Collective Memory

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Abstract
The collective memory field is characterized by diverse conceptualizations of the “social” or “collective” nature of memory, as well as by fundamentally different understandings of where collective memory resides. These differences coalesce into two perspectives on collective memory that have guided theoretical and empirical writing: one that focuses on representations and symbols that embody memory or act as its “vehicles”, and one that focuses on subjective memories and views of the past held by groups of individuals. These two perspectives, as well as the variety of work in memory studies as a whole, are reflected in comparative research on collective memory. Studies that emphasize embodiments and vehicles often explore the ways they facilitate the persistence of the past, or its reconstruction or invention, for purposes grounded in the present; these studies also examine constraints on how the past is carried forward, whether stemming from historical experience, social context, culture, or previous “memory work”. Research that focuses on the memories held by individuals often examines the shaping influence of social and historical contexts, and also points to the role of social processes in the formation and retrieval of memories. A comparative perspective attunes us to linkages between the two forms of collective memory, sensitizes us to the multiplicity and multidirectionality of influences, yields insights into the relationship between cultural systems and memory, and helps to illuminate the nature of collective memory itself.

Introduction
Collective memory refers to memories of the past that are shared in some sense by members of a group—often, though not necessarily, a nation. Schwartz (2008, 11) defines collective memory as “the distribution throughout society of what individuals believe, feel, and know about the past.” His definition points to a crucial difference between collective memory and historical accounts: both may be grounded in past events, but collective memory imbues those events with moral weight, often taking the form of commemorations and interpretations of past events that are actively and meaningfully connected to identities and lives (Olick 2007). Unpacking this definition reveals significant complexities that constitute defining tensions for the field of collective memory—or “social memory studies”, as it is also known. Although the term “social memory studies” reflects a general consensus that collective memory is a social phenomenon, “social” is conceived differently by different scholars.

What Is “Social” about Collective Memory?
In a fundamental sense, collective memory is “social” because it is shared by members of groups, as when virtually all Americans possess some image or belief about the Vietnam war (even if there is great variation in the way in which Vietnam is remembered), or when the wording of texts recited on Passover connects Jews personally to the story of the exodus from Egypt (Zerubavel 1996). Groups sharing such memories are often identified in terms of geographic or temporal boundaries. At the same time, collective memories are often laced with, even dominated by, personal content. Indeed, it is sometimes only their linkage to national or world events that makes individuals’ memories “collective” (Schuman and Rieger 1992).

The initial insights into the social nature of collective memory came from the work of Halbwachs (1992), who first articulated an understanding of memory as socially constructed and framed: the content, retention and retrieval of memories are dependent upon social influences. Individuals gain knowledge of the past “with and against other individuals” (Schwartz 2008, 11) who are members of supportive and conflicting groups. For instance, particular social identities may structure individuals’ memories of the past “with and against other individuals” (Schwartz and Rieger 1992). The dynamics of group conversations may influence the memories individuals retrieve (Cuc et al. 2006); even a single conversation between a speaker and a listener may shape the memories of both participants in surprising and unintended ways (Hirst and Eckterhoff 2008). Further, just as
psychological processes such as cognition, emotion, motivation, and perception operate differently in different cultural contexts (Markus and Kitayama 1991; Masuda, Ellsworth and Mesquita 2008), there is also evidence for the influence of culture on the content and processes of individual memory (Schwartz and Kim 2002; Wang 2008a; Rubin et al. 2007).

In addition, memories are mediated by social products, in two senses. First, representations of the past are communicated by socio-cultural objects that serve as “vehicles of memory” (Yerushalmi 1996): texts of all kinds, films, television programs, educational materials and curricula, monuments and paintings, archives and museums, as well as commemorative practices, to name a few. For example, the New-York Historical Society describes itself as “a collective memory of New York.”

Second, such vehicles or “sites” of memory may serve as an “extrinsic context” (Winter and Sivan 2000) that elicits individuals’ own memories—whether they are “episodic” memories acquired through direct personal experience or “semantic” knowledge (Tulving 1983)—of the events to which they refer. Halbwachs (1992) showed that early Christians remembered Jesus by associating events from his life with specific physical places—“topography”—in Jerusalem, a practice that lent their memories of Jesus a familiar and taken-for-granted quality.

Still other work highlights the ways in which memories are encoded in socially constructed cultural forms and institutional practices such as laws, procedures, or record-keeping (Schudson 1995). Similarly, memories are constructed and retrieved with the help of external social tools—the internet, for example (Wertsch 2002), or indeed language itself—that are not merely facilitative but actively shape memories, according to the “technologies of memory argument” (Olick 2007) or the “extended mind thesis” (Wilson 2005). And in a further, related sense, collective memory may be regarded as broader than any given artifact, event, or institution when it is understood as implicit in overarching narratives, ideologies, discourses or cultural knowledge, all of which convey memory in the form of taken-for-granted ways of viewing and understanding oneself and the world (Confino 1997; Wertsch 2002; Schwartz and Kim 2002).

From the most tangible to the most abstract, these representations, symbols, vehicles or embodiments of memory share the characteristic of potentially enduring beyond the life-span of particular individuals or generations.

Finally, collective memory can be understood as social because it has social consequences. When memories are retrieved in a social context, they are often situated within a broader discourse that underscores their collective meaning; for example, museums devoted to the Holocaust can weave symbolic content into individuals’ memories, drawing them into a national narrative. Halbwachs’ investigation of Jerusalem’s topography considers the way in which the memory sites fostered attachment to Christian identity and guiding principles. Such functions may be accomplished not only through the content of what is remembered, but via the very process of remembering itself, which can enhance group solidarity and strengthen identity (Olick 2007).

Other work on the social consequences of memory examines the ways in which groups exploit memory to legitimate or challenge structures of power; Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (1983) demonstration of the “invention of tradition” is an important example of this “politics of memory” approach. In the case of negative or traumatic memories, rehearsal, commemorative practices, and other processes of remembrance may contribute to social conflict or to healing.

**Where Does Collective Memory Reside?**

These different conceptualizations of the “collective” or social aspects of collective memory are not mutually exclusive; indeed, most writing deals with more than one understanding of the social nature of memory. Still, much research emphasizes either socio-cultural representations of collective memory or collective memories in the form of individuals’ beliefs about the past, raising the question of just where collective memory resides. Images of the past are held by individuals, and memory is commonly assumed to be a property of individual minds, since there can be no memory without an individual to do the remembering. Theoretical grounding for a view of individuals as carriers of memory shaped by group contexts comes from Halbwachs’ (1992) work on the social frameworks of memory. This conceptualization is congruent with psychology’s emphasis on the individual, and beliefs about