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Messing with memories: Feminist poststructuralism and memory work.

Susanne Gannon

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Chapter 3

Messing with Memories: Feminist Poststructuralism and Memory-work

Susanne Gannon

Once we start talking
Stories spill out
Lap over each other
Wash us into other stories
We give our gifts,
memories,
to each other¹

Memory-work, as I have taken it up, attends to unravelling the ways in which discourses have become sedimented and inscribed into our bodies and everyday practices. In my research into women's subjectivities and lived experience, I have worked with a feminist poststructural paradigm that disrupts the subjects, memories, truths and texts produced in and through memory-work (Davies & Gannon, 2004; 2006). My interest in textual aesthetics and ethics has led me to produce "transgressive" texts by messing with memories to produce new texts (Gannon, 2001; 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2006a). The forms of data representation that I have adopted for some of my memory-work – poetry and theatre - are not conventionally valued in social science research, though it may be argued that they are more accessible to audiences beyond the academy.

Background and context

As a member first of the Magnetic Island collective (Davies & Gannon, 2006) and now of the Narrative, Discourse and Pedagogy group (Linnell et al, forthcoming), I have worked with Bronwyn Davies and others in a mode we prefer to call “collective biography.” Our topics have included gendered subjectification at school and at work, power/knowledge, embodiment, reflexivity, fiction and femininity (Davies & Gannon, 2006), and speaking and listening (Linnell et al, forthcoming) and we have generally later published co-authored scholarly texts based on our work together. In these workshops, undertaken within established research groups with academic peers and colleagues, we have investigated theoretical concepts through the lens of everyday life, in order to enrich our understandings of both. I have also convened collective memory groups in other locations and on other topics with other sorts of groups. Our topics have foregrounded women’s bodies, in particular in a series of workshops on “breasts” held in Germany (Gannon & Müller-Rockstroh, 2004a, 2004b; 2005). Another series of workshops explored collectively generated provocations such as “isolation” (Gannon, 2001), “boundaries” (Gannon, 2004a), the “views of others,” and “mistakes,” which is the subject of the latter part of this paper. Some of these memories have been used more or less conventionally as data texts in diverse disciplinary locations – in the guise of philosophy (Gannon & Müller-Rockstroh, 2004a), sociology (Gannon & Müller-Rockstroh, 2004b; 2005), and pedagogy (Gannon, 2004a) – but I have also taken the texts further in my work on transgressive writing practices by using them as raw data and shaping them into other texts for other purposes, locations and audiences. This transgressive text work, particularly that of rewriting memories as poetry, is the subject of this chapter.

In taking up collective memory-work within a feminist poststructuralist framework, my gaze shifts from “truth” towards the effects of discursive regimes that constitute the subjectivities that we take to represent our particular individual “selves” at particular points in time and place. The focus thus shifts away from the individual and her memories, and away from the group’s collective set of memories, to the discourses which make the events in those memories possible and the rationalities that make them reason-able and imagine-able. In working further with these memory texts - in “messing” with them to produce new texts in different forms - I have continued this discursive interrogation.

In the collective memory-workshops that I have convened, groups of women have generated sets of memories around selected topics and begun together, in the embodied space of the workshops, to collectively disentangle the discourses circulating within the texts we have produced. This deconstructive work enabled us to begin to recognize our collusion in the circulation of hegemonic values, norms and desires as we (have) take(n) them up in our own bodies, psyches and ways of being in the world. Yet the “collusion” we identified was not conscious, nor as individualistic or pathological as psychological frames for understanding social behavior might suggest. In taking up memory-work as our method, we have foregrounded the social rather than the psychological and place the body at the center of deconstruction. Thus we recognize that (our) bodies are connected to other bodies: they exist and acquire meaning in social spaces. The poetic texts shaped from the memories in these workshops emphasize the sociality of

subjectivity. The responses and behaviors of the girls we recalled were shaped by the others we love and live with, and were limited by the discursive possibilities that structured those relationships in those times and places. Our opportunities to resist, or to behave otherwise, were constrained by what we experienced individually as a lack of agency. In a feminist poststructural framework, we understand that possibilities for agency do not arise as we step outside of discourse, for we are always already discursively inscribed (Gannon & Davies, 2006). Rather, agency – necessarily tentative, fleeting, contingent – is glimpsed as we shift and multiply the discursive frames through which we understand the memories. Agency arrives in transitory moments that we might figure as “mo(ve)ments” and within which we might take up new possibilities for understanding, and acting, otherwise (Davies & Gannon, 2006, p. 7). In the collective context we aim to trace the formation of our own subjectivities, so that we might see the movement, the flow, the working of “organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts, etc.” (Foucault, 1980, p. 97) on us and in us, and how they might be otherwise.

The further work I have done in shaping poetic texts from memories has kept them in play beyond the workshop, emphasising mo(ve)ments of intention, desire and agency inscribed in the girl subjects we remembered and which other women might recognize in their own embodied memories.

Messing with data texts is characteristic of the interpretive shift in social research of which Denzin (1997, 2003) and others have written. Social research has always assumed that “experience is the ‘great original,’” assuring readers “that there is both a ‘there’ and ‘beings’ who are there” (Britzman, 2000, p. 28). Yet collective memory-work problematizes the transparency of experience, and of research practices where subjects simply recount their experiences to researchers. In memory-work we do not go looking for any “sacred originary” but for traces and unreliable fragments as they are written in our bodies. Memory writing is not a veridical act that reproduces the original experience as it was lived but is necessarily always constituted from a particular time and place and discursive frame. The double spaces it utilizes – the memories of then and there, and the present of here and now and us together – create an intense awareness of the performativity of texts. Collective memory-work can be understood as a sort of “performance ethnography,” representing knowledge as “partial, plural, incomplete, and contingent” rather than valorising “analytical distance or detachment” (Denzin, 2003, p. 8). In such work the description of everyday life that characterizes ethnographic research is realized through a textual aesthetic that acknowledges that “a theory of the social is always a theory of writing” (Denzin, 1997, p. xii). The messed with texts that I have subsequently produced write further across the binaries of self/other and individual/ social, as they weave particular and separate stories into a single text. This work is influenced by Richardson’s rigorous crafting of poetic texts from interview transcripts in order to crystallize and heighten the discursive affects of her data (Richardson, 1997).

Feminist poststructuralist research disrupts “foundational ontologies, methodologies, and epistemologies” (St.Pierre & Pillow, 2000, p. 2). The intent of such research is to deconstruct dominant discourses through close work with data, and, in addition, to use data itself as a generative space for producing multiple readings that might subvert and fracture hegemonic discourses so that,

in these fissures, we might catch sight of possibilities for agency. Disrespectful ways of working with data become possible. In contrast to positivist epistemologies, in poststructuralism “language as it is presented in texts produced as data is not respected as if it did reveal ‘the real’ but may be deconstructed and broken open to show *the ways in which the real is constructed*” (Davies & Gannon, 2004, p. 319).

Deconstructive work begins inside the workshop space, as participants collectively work their way in to the memory texts that are generated. The texts, the written memories, become data fragments for discursive analysis, separated from the individual producers who at one time lived those events. Haug’s recommendation (1987) that memory-workers take up third person grammatical voice is one strategy for dislocating memory stories from the individual producers into a collective story space; another is that memories should aim to recall particular moments in vivid sensual detail, rather than to produce narratives underpinned by psychological explanations that stress causality and linearity. These strategies can also help to dislocate the memories from the individual and any residual investment in the particular self that she is accustomed to producing.

In an additional turn, the memory stories generated in a workshop might be understood as discursive fragments, or data, that contribute to a collective pool – a “sea of stories” (Rushdie, 1991). In that sense, the collection of data around a topic might go on over a longer period and might include different participants. For example, the three workshops on “breasts” convened by myself and Babette Müller-Rockstroh in Germany had participants who came to all three workshops and others who came to only one. Different workshops focused on “getting breasts,” “nurturing breasts” and “dangerous breasts,” but our collective knowledge of the complexity of discourses around breasts was extended and enriched across the three workshops. In another series of workshops within which the topic of “mistakes” arose, participants remained the same across six weeks of workshops while our collective understandings about the discourses of gender in our lives and their constitutive force (Butler, 1990) continued to build as the sea of stories around diverse but interrelated topics became deeper and wider.

After the workshops, which are often experienced as powerful and transformative spaces have finished, participants tend to disperse and often any further work with those texts is left to one or two participants, positioned as the researcher(s). Although I have participated in groups who continued to work collectively with the texts (Davies & Gannon, 2006; Linell, Bansel, Ellwood & Gannon, forthcoming), more often than not, as noted in the introduction to this volume, the collective work ceases at this point. This was the case with the workshops I discuss in the final section of this chapter. My broader interests in experimental writing practices in social science has led me to work with other methodologies including autoethnography (Gannon, 2006b), poetry (Gannon, 2001, 2004a, 2004c), multiple narratives (Gannon, 2002) and theatre (Gannon, 2004b, 2004d, 2006a). The further text work that I have done with collective memory texts, after the workshops have been finished, has in a sense been part of this broader project. It has also been deeply informed by the notion of collective knowledge.

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In terms of the politics of collective memory-work, it has come to be insufficient for me that the work be contained within academic spaces, and that the individual stories stand alone in the texts of this work. Pushing the work into broader contexts, outside journals and theses and conferences, into the wider world, is also compatible with feminist perspectives on non-hierarchical knowledge production, as well as broader issues of access and equity. The analytical and imaginative work done in memory-workshops can migrate and mutate into other texts for other audiences, thus adding to the pool of discourses in circulation amongst women in social spaces outside the original group. Multiple passes may be made through the data for different audiences and different purposes.

Messing with memory texts

The work completed in Germany on breasts as sites of inscription led me to write a play called “The Breast Project” that had a season with a professional theatre company in Australia (Gannon, 2006a). My sisters, my mother, my friends, as well as many women who are strangers to me, and some who had contributed memories, were able to see the text unfold embodied before them – as both a distillation and an expansion of the original memory-work (Gannon, 2004b). The storyline of women from different parts of the world telling “breast stories” was one thread in the complex weave of the final text but the subtext of the play and the three characters I invented for the core narrative of the play were informed by the original memory workshops and by the subsequent analytical writing that Babette Müller-Rockstroh and I did around those memories. During the development of the play, other women as actors and dramaturges enriched the text with their own embodied knowledge, and the conversation about breasts continued into the theatre. The collectively generated stories that began within the space of the memory workshops thus became texts “that get away, that escape... (t)hat can’t be closed, that leave us behind, that can’t be finished” (Cixoux, 1998, p. 44). In response to the invitation that closes the opening chapter of this book, this textwork might be considered an appropriation or subversion of memory-work methodology, yet I have taken it up – with the permission of the women who participated - as a further opportunity to make the research matter, to send it into new collective spaces and to make it work harder in the world.

In messing with the memory texts as I have in the playscript and other transgressive textwork, I have abandoned the quest for any sort of recognisable social scientific validity; rather I seek in these texts a sort of voluptuous validity, where a female imaginary might create a “disruptive excess” (Lather, 1994, p. 46). In the poetry I have constructed from memory-work projects, I have “crystallized” (Richardson, 1997) multiple memories into a single text and collapsed the separate speaking/ writing subjects of these texts into a single collective subject who speaks as “she” (Gannon, 2001, 2004a). In so doing I have abandoned any lingering fascination with the “authenticity of voice” and the “romance of the speaking subject” (Lather, 2001, p. 483). Poststructuralist approaches problematize both the author and memory as a source of truth (Barthes, 1977; 1989), and writing as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1997). Indeed, poststructuralism’s legacy can be seen as the “evacuation of any ground upon which one could speak the self” (Probyn, 1993, p. 14). In most memory-

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work texts, the stories are presented as intact and inviolable – each person’s memory is discrete and separated from the other memories – spaced and shaped so that they cannot be conflated. They are presented as (if) they tell separate and different stories of “selving,” though the analytical texts that wrap around them talk of collective experience. In my text work I leap across this tension and shape the data texts themselves into a single text that both writes and represents collectivity. These texts can then go into the world to do different sorts of analytical and emotional work. For example, one poem became data for a discussion, in the journal *Sex education*, of the complex and ambivalent discursive positions available for adolescent girls as they cross the “boundaries” of childhood and adulthood through becoming sexual, and how these might impact on the effectiveness and the pedagogy of sex education programs in high schools (Gannon, 2004a). The paper provides no grand narratives and no replicable research moments but it does provide close and multiple readings of a complex context. It forms a textual intervention into a field where research tends to be framed by public health discourses, takes little account of girls as active subjects, and continues to be marked by what Fine calls “the missing discourse of desire” (1988).

The “Boundaries” poem and the one that follows on “Mistakes” were from the same series of workshops I convened as a writing workshop with women I had met in other writing workshops in our town. We were all passionate about writing, and understood the transformative possibilities of writing in (and of) our lives, but I was the only one of us who was interested in reframing writing within an academic context. We adopted collective memory-work methodology with guidance from Haug (1987) and Davies (1994) and generated topics from week to week collectively, picking up a thread that emerged from talking and writing each week to pursue in the following week. The poem below is crafted from the multiple texts we produced in one of those weeks, and examines – as many of our texts did – aspects of our collective experiences of growing up as girls into hegemonic heterosexuality. The topic – “she never makes the same mistake twice” – which was a line from one of our previous texts – provoked memories of passive, vulnerable girls and women. Although each memory was separately told and we attended systematically and initially to each story in turn as a separate text, we found strong resonances amongst our stories. It was the stories that resonated with all of us that work best as compelling and aesthetically convincing texts. In the work of Haug (1987) the participants wrote and rewrote their memories until they reflected the group analysis but in memory groups such as mine, convened in the first instance as a women’s writing group and made up of people keen to discuss the texts extensively but expecting to work on a new topic each week, rewriting was not feasible. In a sense, the rewriting practice that I adopted, beginning with the texts but informed by the tape recorded discussions of them, was a “messing” that equated with the rewriting phase of Haug’s process. Although Haug and her colleagues insisted on third person voice in their writing, the women in this group chose to write as each of them preferred, in whichever voice gave them best access to the sensory detail of the remembered experience. In messing with the texts after the workshop, I made the voice and tense consistent and organized them into chronological order by age. Thus the “messing” work, created a textual “collective girl” from our disparate but related experiences. Where the

collective girl who speaks as “I” in this poem does act, her actions are often directed at self harm and humiliation. These were the sorts of “mistakes” we thought to set behind us, the moments that we did not want to experience again but that we recognized in the irony of our topic. In the stories, and the further work we did with them in the workshop space, we recognized the moments where we acted despite our constraints, and despite our intentions. They documented movements that were dangerous as well as those that were ultimately redemptive, and are part of our present senses of our selves as strong and resilient women.

Mistakes

Late afternoon -
 a tin can, lid hanging open, out of reach in the sink;
 I stand/ wobbling on a chair dragged from the kitchen table;
 I know sharp/ hot/ spiky things are dangerous
 I pick it up -
 ragged edge, snags of metal bent up, jagged;
 look out the window to the yew tree
 (where the song-thrush has her nest
 I stole an egg from her
 and keep it on a bed of cotton wool in the cupboard)

I roll the ragged edge of the tin can lid,
 very gently,
 up and down the inner side of my arm.
 up and down,
 up and down,
 no pain;
 thin streams of blood,
 blood mixing with potato peelings
 my mother comes,
you silly billy,
 washing blood away, bandaging
 hugging

...

My mother is out
 with her new lover.
 I'm home alone;
 the house is dark spooky,
 full of bad memories.

I sit on the sofa thinking what if,
 what if a burglar broke in,
 what if I have to defend myself,
 what if I have to use this ordinary knife,
 this supper-eating knife,

as a weapon?
 How sharp is it?
 What pressure would it need?

I push the blade into my left thumb
 It doesn't break the skin
 I press the blade harder into flesh
 I know it will cut
 I can't stop
 I press harder
 keep pressing
 Skin splits
 hurts like hell
 Blood all over everywhere
 (if I bleed to death they'll all be sorry)

...

I love my mami
 but live with my grandparents
 want a white picket fence
 mother/ father/ sister/ dog all living together.
 a real family.
 I want to be a proper daughter
 I move in with mami for high school

first day
 red satin skirt, black six inch platforms
You look like a hooker
 I swish through in red satin
 I swish through to my room
 the stinging burn of the belt on my back
How dare you walk away when I'm talking to you! Condenada!
 I stay silent
 the belt on my flesh
 swish swish
 welts rising
 swish swish
 against my silence
 skin splitting
 swish swish
 eyes burning
 voice bursting
I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!

...

Be my summer girlfriend?
 My insides flip-flop

Palms sweat
 I stand in front of him in choir
 he plays with cascades of hair
 half touches
 accidental contact
 he rearranges a barrette
 undoes a braid
 tugs turn to tickles to body melting pulses

Long evening walks before his shift at the mill
 I hear the slow *kerplonk kerplonk* of the logs
 I sleep on the verandah.
kerplonk kerplonk
 I dream in his rhythm

The summer ends, he goes away
 He cries, his head cradled in my arms
 I am Cathy, he is Heathcliff
Wait for me, he says

Next summer, back at his summer job,
 he has other girlfriends
 but haunts every place I go
You're driving me crazy
 he shouts
 head tilted to the light
 eyes welling
I only want to take you to a dance
 Somewhere - amongst the kisses - I forget
 I am teaching him a lesson

Saturday, a party
 Another girl spread-eagled on top of him necking
 Sunday, a phone call
I have to explain
Come over and I'll explain

It means nothing, he says.
She just jumped on me. You know her. She's crazy.
 He cries
Don't do this to me,
Don't
 He blocks my passage
 grabs me by the throat
You can't walk out.
 He grips tight and tighter.
 I can't breathe
 He shakes me
 His hands so strong.

I know we're alone here.
 I look at his frantic frightened eyes
 painfully, slowly hiss the words past his strangling clamped fingers
Youu Geeeeet Youuuuuuur Hanndss offff Meeee.
 He releases his grip
I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry
 I move slowly, steadily, up the seven steps.
 Outside, breathe again.

...

Mid-year exams
 Saturday night home studying
 Politics, Biology, History

Sunday noon I ring my girlfriend, best friend, confidante
Did you go?
Did you see him?
Yes...He's here, she says, with me.
 Somersault gut
 But he's mine, I thought he was mine)
 Vision of him spread-eagled, half-wrapped, sun glowing on olive skin
 But you're my friend, I told you my secrets, you gave me advice...)

I speak to no-one, study
 Six months later
 I leave

...

He does not look at me
I'm sorry, he says
 he rubs the back of his neck
 Behind him a sign *Welcome home.*
 I stand, white and motionless wordless
 I do not say *But you said you loved me*
 I do not say *But I've waited for you for a year*
 I do not say *But our future stretches out in front of me in shining pictures*
of us together happy for ever and ever

I say nothing, turn, walk to the headland.
 The ocean inky dark below
 Waves crashing somewhere in the blackness
 No moon reflected on water,
 just darkness and the waves on the rocks.

I take a deep breath and jump
 free fall
 crunch
 land on one shoulder

bounce, somersault, bounce again
 rolling through scrappy grass and stones
 thump
 a rocky ledge
 slowly I move my arms and legs and sit up
 hold shoulder and knee
 rock with pain
 slowly push myself up and start to climb.
 scrambling
 crying and clutching my wounds
 to the top.
 Torn jeans and shirt
 blood seeping through

I sit looking out over the ocean
 down into the darkness
 nursing my leg and crying

After a while I don't cry anymore
 I stand up
 look up the hill,
 turn
 and start to walk again down the road

The composite collective girl is strongly embodied in the text – her skin bleeds, she bruises, her belly melts with desire. A collective story, particularly written in poetic form (Gannon, 2001), can have a greater sense of the “linkages” that Haug’s group sought to recover, the “feelings, attitudes towards other people and towards the world, which have some connection to the body” (1987, p. 76). In the poem, this girl tells her own story in the first person, and it is both detailed and visceral. As this composite collective girl grows up, she experiences self-hate and violence, abandonment, lust/love, and betrayal but she also displays her power. She is vulnerable and the terrain is dangerous but she finds opportunities for resistance, makes conscious decisions about self-preservation, develops and maintains her integrity. She puts the knife down. She shouts over the strap and through the fingers around her throat. And she leaves, she leaves, she leaves. This was a constant in our stories and in our workshops which brought six women from Canada, the USA, the UK and different parts of Australia together in a place that we had come to from our other places, and as selves we had constructed through all our diverse lived experiences (Gannon, 2000). This girl is destined to leave and she is destined to live. She walks independently down the road to adulthood, towards her future selves, scarred but strong. Together in one text, ordered chronologically, the stories are a distillation of the struggle for agency in the lives of girls growing up into heterosexuality. Separately, surrounded by analysis and interrupted by theory, they might not have this impact. Written in narrative prose, they might not have these effects. The lines of the poem are breath length, the memories are immediate, details evoke the senses – sound, sight, and the sensitivities of skin. The space around the text, the slower reading that poetry requires, may give a

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little more space for readers to recognize their own younger selves alongside this girl. The dialogue of memories might continue beyond the text, as it did in “The Breast Project” play, and reach those others who were not at our workshop but who have themselves made mistakes, like our own, and survived them as well as we have.

Conclusion

Memory-work attends to the ways that discursive regimes are taken up and embodied in ways that become sedimented and naturalized. Within a poststructuralist paradigm that sees bodies as socially inscribed and performed, and a feminist paradigm that validates the personal and lived experience, memory-work provides opportunities for collective interruption of those regimes. In messing further with the memory texts that have been produced during some of the workshops I have convened, I aim to keep textual forms in play and to keep memories more open than more conventional scholarly forms allow. In messing with texts as I do, I am interested in the ethics and aesthetics of writing and of research. How might rigorous imagining assist us to enter into the space of the other (Gannon, 2006) in collective biography and in other research contexts? How might writing matter differently and take on different forms and contexts for different readers? How might my work provoke a dissolution of subjectivities, such that I see myself in you and you in me? And what effects might that have on our understanding of how we are and might be in the world?

Endnotes

¹ Excerpt from Susanne Gannon, “(Gradual) Submersion” poem. In Bronwyn Davies, (2000), *(In)scribing body/landscape relations* (pp. 47-48). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

² Condenada - daughter of the devil.

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Working memory plays big role in remembering as well. It is the active system that temporarily stores and manipulates information that is needed in the execution of complex cognitive tasks, such as learning, reasoning and comprehension. It keeps information active, binds and transfer information into more permanent stores and maintains goal relevant information while inhibiting goal irrelevant information.

Messing with memories: Feminist poststructuralism and memory work. This chapter begins by outlining how collective memory work has been taken up within a feminist poststructuralism that disrupts the subjects, memories, truths and texts produced in and through memory work. The latter part of the chapter more. This chapter begins by outlining how collective memory work has been taken up within a feminist poststructuralism that disrupts the subjects, memories, truths and texts produced in and through memory work. The latter part of the chapter discusses transgressive texts produced by messing With the memory palace technique and other memorization techniques that deal with symbols (such as letters and numbers), the best strategy is to turn something abstract into a sound and visual representation. Use the sounds in the word to turn it into an image. In the case of "Mike," you can think of a picture of a microphone.

Gannon, S. (2008), 'Messing with memories: Feminist Poststructuralism and Memory-work', *Dissecting the mundane: International perspectives on memory-work*, University of Arizona Press 9780761841166. Davies, B. and Gannon, S. (2008), 'Hang On and Flying', *Creating Scholartistry: Imagining the Arts-informed Thesis or Dissertation*, Backalong Books 9781894132305. Gannon, S. and Davies, B. (2007), 'Postmodern, Poststructural, and Critical Theories', *Handbook of Feminist Research*, SAGE Publications 1412905451. Small, J., Cadman, K., Friend, L., Gannon, S., Ingleton, C. and Koutroulis, G. (2007), 'Unr Memory-work is a feminist research methodology that is used by research collectives to study socialization within the dominant values that make up a particular culture. The power of memory-work liesâ€¦ Expand. 21.Â Messing with memories : feminist poststructuralism and memory-work. S. Gannon, Adrienne E. Hyle, M. Ewing, D. Montgomery, J. S. Kaufman. Sociology.