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COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Conceptual Foundations and Group Formation

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Collective memory is a topic of growing interest in public discourse and the media as well as in academic research. In the US, for example, disputes over how monuments and textbooks depict the Civil War have become flash-points, and in places like India, Spain, and Russia, the past has been the focus of major disputes. Meanwhile, vibrant discussion in the humanities and social sciences has given rise to journals such as *Memory Studies*, volumes such as *The Collective Memory Reader* (Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levi, 2011), and the Memory Studies Association whose membership has grown exponentially over the past decade. In the process, the broad notion of collective memory has generated related, but somewhat distinct topics such as "communicative memory" (Assman, 1995), "cultural memory" (Erll, 2011), and "historical memory" (Winter, 2006).

The origins of collective memory studies are usually traced to the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), who was influenced by the ideas of Emile Durkheim as well as those of the psychologist Henri Bergson. Halbwachs's scholarship set a standard for interdisciplinary analysis, and this remains one of the hallmarks of the field to this day (Roediger & Wertsch, 2008). In recent years, the interdisciplinary discussion has expanded in all directions in an effort to draw on insights from psychology, sociology, history, literary studies, neuroscience, and other disciplines.

When trying to sort through the growing literature on this topic, it is often useful to start by creating some sort of organizing framework, something that has been attempted by several scholars. In *Memory from A to Z*, for example, Yadin Dudai notes: "The term 'collective memory' actually refers to three entities: a body of knowledge, an attribute, and a process" (2004, p. 51). In another effort to provide a framework for the study of collective memory, Wertsch and

Roediger (2008) have argued that three basic oppositions are useful: collective memory versus collective remembering; history versus collective memory; and individual memory versus collective remembering. In their approach, collective remembering is viewed as a dynamic process that often involves active and contentious contestation rather than a static body of knowledge. Furthermore, it is tied to some identity project and is in that sense subjective, as opposed to the sort of objective representation of the past that historical scholarship aspires to provide.

In 1999, Jeffrey Olick formulated the notion of "two cultures" of memory studies that frames the field in terms of a distinction between approaches to research. In his account, the "individualist understanding" of collective memory is "open to psychological considerations, including neurological and cognitive factors" (p. 333), whereas the "collectivist understanding" focuses on the "social and patterns of public and personal memory" (p. 333) that are shaped by institutions and other sociological forces. Olick summarizes these in terms of a difference between "collec*ted*" and "collec*tive*" memory.

In her 2011 volume *Memory in Culture*, Astrid Erll has proposed yet another conceptual framework in which to understand collective memory studies. Among other things, she draws a fundamental distinction between national memory as a form of collective memory and "transcultural" memory, with the latter emphasizing how different national groups and their memories may not be as sealed off from one another as is sometimes assumed. For example, the internet, as well as global business practices, let information about LGBT issues move around the world with little regard for national boundaries.

In one way or another, all of these contemporary efforts to provide a framework for sorting out the various strands of collective memory studies reflect an important assertion that Halbwachs made in his early formulations. He asserted that there are as many memories as there are groups. At first glance, this may seem to suggest that groups are given some kind of analytic primacy, and are somehow "there" before remembering comes into the picture. But much in collective memory studies emphasizes that memories are powerful means for holding groups together—and even forming them. As with many chicken-and-egg questions, the answer to this one is to eschew either/or answers and examine how memory and membership in a collective exist in an inter-defining relationship. Of course, "the group" does not carry the memory; rather, individuals as members of a group do the remembering, a point emphasized by another founder of memory studies, Frederic Bartlett (1932).

Different Memories for Different Groups

Pursuing these topics raises issues about how to define both memory and collective, which, in turn, raises the issue of what counts as evidence to support our claims. Instead of trying to answer these questions in the abstract, an

approach that often generates as much frustration as insight, we propose a different approach. Namely, we will begin with empirical examples of competing accounts of the past that different groups hold to be true and use that as a way to discuss definitions and methods. This step will involve bringing together conceptual traditions that focus on groups and pay little attention to memory, on the one hand, and those that focus on memory and pay little attention to group formation, on the other.

The example we use comes from our own studies of collective memory for World War II. The individuals in these studies were born after the war—in most cases decades after it. Thus, they did not develop a collective representation of the conflict through personal experience. Furthermore, there is no evidence that their representation was the outcome of extended individual research into original sources. Instead, they had access to information through history instruction, media, and family discussions. These pieces of information are often given to individuals rather than discovered by the individuals themselves. In our view, this suggests that collective memory is often a matter of mastering "off the shelf" narratives. Furthermore, our example illustrates another key aspect of collective memory, its close ties to collective identity. Instead of being some sort of neutral knowledge, it is part of an identity project that can become particularly clear when confronted by the memory of other collectives.

Some of the impetus for the explosion of interest in recent decades came from the rise of interest in memory for the Holocaust, ironically some decades after the Holocaust was over. From collective memories of the Holocaust, a "memory boom" (Blight, 2009) emerged that examined how groups from all over the world remember a range of events, especially traumatic ones. In addition to its focus on national communities, memory studies took a "transcultural turn" (Erll, 2011) around 2010 in an effort to address increasingly important projects that extend beyond the nation. This called into question the "methodological nationalism" that accepts the nation as the normal or default focus of scholarship. In today's world, though, national memory remains a major force that all too often has ominous consequences.

In this view, the state does not create national memory or identity out of nothing, but it does engage with a particular set of cultural resources. These resources have been the object of inquiry for other contributors to this volume, some of whom have examined narratives that are what Alasdair MacIntyre (1984, p. 121) called the "stock of stories" that guide a culture as it seeks to answer views of who we are and how we are supposed to act. These provide semiotic resources and mental habits to be harnessed in more or less effective ways, and they sometimes even serve as a sort of brake on what top-down efforts can do. Authors in this volume examine such issues under the heading of collective narcissism, implicit attitudes, narrative templates, and so forth. The result is that top-down efforts are viewed as being shaped as much by bottom-up forces from a national community as vice versa.

A second general theme running through much of this volume concerns the dynamic and highly contested nature of national memory. This dynamism is so prevalent that it might be more appropriate to speak of national *remembering* rather than memory. Instead of being a fixed narrative or a body of information, such remembering is typically characterized by memory activists, competing narratives, generational change, and other forces. The term "remembering" is somewhat cumbersome in English, making it difficult to use, but the spirit of the term motivates much of what we have to say.

As already noted, the origins of memory studies can be traced to the 1930s in the writings of Halbwachs (1980). Much of the research that followed in sociology, media studies, and other disciplines has been concerned with how social differentiation and political power shape accounts of the past. For example, some scholars have been concerned with how the formative experiences of a generation (usually in its young adult years) shape its account of historical events and how this, in turn, shapes the collective's social and psychological characteristics (Corning and Schuman, 2022). Sociologists have also examined how elite segments of society differ from others in changing ideas about the past. The role of media, monuments, and public performance in shaping public memory has also been a topic of interest to scholars and practitioners. For example, *Watergate in American Memory* (Schudson, 1992) examines the role of media in bringing Richard Nixon's presidency to an end.

More generally, problems in defining collective memory stem from the fact that it is not a topic that fits neatly within the confines of a single academic discipline. The concept (or concepts) has been examined by sociologists (e.g., Zerubavel, 2003), anthropologists (e.g., Cole, 2001), psychologists (e.g., Middleton & Brown, 2005; Pennebaker, Paez, & Rime, 1997), historians (e.g., Bodnar, 1992), literary analysts (e.g., Young, 1993), and others, but there has been little contact, let alone coordination, among these efforts.

The limited literature on collective memory stands in stark contrast to the breadth of research concerning individual memory (Wertsch, 2002), and the problem remains of how to connect individual and collective remembering (Wertsch & Roediger, 2008). Similarly, the "collective" part of collective memory can refer to different kinds of groups, and though the most common "collective" alluded to in this chapter is that of national memory, there are additional ways to think of groups and of the coalitions we are part of.

In many cases, the way in which collective memory is "collective" stems from the use of a consistent narrative among members of a particular group when interpreting or remembering past events (Wertsch & Roediger, 2008). These shared narratives give rise to schemas in the form of "narrative templates" for structuring and interpreting information and making such information meaningful (Wertsch, 2002, 2021; Yamashiro, 2022). Such narratives influence how groups collectively remember, such as the aforementioned example of how people from different countries remember World War II and their

own country's contribution to the war effort (Abel et al., 2019; Roediger et al., 2019; Wertsch, 2021), as well as to events in world history in general (Liu et al., 2005). The same pattern occurs for how U.S. states view their contribution to U.S. history (Putnam, Ross, Soter, & Roediger, 2018), and the overclaiming of responsibility for one's own group to a joint outcome (Ross & Sicoly, 1979). Narrative templates can also serve to bias how different groups perceive and later remember the same observed event (Wertsch, 2021). Because collective remembering is motivated by a shared narrative template that shapes group identity, past events or verifiable facts can be reconstructed, reinterpreted, or altogether revised to fit within the shared narrative (Wertsch & Roediger, 2008). The power of narratives to impact and alter how groups collectively remember was made particularly salient by the spread of misinformation across social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (e.g., Stone & Jay, 2019).

Group Formation and Coalitions

Every one of us, regardless of willingness or intention, belongs to groups and communities that ultimately shape and influence our identity as a member of a collective (Roediger, Putnam, & Yamashiro, 2022). In the city of St. Louis, for example, it is a common local practice to ask where one went to high school—though a seemingly innocuous question, the answer often takes the form of heartfelt assertions of emotional commitment to a group, and it offers quite a bit of insight into an individual's background: the community they grew up in, an estimate of their family's socioeconomic status, educated guesses of their political and religious affiliation, all based on one's membership to a particular high school. As this example suggests, group membership can have the potential for profound impacts on an individual and can bias how those from a different group view and appraise someone. More broadly, as will be described, the formation of a group can occur quickly and the intergroup biases can be powerful, even if the group itself is an arbitrary one.

A seminal example of group formation is the Robber's Cave Experiment (Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif; 1954; 1961; see also Tajfel, 1970), which demonstrates how quickly groups can form and how powerful in-group identity and out-group hostility can be. This field experiment (conducted long before approval of research involving human subjects was required) consisted of 22 young boys who spent a summer at Robber's Cave State Park in Oklahoma with researchers acting as camp counselors. In the first week, the boys were randomly assigned to one of two groups that were kept separate. Each group (self-identified as "The Eagles" and "The Rattlers") began to form its own norms and identities as a result of shared experiences and cooperation in day-to-day activities. When the two groups were brought into competition with each other, including playing games of tug-of-war and baseball, out-group friction was quick to form and eventually devolved into taunting, destruction,

theft of each other's property, and even threats of physical violence that re-quired the researchers to step in. Initial attempts to reduce hostility between the two groups (e.g., watching movies together, sharing meals) were unsuccess-ful until the groups had to work together to restore their water supply that had been artificially blocked by the researchers. In other words, the introduction of a shared superordinate goal between the groups took precedence over their initial goals. Thus, although the initial group formation was quick and created a powerful intergroup bias, the degree to which individuals in a group share a common goal or motivation is the most important factor in managing inter-group hostility.

Intergroup biases also have important implications for perceiving and re-membering events. For example, the classic study by Hastorf and Cantril (1954) demonstrated that students from Dartmouth and Princeton had vastly divergent perceptions of fouls in a football game between the two schools. The game was exceptionally rough, with heavily favored Princeton students accusing the Dartmouth team of dirty play. Hastorf and Cantril had students from each school who had not witnessed the original game watch a film of the game and indicate the number of penalties that should have been accorded to each team. The Princeton students saw the game as one in which Dartmouth made many more penalty infractions than Princeton, but the Dartmouth students made the opposite judgment, with their own team relatively penalty-free compared to the Princeton team. Thus, students from each school were heavily biased in viewing their own team more positively and the opposing team as unnecessar-ily rough (see also Snibbe, Kitayama, Markus, & Suzuki, 2003). Thus, biases for our own group and against other groups color how we collectively perceive, interpret, and later remember the same event. Not only do such intergroup biases fit within the particular narrative that "my own group is good and the opposing group is bad," but such biases are motivated by a desire to feel emo-tionally satisfied with one's own group and identity to it (Roediger, Putnam, & Yamashiro, 2022).

Of course, groups are not always clearly delineated and static, as in fixed categories such as "The Eagles" and "The Rattlers" in the Sherif (1954, 1961) study (Cikara, 2021) or the Dartmouth and Princeton students in the Hastorf and Cantril (1954) study. Further, group membership can often be subdivided into other groups or change over time, either in terms of group membership it-self changing or a change in the relationship between different groups. For ex-ample, Americans as a whole can be thought of as a group when discussing how nations collectively remember World War II (Abel et al., 2019; Roediger et al., 2019), but subdividing Americans into younger and older age groups can reveal divergent findings. For example, younger Americans perceived the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan as a negative event, whereas older Americans perceived it as a positive event in a study by Zaromb et al. (2014). Similarly, the Sherif (1954, 1961) study illustrates how group membership is tied to shared

goals rather than one's categorically assigned group. The potential limitations of focusing on categories, then, has led some to instead emphasize coalitions (Boyer, 2009, 2022; Cikara, 2021; Dunham, 2018) when considering collective memory. Rather than thinking of a collective memory as tied to mere membership within set categories (e.g., one's nation, state, or race), it may instead be tied to coalitions driven by shared beliefs, motivations, goals, and expectations (e.g., political or religious affiliation) that can change. Thinking of group membership in terms of coalitions may also be fruitful for collective memory, as coalitions show evidence of transcending across different cultures and countries (Ruggeri et al., 2021).

Group Overclaiming of Responsibility

When individuals participate in activities, how do they apportion responsibility for the various tasks? Ross and Sicoly (1979) asked this question in several contexts. In one study, they asked married couples questions about chores they both did, such as "how often do you take out the trash?" or "how often do you care for the children?" The totals always added to greater than 100%. In another study, the researchers asked members of college basketball teams to name a turning point in the game that led to the outcome. They predicted that the players would ascribe the turning point to their own team rather than to the other team, and that was the outcome: 80% of the players attributed the turning point to acts of their own team and only 11% to the other team. The other 9% attributed the outcome to both teams. The authors also asked the players to explain the outcome of the game, regardless of whether it was a win or a loss. Only 8% of the players invoked properties of the other team in their answer, whereas 92% credited or blamed the win or loss on their own team's play. Ross and Sicoly's work persuasively showed that people tend to claim more responsibility for themselves (and their group) than is warranted. The authors summed up their studies by saying that "individuals tend to accept more responsibility for a joint product than other contributors attribute to them" (p. 322), and this appears to apply to individuals as group members as well.

We have asked in several studies whether such overclaiming of responsibility is a characteristic of larger groups than basketball teams. Because Schroeder, Caruso, and Epley (2016) showed that overclaiming increased with group size for smaller groups, one might expect huge effects with large groups, including communities that are "imagined," in Benedict Anderson's (1983) sense of the term. We obtained just such an outcome in three different studies.

In a study by Zaromb et al. (2018), 6,831 college students in 35 countries were asked "what contribution do you think the country you are living in has made to world history?" and were provided a 0–100 scale for their answer. This question was placed at the end of a long survey in a larger study on what students knew about world history, so they answered the question after dealing

with many events of world history, almost all of which did not happen in their country. Nevertheless, the responses reflecting overclaiming of responsibility were extraordinarily high. We expected that students from the U.S. would provide the highest totals, because of the frequent talk of American exceptionalism in our country. We were surprised that this prediction was not borne out. Although U.S. students gave a mean estimate of 30% of world history being attributable to their own country, students from 21 of the 30 countries provided similar or greater values for self-centered attributions of responsibility. The top few in terms of percentage of world history allegedly accounted for were Russia (61%), the UK (55%), and India (54%), but Brazil (41%), and Canada (49%), and even Fiji (34%) topped the U.S. The total percentage for the 35 countries (out of about 195 in the world) was 1161%! Thus, overclaiming of responsibility is clearly huge in national groups. Of course, in this case, we cannot know what the actual percentage should be, because the question has no objective answer. Rather, the question functions more like a projective test item, because it allows each respondent to project his/her belief about their country's importance on world history onto a numeric scale. Roediger et al. (2022) referred to such egotistic overclaiming as reflecting national narcissism.

Earlier in the chapter, we have referred to another type of overclaiming that can be called national narcissism, viz., in our study of how 11 countries perceive the contributions of their country to the victory (or loss) of World War II. When we asked people in eight Allied countries to estimate the percentage of war effort of their country that led to the victory on a 100-point (or percentage) scale, the total was 309% or about 39% per country, led by Russia (or the USSR, as it was in the war) at 75%. Some 20 other countries participated on the Allied side, so if they were included, the numbers would be even more fantastic.

Putnam et al. (2018) conducted a similar study to that of Zaromb et al. (2018) with people in the 50 states of the U.S., asking what proportion of U.S. history people from each state were responsible for. The study was replicated and extended by Churchill et al. (2019), and the data shown here reflect the results of the two studies combined. Once again, the totals were quite high. People in the states that were among the original 13 gave very high numbers (e.g., Virginia at 41%, Massachusetts at 39%, Pennsylvania at 36%). Even smaller states such as Delaware (32%) and Rhode Island (21%) produced high values. People in large states like California (27%) and Texas (22%) were also high in percentage of history accounted for. The total percentage given by 5,113 people from all 50 states across the two studies was 1145%, or a mean of 22.9% per state. How could this be? After all, with 50 states and 100%, the mean should be 2%. The high value indicates, again, the power of large groups in overclaiming of responsibility.

Why should such great overclaiming of responsibility occur? Roediger et al. (2022) outlined several possible mechanisms, three of which we will briefly summarize here. One is the availability heuristic; information that is readily

available or accessible—coming to mind quickly—is often weighted heavily in judgments. An individual can readily bring to mind information about his/her own country or state, but not that of other countries or states. Thus, one's own country is overweighted in making judgments. In the Roediger et al.'s study of World War II, when people were faced with estimating both their own country's and other countries' contributions to winning World War II, in most cases, they greatly moderated their own claims of responsibility that had been given when they were initially asked the question. When forced to explicitly consider other countries' contributions, they realized they may have overestimated their own country's contribution. A second factor in overclaiming of responsibility may be the general difficulty people have in reasoning with really small (and really large) numbers. When people are asked to estimate small numbers ("what percentage of the U.S. population is LGBT?"), they often overestimate in their answers. For example, the answer to the question is 3%, but when people are asked to estimate, the mean given is 20% of the population as LGBT.

The two factors just mentioned are cognitive in nature, but we also need to consider social and emotional factors. We have pride in our groups, and we may bristle when our group and its contributions are challenged. For example, if an American heard the statement from a Russian that "the USSR was much more responsible for winning the war in Europe during World War II than was the U.S.," they would be upset and argue the point. If they asked for evidence, the Russian's next statement might be: "Well, the U.S. suffered about 417,000 military deaths in both Asia and Europe during the war, whereas the Soviet Union had between 9 and 11 *million* military deaths in just Europe." Americans are usually shocked at those numbers, and they have often not even heard of battles on the Eastern theater of the war that greatly drained the German military forces (the Battle of Kursk, of Stalingrad, and of Moscow, to mention but three). At any rate, multiple factors are probably responsible for overclaiming of responsibility in large groups, including the three described here.

Conclusion

Collective memory is a multidimensional phenomenon and understanding it will require multidisciplinary methods and conceptual frameworks. At present, scholars interested in it are often surprised that scholars from disciplines other than their own seem to have little knowledge that efforts outside their home discipline even exist. Some of this is due to the use of a plethora of terms, but it is mainly due to discipline-specific concepts and methods that provide little room for contributions from other intellectual traditions. The remaining gaps between disciplines are such that building connections by formulating a single, grand, seamless conceptual framework is less likely to be productive than building from the ground up by working through concrete examples. The global community examining collective memory is vibrant and has at least

some tendency to forge "local" connections by examining particular exemplars and conceptual formulations of the issue. We have provided some examples here, but many more promise to enter the discussion in the years to come.

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