructed and passed on from generation to generation. The first author is inextricably linked to these stories, as the events recalled are part of who she is and part of her own story. As such, her memory of those stories, and the actors within them, is also intertwined with her present; indeed, borrowing from Johansson and Jones (2020, p. 132), here “we write of and for a place where we no longer live, but which part of us will always inhabit and be inhabited by. Beyond geographical parameters, this place is deeply embedded in us and resides in the past”. These stories (re) told across generations, and as narrated by her parents, have focused on the male grandparent figure. However, we suggest that when these are read and spoken through *impressionistic memory work*, women appear to have pivotal roles both in the story and in the family, enriching the existing narrative. Further, moving beyond the people/character in the story, feminine aspects of the stories that spotlight embodied and affective memory are also afforded more visibility.

In order to revisit two family histories, we first put the stories in writing. We are sensitive towards and aware of the ethical issues stressed by Ellis (2007) with regards to writing about intimate others. The stories told here are included with permission to do so, and pseudonyms have been used throughout. After drafting these stories, the factual details were checked with the first author’s parents, whilst still living (together with another elderly sibling). They separately reviewed and corrected some of the information provided through the initial draft



and added some detail about their own recollection of these experiences, and their lives during that time (1943–44). This effort of fact-checking in and of itself is interesting and involved the family members bringing their own values, positionality and subjectivity to the exercise. The written accounts were shared with the second author. In so doing, the accounts were taken as the a-priori accounts.

The second author then offered her reading on the stories, highlighting who she thought were the main characters, the secondary ones and the ones whose role had been neglected; these were compared with the first author's interpretation, and the shared family discourse. In these stories, gender dynamics were significantly present. Male figures in the stories had been centred, but their very survival had been made possible by the bravery of women (both family members and strangers). The socio-cultural matrix sustaining the (re)telling of family histories, and especially those centred around war narratives and heroism, has relegated women to the role of support actors. The first author then went back to her relatives to probe further reflection on both the role of women and the feminine aspects previously considered superfluous. In some cases, that knowledge related to the othered, together with the embodied and affective details, had been neglected for so long, that nobody could fill the gaps.

We then dialogically analysed the main plot and considered how this could have been reimagined from the perspective of secondary and marginalised characters. Central to our new reading, was our feminist lens with ontological and epistemological implications. Again, we did not attempt to rewrite the stories – which would offer yet another crystallised positioning and normative view. Rather, we embraced the impressionistic approach and the affective and sensory contours of the stories, thus highlighting the feminine without limiting its presence to the characters and their roles (protagonists and supporting actors). This also required us to reject the linearity of the plot, whilst embracing plurality, openness to polyphony, possible gaps in the sense-making and knowledge production and the richness of detail brought in and out of focus.

Below, we present two family stories. We will return to our insights further on in the paper. The starting context of these stories is Italy (Rome, and a village in Tuscany) during Second World War.

### **Blue eyes and overalls**

*Mario was born in 1908 in a working-class family, raised in a small town in a central region of Italy. He had an instinct for beauty, which he embodied through his talent for molding iron into shapes of lightness and delight. He moved to Rome as a young boy to learn the trade in an officina, and there he became an expert. A testament of his talent is an iron gate adorned with roses draped over white stones in Rome, Via XX Settembre. He defiantly married a girl from the North, nonna Luisa, ever so 'modern' compared to the local women, never as modest. His trade and talent made him an unwilling yet ideal recruit for the fascist artillery division during the second world war. He wanted to make iron roses, not weapons; and he had proud certificates of merit for 'ornamental design' to prove it.*

*It's late Summer of 1943, Italy and Germany are still Allies, and Mario is sent 1360 km from home to the city of Halle, to attend a specialization course on cannons at a German military base. Lost between the propaganda-led newspapers and the scant circulation of news on the radio, he doesn't quite understand the intricacies of world politics. He is a family man and just wants to get this done quickly so he can go home to his wife and children – a shy six-year-old girl with hypnotizing green eyes, and his 3 year old son.*

*On 8th September 1943, Marshal Pietro Badoglio, Italian head of government, makes an announcement to confirm that the armistice between Italy and the Allies signed on 3 September has come into force. Mario is in Germany, and overnight he becomes a prisoner of war, alongside his Italian colleagues. They heard rumors of prison camps, and although they cannot be sure of*

what happens there, they know it's something to avoid at all costs. So, he gets together with some Italian friends, although others decide to stay, and they plan to escape from the base. One fortuitous advantage they have is that, due to the nature of their work, they are not wearing Italian military uniforms but overalls that look the same as those worn by the Germans on the base. They leave the following morning unnoticed, by timely exiting the base alongside some other German workers. Mario makes it to the Halle train station, surrounded by a language he doesn't understand, longing to re-join his little family and the warmer embrace of his hometown. He identifies the first train headed south and threads a path through the crowd, trying to reach his platform, trying to leave behind an impending nightmare. While waiting to get on the train, Mario realizes with dread that SS military squads are canvassing the platforms and asking suspiciously Mediterranean looking people to show their documents to prove their German origins. He also realized that he is facing a military checkpoint in order to get to his train. He witnesses one of his mates getting arrested at the other end of the platform, and two other friends of his slowly turning and walking away to avoid getting apprehended. He doesn't speak German, he doesn't have the right documents, and there is nowhere to escape anymore as SS military boots are making their way towards him. He turns to the side and sees a German woman, dressed in brown with a pretty hat on her head and a little blond girl holding on to her skirt. He feels lost, his heart is pounding. He looks around, trying not to stand out, desperately in search of an answer. And with the genius that strikes in moments of terror, he looks at her, imploring humanity, asking for help. She nods ever so slightly as he picks up the child, pretending they are a family. She locks her arm around his, greets the German soldiers; he mocks a smile. The girl holds on to him without crying, without saying a word. They are through the checkpoint, and Mario can breathe again. The officers on the platform walk on by this seemingly local blue-eyed family without even bothering to ask for documents. He helps the lady and her child onto the train and thanks her with a heavy smile and tears in his eyes. This woman, a stranger, and her child, saved his life. His blue eyes and overalls let him hide against the local backdrop of humanity on the packed train.

My father remembers that during a warm Roman afternoon, when he was playing in the street outside of his house under the palm tree with his little friends, his mother came out of the house. Precious vegetables were scooped up and wrapped at the bottom her apron, as she was telling him to go back inside, 'it's almost time to start setting the table for supper'. He then saw her turn her head and gaze towards the end of the street, which rose gently in the distance, and stare for a few seconds at the tiny shadow of a man – a frown forming on her tired forehead. She let go of the apron, all the vegetables now rolling away on the pavement. Luisa, breath caught in the hands clasped over her mouth, called Mario's name over and over again, as she started running towards her husband who had finally made his way back home.

### Would you like some candy?

Silvano was a complex man, hardened by work in the fields under the hot Tuscany sun – impervious, generous with friends and guests, hard on his children, unable to show affection. Born in 1887, he was a traditional man of his century. Feared by his seven children, who were required to address him as 'Sir' and never even dared to call him 'daddy', he was the head of one of the families in a small Etruscan village. He had worked hard to set up his businesses – the grocery shop, the Trattoria restaurant, the bar and the magazzino with the only telephone in the village. He had fought two wars, from which he had returned with a medical discharge, and for which he had been awarded knighthood of the Republic. He was callous and stubborn, a troublemaker in his resistance towards fascist norms, in his fathering partigiani rebel boys, and in befriending Jews. His refusal to comply with the fascist system and its ideology made him an easy target of raids by the Repubblicani, the ruthless policing arm of fascism.

It's 1944, suddenly Silvano hears panicky banging of fists on the trattoria entrance door. He runs quickly down the stairs, from the family quarters, pulling up his braces. His Jewish friend is

outside on the doorstep looking over their shoulder, staring at him with scared pleading eyes. The fascists are coming for another raid to capture Jewish people. Nobody else in the village wants to host the Jew, and Silvano's loft is already occupied by three Jewish men in hiding, fed through a secret space in the ceiling. They rush outside, the house door is urgently bolted behind them and locked with a big handmade iron key. This house was thoroughly searched many times before; Silvano knows that some people in the village are jealous of his wealth and despise him for his stubborn refusal to become a member of the Fascist party, for his solidarity with the Jews, and are spying on him. There is commotion coming from the cobblestones down the main street, the soldiers in black shirts will soon get here. The two friends run along the short road in search for a fast solution. Silvano opens the door to the bakery, which has the only oven in the village, where families take turn to make bread once a week. It's lunch time, but the oven is still hot from the morning baking, and the poor man will not be able to hide in there for long. There is no time, better asphyxiated than in fascist hands, proclaims his friend. Silvano lets him in before shutting the oven closed, with only a fissure left open to let oxygen in, and runs back to his family.

The fascist squad comes in, looking suspiciously all over the house. Where are the Jews, we are sure they are here, that's what the spy told us – and he has always been reliable before. This stupid man is defiant, doesn't respect authority. They drag nonna ELisa off her bed, leaving the paralyzed woman in pain on the stone floor, reassuring themselves that nobody is hiding in or under the disabled bedsheets. Silvano and the children are forced outside of the house, two men snatch his arms open and hold him firmly in position while another soldier hits him in the stomach. They make the little girls look, under threat of rifles, as the soldiers break Silvano's teeth with the back of the rifle, blood pouring out, children's tears streaming down. The black shirts eventually leave, and Silvano runs to find his friend, barely alive and forever grateful.

They continue to come back, like vultures, hovering around in search of near death. They go to the house, they invade their business space, their private rooms. Throughout the commotion, a little three-year-old girl stands in a corner by the large wooden table with a dress handmade by her eldest sister and a comforting thumb in her mouth, looking around the room while sensing the tension in her family's voices. She is the youngest of Silvano's daughters, my mother. The fascist lieutenant beckons her towards him and makes her stand by his knees; she doesn't like it. She is confused and doesn't understand what is happening. He asks one of his men to take out a large bag of candy – does she like candy? Where are the Jews? Where are her partisan brothers hiding? Her older sisters gasp, she is only a little girl, she loves candy and that's not easy to come by during war times, even when your family owns a food shop. She has heard the stories at least a million times – her older brothers are hiding in the ruins sheltered by the woodland up on the mountains near Capalbio, her auntie and other villagers are feeding them in secret. Nobody told her to keep that a secret, but she can sense a shift in the room atmosphere, anxiety in her sisters' eyes. She nods – she likes candy. She is scared, embarrassed to be spoken to by a strange man. There is something about him that she doesn't like, a strange bitter feeling that cannot be masked by the sweetness of the promised candy. The skin on her arms feels very sensitive. He reassures her that he is a friend of her brothers', he wants to know where they are so he can give them candy too, and let them come back home. She can have that big sack full of candy all to herself if she tells him where they are hiding. She desperately wants the candy, but, somehow, she knows that she must stay quiet. She can feel everybody's eyes on her, the tension mounting, but she doesn't say anything. They eventually let her go. My mother was only a little girl, my daughter's age now that I think of it, but she says she still remembers that day very clearly after over 80 years.

## Discussion

### *Troubling histories*

The two family histories are seen as critical moments in the family's history where the survival itself of members of the family was at risk. This historic perspective is meshed with

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moral, ethical and political factors embraced by the group (family) that contributed to the rendering of the grandfather figures in strokes of bravery. There is little critical reflection which might embrace the feminine nuances. Instead, the emphasis is placed on linearity and masculinity. For example, the *nazi* and the *fasci* are clearly portrayed as the “villain”, threatening the very survival of the family (and others); men, women and children going against those ideologies are considered righteous, and brave when openly challenging the political status quo. Negotiations and grey areas of cooperation with these groups are left silent. Also, the stories are told against the socio-cultural backdrop of Italy, a patriarchal society, after Second World War, which may have contributed to the focus on men as protagonists and women as supporting figures. We can recognize their gendered treatment as an example of past (and on-going) socio-political dynamics in a specific cultural locus, as well as the politics of the retelling of the stories which in turn would and continued to be subject to gendered practice, and the unquestioning of the past as “the truth”. Though they clearly play an instrumental role in the narrative, the women in these stories are carefully contained so that they do not usurp the male, leading protagonists. However, there is little exploration beyond this macro level of assumed hierarchies and moral justifications, as other power relations that may be problematic or undermining the heroisms of the (male) protagonist are not surfaced.

A masculine approach to storytelling normalizes the patriarchal construction of the family’s histories. This reflects the pressure to resist the messiness of storytelling (Höpfl, 2000) to strive for linear, masculine, disembodied processes of knowing and being, which result in the “tidying up” of our stories. Instead, here we offer a different approach to organizing and “composure” in stories – this term can refer both to the composition of the narrative, and to the personal composure conducted by the individual through the narrative (Dawson, 1994; Summerfield, 2004). Of course, composition is key in arts-based methods – both visual and narrative ones. *Impressionistic memory work* aims to dismantle myopic compositions, neat boundaries, their hierarchies and streamlined threads within narratives.

In our dialogic exercise as authors, we revisited these stories focusing on a particular scene in which the female actors were present (the German women, and the little girl). We reimagined the scenes with them in the foreground and central to the narrative. For a moment, we pushed the central grandfather character to the side, or even to the background. We imagined the scene blurring as though the images which at first were clear became fuzzy, to then regain focus under a new perspective. The new image was of the same scene, but as though taken from a different point of view. Coming into view, the woman and the girl were in the foreground, named, given agency and voice. They became centrally important. We imagined our own hand as laying new brushstrokes of meaning, narrating the new scene or creatively drafting new lines of text. In this process, affective and sensorial aspects of the stories that had been relegated to being out of focus in the mainstream masculine re-telling of the stories, were weaved back into the narratives (i.e. the color of clothing, the smell in the air). This also interacted with the authors’ own identities as women, daughters from a certain generation, mothers and critical scholars.

Since the original story is a durable representation of the past, we had to take for granted that the events unfolded as told, but we felt there was room for more insights. For example, imaging the original story as a series of photographs, *impressionist memory work* allowed us to imagine what an alternative photo or set of photos might look like, with alterity in the foreground. We further imagined the blurring of boundaries and detail through subtle shifts in lighting and focus. This dialogic imagining, imbued with listening and feeling, was a powerful feminist exercise in reframing narratives and reclaiming otherness out of the margins by bringing it into the fore. It also left us questioning what had been left outside of the frame altogether that we could no longer consider or access. It did not erase that which was taken for granted – the new framing and perspective simply enhanced the richness of the

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story by adding more depth and detail. We gained more appreciation for the myriad of actors, details and perspectives involved and felt that this richness could be retained through family histories. Indeed, the exercise might have run the risk of making the story messier, like that of an impressionistic painting, but it also gave us the opportunity to decenter and problematize the main foci. We could then take in the story as more complex, more dynamic and indeed, more interesting. If read (or re-read) using *impressionistic memory work*, the masculine foci can be “troubled”. Other aspects emerge and become problematized to enrich individual and collective histories in terms of dominant roles, socio-political tensions and knowledge production. In its “undoing”, Impressionism reminds us of the opportunity to change our perspective, to dismantle historical privilege and articulate new “corporeal and non-discursive experiences” (Kyne, 2020, p. 212) and question the reliability of the former *impressions* (Saunders, 2018).

*Impressionist memory work as (un)doing and (un)knowing differently*

Memory work can be a powerful way to understand gendered, social, cultural biases (Jansson *et al.*, 2008). In the context of researching and writing differently in organization studies, feminist methods premised on inclusion and polyphony constitute a way of challenging normative masculine norms of what counts, and whose voices should be acknowledged (Boncori, 2022; Johansson and Jones, 2020). As such, we contribute to this strand of the literature, but also to sociological perspectives on memory work in this field that are not only related to the everyday life of business organisations, but also to critical perspectives on processes of organising and knowledge creation (Coraiola and Derry, 2020; Coraiola *et al.*, 2023; Foroughi, 2020). Echoing Savigny (2017), we believe that the way we construct and create our texts, and the knowledge we draw from it to inform our writing, are political choices and acts. This is also the case in our understanding of *impressionistic memory work* as applied to the intersecting dynamics of informal collective negotiations between memory, identity and sensemaking. Through the problematizing of narratives and the theorizing around the told and untold experiences in stories, new understandings can emerge (Haug, 1987). These negotiations – the “work” aspect of memory – can be explored through a dialogic approach between the individual, the group (including family) and the socio-cultural, political or historical context these are situated in. This can bring about a tension between the lived experience and its articulations or interpretations, which fosters critical reflection (Widerberg, 1996).

We believe that *impressionistic memory work* contributes to the development of more inclusive approaches in research by “troubling” normative and masculine ways of knowing. The “undoing” of this approach is centered around the feminine and requires engaging with alternative perspective and positionalities. This approach is one that is open to multiplicity, shifts of focus, messiness, and diversity (Johansson and Jones, 2020). Our approach promotes non-dominant narratives, experiences and knowledge to escape from the confines of the margins. As we reflected on our approach and the theoretical and methodological implications, we noted the power of our own ability to re-envision a story as feminist storytellers. We saw ourselves as engaged in our own history-making with a critical appreciation for both the taken-for-granted facts as well as the promise of bringing something new to the fore. We also noted the potential of these opportunities despite the durability of a well-worn story. For instance, could we describe the woman or the little girl in greater detail? Could we name them and hear their voices? How would this make us feel as women hearing and sharing their story? We saw that the family story tellers enjoy a similar powerful role, and we wondered if such “revisions” would be accepted into the family, and across different generations, or if this would upset the existing social ordering. We imagined that the first author of this paper might be able to offer these new insights when it became her turn to tell

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the stories to her children. This led to wondering about the many ways previous authors had brought their own subjectivities to the stories, inscribing themselves into the narratives, turning embellishments into facts.

The space we created through this intentional dialogue, and our reflections about the meaning of these stories, the details lost or included, disrupted the usual family dynamic that would seldom question the veracity of its history or its foci. Though our result was indeed still honouring the story, the actors and the family, we understand that the implications of these negotiations and feminist memory work might not be so easily embraced. However, we appreciate that the potential in our process of remembering “culturally re-works the past in the moving target of the present” (Watson, 2002, p. 409). We have consciously avoided the re-writing of the family histories herein shared through the lens of the women therein. We do not wish to crystallize a set specific narrative, but rather, in keeping with our ethos of *impressionistic memory work*, instead to open a kaleidoscope of interpretations and perspectives within these stories.

Though there are many feminist approaches that might have yielded new insights of otherness in these family stories, we were inspired by the idea of extending existing notions of memory work through the potential of Impressionism. Impressionist artists and writers have long explored sharing stories, knowledge and facts from different points of view; some media and methods make this exercise an explicit part of the viewer’s or reader’s experience. For example, Claude Monet often painted the same scene during different seasons or at different points of the day (with different light) to see it anew. As such, our adoption of an *impressionistic memory work* was not meant to dilute or delete the story, but to be generative in its unsettling nature. It is an invitation to discover possibilities, to revisit a story and add more to the scene, to concentrate on different aspects merely hinted at in the a-priori versions. Marginalized others and feminine traits may be present in mainstream storytelling, but representations of the past in organization studies often present them in a fragmented or diluted way (if at all), and it is therefore important to enunciate the feminine in various arenas with focus and emphasis (Giles, 2003). And whilst memory is performed in the present (through telling and re-telling) it often looks to the future, while resonating with history (Hirsch and Smith, 2002). Therefore, *impressionistic memory work* can be a way to explore the potential of future selves, while still seeing us as connected to a real time, with roots in a familiar space.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have extended memory work as a feminist approach to historiography to include aspects of Impressionism, to re-read family histories anew. We highlight the potential of *impressionistic memory work* for organisation studies both as a feminist approach and as a way of researching and writing differently premised on inclusion. We further highlight its potential in relation to the doing and undoing informal stories, such as family histories, that are collectively scripted, (re)produced and interpreted. These narratives are fundamental artefacts in establishing both individual and collective knowledge. Our argument has two implications: 1) we need to embrace memory work as a feminist method to challenge the silencing of those marginalized and their experiences in co-constructed and co-interpreted narratives (both formal and informal ones); and 2) engagement with *impressionistic memory work* can further spotlight the feminine, ambiguity, vagueness and the marginalised aspects of memory work – both individually and collectively – to challenge normative sensemaking, and the way we think of and include others.

We have posed that family histories are spaces where marginalized feminine experience can be examined using *impressionistic memory work*. Further, we have offered some contemplation of an intellectual bridge between memory work and Impressionism with theoretical implications. *Impressionistic memory work* can intrude and (re)generate without necessarily taking anything away. While a new messiness or fussiness may emerge, it is no less bold in conception. Family histories are powerful narratives, often fiercely protected by

those who (re)tell them from positions of authority or power and leaving a lasting impression. We seldom feel we have the option of challenging these narratives. As a site of feminist inquiry, we believe they can remain powerful, while being revisited with new aesthetic configurations and feminine approaches.

One of our reviewers found themselves drawn to the figure of Luisa from our first story – wondering about her role, having to survive and keep her children alive during the war’s difficult times on the Homefront with her husband gone. We know she is “modern” and “not modest”, but nothing more. She is a neglected part of the same family story. Luisa made it possible for “blue eyes” to come back home to something. Similarly, the German woman makes it possible for the Mario to leave Germany and get home to Luisa. The little girls – both the one in Germany at the train station, and the one being tempted by candy in her home – keep a life-saving secret, against all odds, thus preserving their family and many others. These feminine figures are presented as supporting figures, though clearly their roles are larger and can be imagined differently through *impressionistic memory work*. We find it hard to press these figures back into the margins once we have contemplated them with renewed focus. Imagine a story told from the vantage point of the little girl, or the German woman, or even, Luisa. Can you see these different people as full figures with agency and voice? What contours of the story emerge if we shift focus and perspective? What aspects become blurred and contested, and which political dynamics are illuminated or silenced? Certainly, something no less significant or referential emerges; simply a story more complex, textured, nuanced and symbolic.

#### Note

1. It is important to note that we adopt the feminist understanding of the terms “masculine/feminine” to denote a set of characteristics, behaviours and approaches to normative knowing, rather than as a mere reference to men and women (Boncori, 2022). As such, the relationship of emotions, behaviours and practices with the feminine does not imply a binary man-woman affiliation. Further, here we use the term “women” in an inclusive manner rather than as an essentialist and exclusionary way of defining genders assigned at birth, and sex. We note that people inhabit intersectional identities, different nodes of privilege, and discrimination; as such, even when included in one category (e.g. “women”) they have different experiences of in/exclusion.

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