The Work of Memory and the Unfinished Past: Deepening and Widening the Social Study of Memory in Southeast Asia

Roxana Waterson
Department of Sociology
National University of Singapore

Kwok Kian-Woon
Cruxible Pte Ltd
Singapore

The past few years have seen a remarkable development in the field of memory research. There has been a great burst of writing, crossing the boundaries between several disciplines, and offering a wealth of new insights into this complex and multi-faceted phenomenon. Advances in neurology have been so spectacular as to transform our knowledge about the brain and its biochemistry, providing for the first time a detailed and coherent picture of how memories are actually created and retrieved in the brain (Rose, 1992). Most of this knowledge is no more than fifteen or twenty years old. Schacter (1996:6) observes the possibility of a new synthesis arising with the increased co-operation between, as he terms it, the "separate tribes" of cognitive psychologists, clinicians, and neuroscientists. Tellingly, he makes no mention of historians, sociologists, or anthropologists, tribes whose sphere of interest has been even more sharply separated from those who investigate memory in a laboratory context. But in these fields, too, there has been a sudden kindling of interest in memory within concrete social contexts. New works in psychology probe the role of memory in the formation of personal identity and life stories (Ross, 1991; Neisser & Fivush, 1994), while in the disciplines of history, anthropology and sociology, there has been a simultaneous development of interest in the workings of memory as a social phenomenon. For memory is as intrinsic to the construction of collective identities as it is integral to the individual's sense of self.

The new outpouring of literature on all aspects of memory presents us with something of a puzzle: memories, after all, are nothing new. If memory is an indelible feature of social life, why only now should there be such a heightened awareness of its importance? And why should social scientists have found, on the whole, so little to say until recently about the functions of memory in social life? Perhaps memory was a fact of life too obvious to attract attention, so that it was simply taken for granted — in
much the same way as the body, for instance, which also excited little sociological attention until recently. Then — not least because of feminist contributions to social theory — the fact of embodiment was suddenly re-appraised as a dimension of the human condition so fundamental as to demand proper analysis, prompting a similar outburst of academic activity. Since re-casting the obvious in a new light has always been one of the most useful goals of the social sciences, breakthroughs of this kind are always valuable. But, once one begins to reflect on the many social dimensions of memory, its comparative neglect still strikes us as surprising.

Twenty years ago, nearly all the memory research done by psychologists concerned short-term memory, the kind used to remember word lists or telephone numbers, and which lasts less than a minute (Neisser, 1978; Bloch, 1996). Research by Endel Tulving (1972, 1983) and others now suggests that “working” or “semantic” memory of this kind may in fact be a separate, though closely related, memory system from what Tulving has termed “episodic” memory. The term “semantic” memory was first used to refer to the stored knowledge necessary for the deployment of language, and was later extended by Tulving to include knowledge in general, all that we have learned about the world and how to do things. “Episodic” memory by contrast is autobiographical, comprising all of our memories about our own life experience. Historians and social scientists, needless to say, are likely to be entirely uninterested in short-term memory, since their concern is with the social importance of memories and how they are transmitted across the generations. As Bloch (1996) suggests, while the past decade has seen a real effort on both sides to bridge the gap between the natural and social sciences, there is still a long way to go to achieve a fuller integration between the insights of psychologists and those of social scientists and historians on the workings of memory.

Halbwachs (1992 [1925]) holds a special place in the literature on memory as the first to have theorized extensively on memory’s collective qualities, the “social frameworks” within which it exists, as well as pointing to the fact that it is unavoidably a reconstruction of the past. In a subtle but significant departure from the vision of his mentor Durkheim, Halbwachs insisted on the existence of multiple and overlapping smaller groupings within the grand collectivity of “society”. It is from within such groupings, which themselves are bound to represent sometimes conflicting interests, that individuals reconstruct their memories of the past. Memory in fact provides a crucial site for the exploration of the links between the individual and the social, which are arguably still underexplained and undertheorized in the social sciences. That exemplary sociologist, Norbert Elias, long ago pointed out, in his What is Sociology? (1978), how easily the “brittle façade of reifying concepts” about “society” and social structures can distort our understanding of our own life in society, and he insisted on the necessity to re-imagine social life in terms of the “figurations” or