



## Collective Memory, Psychology of

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### Abstract

Collective memory has been the subject of productive interactions within the social sciences ever since its initial conceptualization. Employing a social interactionist framework in which large-scale phenomena are empirically investigated as interactions between cognition and social dynamics, the article presents psychology's contribution to understanding the formation and the dynamics of collective memories.

Collective memory has had a long history within the social sciences. It served, in the period since Halbwachs's landmark conceptualization (1980/1925), as a meeting place for interdisciplinary conversations involving sociology, history, anthropology, and psychology (Hirst and Manier, 2008). As any constructive dialog, conceptualizing collective memory has been ridden with theoretical disputes ever since the emergence of the concept. Methodological individualism, an approach aimed at deterministically deriving collective phenomena from the psychological make up of individuals and their interactions, constituted the main issue of contention (Udén, 2002). Although, it is beyond the scope of this article to provide a review of methodological individualism and its nuances, the burgeoning literature on the psychology of collective memory provides substantial evidence that bridging between micro and macroprocesses is a worthy endeavor (DiMaggio, 1997). In what follows, I will briefly present approaches within the social sciences that allow for a psychological exploration of collective memory, I will then articulate the psychological assumptions of such an endeavor, and finally, I will review the burgeoning psychology literature aimed at bridging between micro and macroprocesses.

### Collective Memory: A Case for Its Psychological Foundations

It is widely accepted that just as individuals have memories of their own personal pasts, so do collectivities have memories of the events that are central to their identity. What is contentious, though, is whether to understand these collective memories, one needs to take into account how individuals remember, or simply restrict oneself to the study of the social processes involved in their formation. Widely credited with the articulation of the concept, Maurice Halbwachs was mindful of the fact that individual memory is critical to understanding collective memory. "It is individuals as group members who remember," he claims (Halbwachs, 1980: 46). The critical notion that individuals remember as group members stands at the crux of his conceptualization of memory as inherently social: from the very basic usage of a particular group's language to reminisce to the social dimension that accompanies the act of communicating a memory. Given the belief that it is impossible to separate what is individual and

what is social about memory, he cautions against looking into the brain or in some 'nook of (the) mind' to understand memory, for memories "are recalled by me externally, and the groups of which I am part at any given time give me the means to reconstruct them" (Halbwachs, 1980: 46). It is in light of this unbreakable link between the individual and its social embeddedness that Halbwachs proposes the study of the social frameworks in which memory is manifested.

This ambiguity of locating collective memory in either individual minds or in the social processes that govern their creation has received extensive attention among social scientists. In contrast with Halbwachs's acceptance of the ambiguity, most current approaches seek to resolve it by clearly differentiating between endeavors that commit to one location or the other. Young (1993), for instance, differentiates between 'collected memories,' defined as the aggregation of individually produced social memories, and 'collective memory,' seen as collectivistic cultural activities or productions (see Olick, 1999; for a similar distinction). In final analysis, he argues, "societies cannot remember in any other way than through their constituents' memories" (1993: xi). In a similar attempt to provide clarity to the concept of collective memory, Jan Assmann distinguishes between communicative and cultural memories. The former are conceptualized as conversationally constructed memories that have limited time horizons, the latter are seen as long lasting, publicly available cultural products (e.g., monuments, texts, images, rituals) designed to emphasize meaningful events in the history of the group. It is only in those instances in which communicative memories get transformed into 'objectivized culture' that they become cultural memories (Assmann, 1995: 130). Individuals and their interactions are, according to Assmann, critical only when considering transient communicative memories. The focus of collective memory scholars should be, he claims, the stable cultural memories and the struggles behind their enactment.

What emerges in the social sciences is, then, a dichotomy as to whether understanding collective memories requires the integration of memory processes that are specific to individual memory (Olick, 1999). On the one hand, there are efforts to carve out the 'spaces' where individuals are critical units when discussing collective memory, in concepts such as collected memories and communicative memories. On the other hand, approaches that follow an antiindividualistic

stance (Assman, 1995; Connerton, 1989) advocate that the study of collective memory be completely divorced from its anchoring within individual minds. To resolve this antagonistic dichotomy, Olick suggests a framework, under the heading of 'social memory studies,' that would allow disciplines to carry out their independent research programs in a way that respects their theoretical and methodological differences. Collected memory scholars would study the aggregation of memories, whereas collective memory scholars would carry out investigations of institutionalized objects.

A social interactionist approach stands in contrast to these dichotomous perspectives. It accepts that one cannot easily separate, as Halbwachs contended, the individual from the social. Social processes are constituted by individuals' interactions, and so they are dependent on individual characteristics, whereas individual behavior is dramatically affected by the social contexts in which it is manifested. Integrating this interdependence, a social interactionist position insists that one cannot understand how social artifacts and practices affect memory without considering individual cognition (Hirst and Echterhoff, 2012). This approach builds on recent philosophical developments in the theory of mind, specifically, work on extended mind and distributed cognition (Clark and Chalmers, 1998; Michaelian and Sutton, 2013). According to this view, the mind is part of a larger system that incorporates the environment, including the social contexts in which individuals function. To understand the navigation of a ship, for instance, one has to understand the complex system that produces the act of navigation. A system that includes the interdependence of individuals who are responsible for the navigation, the communication system that coordinates the interdependent individuals, and the equipment that allows for the integration and calibration of the different components (Hutchins, 1995).

In this context, psychology has set out to investigate how a perspective that takes into account both individual cognition and social dynamics could contribute to understanding the formation and the dynamics of collective memories. In what follows, I will trace the history of this social interactionist approach, explore how it leads to an empirically based investigation of collective memory, and finally present the recent empirical advances in the field.

### Social Dimensions of Memory

Ever since psychology embraced the experimental method to study the mind, the individual has been, for the most part, the exclusive focus of its investigations. Given this focus, a topic such as the formation and dynamics of collective memories seems to be orthogonal to both theoretical and methodological advances within psychology, particularly with recent developments in neuroscience (Mather et al., 2013). Despite the prevailing individual reductionism, the social nature of memory has been a topic of rigorous psychological research from the early days of experimental psychology. In an extreme form of individual reductionism, one of the first experimental psychologists to explore memory, Herman Ebbinghaus (1913), carefully designed his stimulus material to strip away its contextual and social dimensions. He used

nonsense syllables and took precautions to make these syllables as distinct from natural language as possible. The reasoning was that any associations that these syllables might trigger would interfere with one's ability to understand how memory works.

Stripping these dimensions away, Sir Frederic Bartlett (1932) claimed, left nothing to be studied. Taking a perspective consistent with Halbwachs's notion that memory is inherently social, Bartlett embarked on programmatically studying the social dimensions of memory. For Bartlett, memory was akin to a tennis stroke. Just as when serving a ball, different contextual factors, such as wind speed, position of the sun, and the location of the opponent, will affect one's serve, so is remembering influenced by the context in which it is manifested. No two strokes, even by the same individual, will be exactly the same because of the variations in the different contextual factors. It follows that no two acts of remembering, even of the same memory by the same individual, will be exactly the same. In this conception, memory is less of a reproductive replica of the past, and more of a reconstructive process affected by a host of contextual factors. Consistent with this realization, Bartlett introduces the concept of *schemata*, which he defines as organized structures of knowledge that act as scaffolds for remembering. It is through these schemata, he argues, that the profoundly social nature of memory becomes manifest. They are acquired and fine-tuned within the groups that one belongs to, and they constitute the generative engines of remembering (Bartlett, 1932). The cultural schemata we develop during socialization processes, Bartlett argues, not only guide what we pay attention to, but also circumscribe how and what we remember (Wertsch, 2002).

### Collective Memory from a Psychological Perspective

Building on the idea that memories are socially constructed (Bartlett, 1932), and emboldened by a wider acceptance of an extended mind philosophical tradition (Clark and Chalmers, 1998), psychologists have recently made collective memory a matter of not just sociological, but psychological concern (Hirst and Echterhoff, 2012). The framework that allows for these advances is one in which collective memories are defined as shared individual memories that bear on people's identities (Coman et al., 2009; Hirst and Echterhoff, 2012). By conceptualizing collective memories as shared individual memories, psychologists have committed themselves to answering several questions. First, how do memories become shared, and what are the psychological mechanisms that account for their sharedness? This set of questions falls under investigations of the process of the formation of collective memories. A second set of questions has to do with the form that these shared representations take. The focus here is not on the processes that underlie remembering, but on the outcome of these processes at a collective level. Psychology has made significant progress in answering these questions, but before we delve into it, I will briefly articulate the psychological assumptions that allow for a programmatic investigation of the psychology of collective memory.

### Psychological Assumptions

I have thus far argued that individual cognition and social dynamics interactively shape collective memories. In this section, I will discuss three claims that have received extensive support within psychology and are fundamental to understanding the emergence of shared representations of the past:

1. Memory is reconstructive. As evidenced in the tennis strike metaphor (Bartlett, 1932), remembering is seen as a flexible reconstruction of the past, in which the audience, future goals, and the context in which it happens, are all critical factors that determine what form memory would have (Schacter, 1999).
2. Individuals conform. When placed in a social context, individual behavior is drastically affected by the constraints of such a context. Individuals' memories are, for example, affected by suggestions or recalls offered by others in a social group (Hirst and Echterhoff, 2012). And the reconstructive nature of memory is what allows for these suggestions to become completely internalized and remembered as valid representations of the past, even though individuals never experienced them (Edelson et al., 2011).
3. Individuals identify with groups. Extensive research within social psychology has explored the processes involved in group identification, but also the implications that such identification entails. Favoring the in-group and derogating the out-group, preferential attention to group-relevant information, and the motivation to construct a common ground with fellow group members represent biases that favor the emergence of collective memories (Ellemers et al., 2002).

It is the combination among memory's flexibility, and the individuals' tendencies to conform to and identify with groups that give force to an approach aimed at understanding the formation of collective memories. What results from the integration of these psychologically grounded claims is a social interactionist approach that takes into account both the individual cognitive mechanisms, such as memory's flexibility, but also the social dynamics surrounding people's interactions, such as the specific ways in which they influence one another. In focusing on memories growing out of human interactions, the social interactionist approach sees remembering as embedded in social activities. Conversations, as such central social activities, provide a fertile ground for psychological investigations of collective memories (Hirst and Echterhoff, 2012).

### Collective Memory as a Process: A Social Interactionist Approach

Shared representations are created through complex processes. While recognizing the intricate linkage between the cognitive and social dimensions governing their formation, researchers have recently taken on the challenge of studying these processes empirically. In this section, I will first describe work on shared attention that allows for the emergence of shared representations in the absence of communication, I will then turn to the larger literature on the impact of conversations on memory in dyads and small groups, and I will end the section with recent work aimed at understanding how shared representations emerge in social networks.

### Noncommunicative Processes

Most of the process accounts of collective memory emphasize the conversational nature of their emergence. Bartlett's notion of schema is, however, consistent with the idea that shared representations of a particular event could emerge even in the absence of social interactions. By using similar schemas to filter incoming information, individuals can form similar representations of the past. These schemata are, of course, acquired by way of interactions among individuals, but once they are part of a person's repertoire, they will automatically guide the encoding and retrieval of information. Group membership and situation typicality increase the chances that independent individuals use similar schemas to make sense of an event (Mandler, 1984).

**Shared Attention Mechanisms.** Recent investigations show that shared representations of the past could emerge in the absence of communication. Individuals, it was found, pay preferential attention to, and better remember, information that they believe similar others have access to at the same time (Shteynberg, 2010). In this particular instance, this shared attention mechanism makes people focus on the presented information unselectively, just by virtue of it being attended by similar others. This increase in shared attention could also guide participants as to what specifically to attend to. The resultant selective attention could create similar representations of an event, as when one is exposed to media coverage of causes of group-relevant conflict, for instance, simply because group members use their shared heuristics to decide what is salient for one's own group (Hastorf and Cantrill, 1954; Vallone et al., 1985).

### Communicative Processes

Most typically, however, researchers have focused on the way people influence one another in a more direct fashion. An extant literature has focused, for instance, on how communicating about past events influences people's memories and renders them more similar.

**Audience Tuning/Shared Attention.** When we communicate to an audience, be it another person or a large group, we often have expectations as to what the audience wants to hear. These expectations affect not only what one communicates to others, but also the communicator's subsequent memories. Speakers, for example, often recount stories of the past in a biased manner to fit the audience's expectations. Interestingly, though, this effort to align one's message to the audience's expectations only results in altered memories consistent with the communicated message in situations when the speaker is motivated to create a connection with the audience. That is, only when speakers are motivated to share their beliefs, values, and attitudes with their fellow interactants does audience tuning result in consistent memory changes (Echterhoff et al., 2008). These motivations to create a shared reality can facilitate, thus, convergent memories between speakers and listeners.

**Conversational/Dyadic Interactions.** Most of our interactions are, however, in the form of extensive conversations in which content is exchanged bidirectionally. There is extensive

empirical research on how these conversations affect our memories. In these conversational paradigms, participants are instructed to study material such as newspaper article, a video, or a story and then are asked to recall the story first individually, then jointly as a pair, and finally, again, individually. Analysis of the content of the final individual recall reveals how the processes that unfold during joint remembering affect participants' individual memories.

Employing this experimental paradigm to study how individuals influence each other's memories in a conversational setting resulted in the discovery of three important psychological processes. First, there is a significant literature on the social contagion of memory. According to this research, information that only one participant knew emerges in conversations and is taken over by the other conversational participants (Roediger et al., 2001). Critically, the contagious information is often misleading, that is, an inaccurate recollection of the past. Second, information mentioned in the conversation is reinforced through practice effects (Karpicke and Roediger, 2007). That is, repeatedly listening to certain pieces of information will make this information more memorable, and more likely to emerge in future recalls for both speakers and listeners. And third, information that is not mentioned in the conversation is more likely to be forgotten by the interactants (Cuc et al., 2007). Critically, information that is related to what is discussed in the conversation is more likely to be forgotten than information that is unrelated to what is discussed. This phenomenon is known as retrieval induced forgetting. Information that the speaker recounts in the conversation results in induced forgetting in his/her related memories (*within-individual retrieval-induced forgetting*, or WIRIF), and also in the listeners' related memories (*socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting*, or SSRIF). Given that in most situations WIRIF and SSRIF occur simultaneously, they lead to forgetting of the same material between speakers and listeners, and thus increase in the overlap among conversational participants' memories is reached. By and large, all three discussed effects have cumulative effects insofar as mnemonic convergence is concerned.

#### Group Processes

Instead of focusing on the influence one person has on the memory of another, some researchers have examined how group processes affect what people remember as the group attempts to jointly recount the past. Several findings emerge. First, individuals distribute the task of remembering, a process called transactive memory (Wegner, 1987). Couples, for instance, tacitly coordinate during the memory task, such that each member of the pair focuses attention on a subset of the material to be remembered. They use their knowledge of the other interactant to infer what information they should pay attention to and later remember. It is this knowledge, an essential aspect of a transactive memory system, which allows for increased group recall performance.

Second, by analyzing a group's memory performance, researchers found that a group remembers more than any individual member on their own (collaborative facilitation), but less than the sum of the nonoverlapping individual memories remembered in isolation by group members (collaborative inhibition). Several explanations have been

proposed for these group phenomena (for a review, see Hirst and Echterhoff, 2012). Suffice it to say that the surfacing of memories in joint remembering was found to impact group members' memories making them more similar to one another's (Barnier et al., 2008; Rajaram and Pereira-Pasarin, 2010).

#### Information Propagation and Extension to Social Networks

Most of the research reviewed under this section has focused on dyadic, or small group interactions. We know, however, that mnemonic effects go beyond these small group interactions. For instance, in an experiment designed to understand information propagation in social networks Harber and Cohen (2005) studied how a morgue visit by 33 students propagated in conversations in their social networks and reached nearly 900 people within 10 days. The finding that the more emotionally arousing one's experience the deeper into one's social network the information spreads, showcases the importance of individual processes in as much as propagation is concerned. This emotional contagion effect is due to the fact that the individual is more likely to talk about emotional material in vivid terms, which might make the information more likely to propagate (Berger and Milkman, 2012; Sperber and Hirschfeld, 2004).

Following up on the idea that the networks people are embedded in are critically important when it comes to understanding collective phenomena, recent investigations have started to reveal how cognition interacts with structural features of the network to impact mnemonic convergence. Coman et al. (2012), for instance, implemented the results of their empirical studies on conversational influences on memory into computer simulations. They used agent-based computer simulation, a method that allows for the creation of agent societies, akin to human societies. By manipulating the characteristics of agents (e.g., memory, identity) and their interactions (e.g., the degree of mnemonic influence), Coman et al. set out to study the parameters that affect mnemonic convergence. They showed that the degree of dyadic influence, network structure, network size, and number of conversations are all critical factors when it comes to creating collective memories. This work advocates for an approach that seeks to establish general principles by operationalizing collective memory and examining the contribution of cognitive mechanisms as well as the social dynamics to the emerging collective representations.

While acknowledging that studying large groups of interacting individuals is challenging from both practical and methodological perspectives, researchers interested in collective dynamics have made meaningful progress in understanding the spread, stability, and the convergence of memories within both small and large communities.

#### Collective Memory as a Product: The Role of Identity

Even though the relation between collective memories and identity is widely theorized within the social sciences, it has not yet been explored in much detail in the psychological literature. This is surprising, inasmuch as identity, and particularly collective identity has been the topic of empirical investigations in social psychology for much of its history (Ellemers et al., 2002). The exploration of the relation between collective memory and collective identity has been successfully undertaken, however,

by a small group of psychologically minded sociologists. They employ an aggregation method to study collective memory. For instance, Schuman and his collaborators asked participants to name important public events that happened during a period of 50 years. By computing the proportion of the sample that remembered public events within this time span, they conclude that different cohorts have different collective memories. Events that happened when participants were in their adolescence and young adulthood were much more likely to be mentioned as important when compared to events outside of this critical period. The study of individual autobiographical memories reveals the same pattern, referred to as the *reminiscence bump* (Berntsen and Rubin, 2002). Critically, the explanation that applies to both the individual and public reminiscence bumps is that identities become crystalized during this transitional period in one's life, which facilitates the integration of these events into our identities (Brown et al., 2009).

Linking process and product, and building on Bartlett's schemata theory, Wertsch (2002) proposed that culturally dependent schemas lead to the emergence of different collective memories for different cultures. He proposed that individuals employ schematic narrative structures to guide remembering of public events. For instance, the narrative structures that Russians employ when remembering the past start with a context in which Russia is unrightfully attacked by outsiders, then, overwhelmed by them, and finally, through courage and solidarity, the Russians triumph over their enemies. This schematic narrative structure is then, employed by individuals to make sense of and remember past and present events. This approach is one that proposes an explanatory process to the observed collective memories.

In order to explore the process-product link, scholars have started to take seriously the claims that collective representations are distributed in the population and that they change over time (Michelian and Sutton, 2013). Attempts to operationalize collective memory in a positivistic manner would not only provide a framework in which these claims could be rigorously investigated, but would also advance our current understanding of the factors that drive the emergence of collective memory.

## Conclusion

This article presented the historical background as well as recent empirical advances in the psychology of collective memory. After tracing the roots of the psychological investigations of collective memory to Bartlett's visionary approach to memory, I have succinctly presented the current empirical work on the psychology of collective memory.

The advances in this burgeoning field show that integrating psychological insights into approaches aimed at understanding large-scale dynamics is a promising avenue for research. The scope of this investigation is larger than simply understanding the formation of collective memories, since these theoretical and methodological advances could be used to construct a scaffold for understanding how communities mobilize their identities, how they make decisions and solve problems collectively. Scholars have already convincingly made the case for an approach aimed at bridging between micro and

macroprocesses when it comes to understanding culture (Cole, 1996; DiMaggio, 1997). Even though approaches that psychologized culture to an extreme, such as Parson's attempt to study it as a collection of beliefs, values, and norms, are cautioned against as unrealistic (DiMaggio, 1997), an effort to identify potential bridges between micro and macroprocesses is certainly within the reach of social sciences today. A social interactionist approach in which both individual cognition and social dynamics are interactive units of a system has produced, as shown in this contribution, meaningful advances within the social sciences.

**See also:** Collective Behavior, Social Psychology of; Collective Behavior, Sociology of; Collective Beliefs, Sociological Explanation of; Collective Memory, Anthropology of; Culture and Networks; Culture, Cognition and Embodiment; Experimentation in Psychology, History of; Methodological Individualism: Philosophical Aspects; Nation-State as Symbolic Construct; Network Analysis; Reconstructive Memory, Psychology of.

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