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## Rethinking the concept of collective memory

Barry Schwartz

Collective memory's fallibility is well documented; its powers less so. How ironic it is that so much ink has been spilled on memory's incidental functions—the forgetting or ignoring of wrongdoing, legitimating and challenging power, exaggerating and underestimating virtuous acts, giving voice to the marginalized—while its major function, to bring us into more direct contact with the past, has led to nothing significant in the way of theoretical explication. Collective memory's contribution to *homo sapien's* survival is not its malleability; rather, memory enhances survival because it permits us to retain and recover so much of the past. Collective memory does not and cannot work perfectly, but if it did not work well enough for practical purposes—purposes which make the human *species* unique—then human *society* would be impossible.

This essay bypasses issues concerning the sources and consequences of collective memory: how it reflects the distribution of power, on the one hand, or, on the other, the patterns and moral demands of culture. Memory study needs a better conceptualization of its object. Although conceptual clarification accomplishes nothing in itself, it does invite inspection of memory's distinctive features, including the workings of memory in its collective aspect and the development and regulation of new lines of inquiry. Collective memory must be explored in its normal as well as pathological working, in how it gets things essentially right and preserves them over vast stretches of time.

The study of the past—how it is known, interpreted, and preserved—is currently in an ambiguous state. According to the prominent psychologist Daniel L. Schacter (1995), memory, by and large, reflects reality, “but distortions can arise due to its constructive nature.” Schacter's emphasis on distortion, so representative of the present state of collective memory scholarship, is symptomatic of disciplinary cultures plagued by excessive, sometimes pathological and often paralyzing cynicism. Research cultures are so determined to disclose memory's deficiencies that scholars like Schacter often choose topics in which deficiencies are most evident. Books and journals typically show memory at its worst because few editors and readers are interested in cases of accurate remembering. The consequence is a “body of evidence” which exaggerates distortion and forgetting.

The situation should be rightly understood. Man's capacity to twist history to his liking is universal and infinite. Denial of the great genocide of Armenians; conservative Japanese efforts to transform World War II into a defensive war; French nationalists transforming their

forebears' collaboration with the Nazis into fierce resistance; the oblivion among Western Jews of Sholem-Shumuel Schwarzbard, David Frankfurter, and Herschel Greenspan, the first to stand up against their people's tormenters—no one can claim that such efforts to remake the past by remembering or forgetting are rare.

Knowledge of memory's pathologies is indispensable to its understanding. However, the more investigators deliberately *seek* to identify these pathologies, the more they underestimate memory's power and, worse, raise the possibility that they might actually have an interest in doing so. In either case, knowledge of collective memory's *normal* working is underdeveloped.

The field of collective memory scholarship is itself a collective enterprise which transcends the achievements and shortcomings of its members. The excesses of this enterprise must be recognized. Few scholars, it is true, have spectacularly overstated the mutability of memory. But, when many scholars select topics where past realities are doubted and differently interpreted while few select topics where such realities are demonstrable and have a limited range of interpretations, collective memory as a field of study assumes a deconstructive perspective.

### History, collective memory, and commemoration

Collective memory is often reputed to be an ambiguous and complex concept (e.g., Olick and Robbins 1998; Roediger and Wertsch 2008). In fact, few concepts are clearer or simpler, but only when recognized as an emergent entity linked to history and commemoration.

#### History

History is an ancient discipline and admits of many definitions; collective memory is a new discipline, and its scholars are most familiar with the definition proposed by Maurice Halbwachs ([1950] 1980). History, as Halbwachs defines it, seeks an objective standpoint to assess the causes and consequences of events. It is "situated external to and above groups" and describes the past independently of contemporary opinions and conditions. Once established, Halbwachs believes, historical knowledge remains stable—its stream of facts and demarcations "fixed once and for all" (pp. 80–1).

#### Collective memory

As history alone stands "above groups," memory, individual or collective, is situation-dependent. But collective memory must be assessed at two levels. The term "biographical" memory refers to what individuals know, believe, and feel about themselves at earlier times in their lives. They do so by means of the brain's storage and recall systems, which mediate information from parents, family members, friends and acquaintances, diaries, photo albums, recordings, birthdays, anniversaries, as well as other social frames, including dates of significant political, economic, cultural, and social events by which individuals locate their own past within the wider world (Halbwachs 1925, [1950] 1980: 22–47).

Individual memories are the fundamental units of collective memory, but collective memory itself—the topic of this essay—refers to the *distribution* throughout society of what individuals know, believe, and feel about the past, how they judge the past morally, how closely they identify with it, and how much they are inspired by it as a model for their conduct and identity.

Individuals *remember* no historical events or historical individuals before their birth or beyond their own experience, but it would be a mistake to conclude that the "memory" of such



occurrences is merely a *metaphor* that simplifies a complex phenomenon by representing it in familiar terms, for to conceive collective memory in this way fails to show what it is or what it does.

As a distributive entity whose key property is variation, collective memory denies the possibility of fully shared conceptions of the past. The adjective “collective” is not synonymous with consensual. That every distribution also has a central tendency makes total dissensus equally impossible.

Above all, similar distributions of thoughts and feelings about the past appear in communities widely dispersed and unknown to one another, which means they reflect a transcendent condition common to all. *Similar differences* across time reflect this same condition. For example, Abraham Lincoln’s renown in the memory of American white people has exceeded that of African Americans throughout the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first century. But whites’ and blacks’ renown for Lincoln, although *differing* in magnitude, has fallen at *similar* rates. This confluence can only result from the same cultural current influencing individuals located in different times and different racial communities (Schwartz 2008: 149, 166–7; Schwartz 2000b). Collective memory must therefore be treated as an *emergent* entity, a *social fact* connecting separate and often distant communities.

Whether one considers differences at a given point in time or similar differences across time, collective memory is more than a framework for the interpretation of what *individuals* remember. The distribution of individual memories is itself a social context exercising *direct effects* on what individuals remember separately. In other words, collective memory’s influence is discerned by isolating the dominant memories of a group from the memories of its individual members (see Blau 1960 on “structural effects”).

A useful analogy to collective memory is public opinion. Opinions, like memories, can only be held by individuals and can only be assessed by questioning individuals, but when these opinions are aggregated they assume new significance. Collective opinion affects the way the average person thinks about matters of the day. It renders individuals more or less confident in their *personal* opinions. Public opinion and collective memory alike affect elections, the morality of given lines of conduct, even the price of goods and services.

Although collective memory and public opinion are similarly constituted and exert effects in similar ways, collective memory represents itself not only by what individuals, in the aggregate, believe about past incidents and persons but also by multiple forms of *commemorative symbolism*.

### Commemoration

Commemoration, in contrast to history and collective memory, distinguishes events and persons believed to be deserving of celebration from those deserving of being merely remembered. The primary vehicles of commemoration include objects which lift from the historical record those events and persons representing a society’s conception of its ideals and depravities. Commemorative *writing* includes eulogies, poems, plays, and commentaries motivated by reverence or enmity. Emphasizing the moral rather than factual aspects of the past, commemorative texts lean toward hagiography or condemnation and are thus distinguishable from analytic history and chronicling. Commemorative *music* consists of anthems, hymns, and songs of repentance, aligning melodic and harmonic structures and lyrics to historical entities in such a way as to dramatize their significance. *Icons*—signs resembling what they represent—commemorate the past by bringing it to visual presence through paintings, statues, prints, photographs, motion picture film, television, and online video. *Monuments*, including obelisks, antique temples, and other memorial structures, are designed to elevate the public imagination by dramatic reference

to grand events and their men. *Shrines*—birthplaces, residences, state buildings, military headquarters, battle sites, and sites of individual death—bring the individual into direct contact with the sacred. Shrines (from the Latin word *scrinium*, meaning case or chest) are sacred because they are, by definition, containers of *relics*, objects that, in contrast to mundane things, are associated with extraordinary events or used by extraordinary people. Commemoration is also realized in *naming* patterns which make the past ubiquitous by incorporating it into the identity of businesses, streets, cities, towns, counties, states, rivers, and mountains. *Observances*, including periodic performance of anniversary, centennial, and holiday rites, perform the same functions—to maintain the memory of extraordinary events and persons and to preserve their essence within the collective consciousness. The “essence” of a collectively remembered entity refers to its “guiding pattern” (Shils 1981: 32–3) or, more concretely, the “basic pattern” (Kroeber [1923] 1963: 1–27) from which variations, including memory’s fads and fashions, emerge and fade.

The relations among history, commemoration, and collective memory can now be stated. History’s goal is to rationalize the past; commemoration and its sites, to sanctify it. History makes the past an object of analysis; commemoration, an object of commitment. History is a system of “referential symbols” representing known facts and their sequence; commemoration is a system of “condensation symbols” (Sapir 1930: 492–93) that simplifies events of the past and clarifies the moral sentiments they inspire. History, like science, investigates the world by producing models of its permanence and change; commemoration, like ideology, seeks to promote commitment to the world by producing symbols of its shortcomings as well as achievements and values (Geertz 1973: 193–233). History and commemoration are at once the sources, vehicles, and products of collective memory.

Nowhere is the interdependence among history, commemoration, and memory more evident than in the field of biblical studies. James Dunn (2003), prominent among historical Jesus scholars, declares that “the quest for the historical Jesus” can only be a quest for the “Jesus remembered” by contemporaries and successors, men and women who told or wrote about him and so marked the memory of his life (p. 335). Dunn’s statement stands out in the context of successful efforts, beginning in the first decade of the twenty-first century, to integrate collective memory, commemoration, and biblical history studies (Kirk and Thatcher 2005), but these efforts are generalizable to all fields concerned with the past.

### What makes events memorable?

Commemoration expresses the memorability of historical events. Social scientists with constructionist bents of mind believe, as did Georg Simmel ([1905] 1977) more than a century ago, that “if something is important, then importance must be ‘ascribed’ or ‘attached’ to it; in other words, it is important [and memorable] because the historian is interested in it” (p. 163).

In contrast, the realist historian ascribes significance to an event because of its intrinsic qualities and consequences. Destructive and order-changing events, including the bombing of Hiroshima or the attacks of September 11, *compel* the realist historian to ascribe importance to them. So do creative events, such as the advent of Christianity and the colonization of the New World. As the consequences of these events cannot be defined out of existence, they become memorable.

### How collective memory gets started

Although many collective memories go back to time immemorial, others have more recent and ascertainable starting points. Both categories of events may be equally memorable. Almost



nothing was known about U.S. president Abraham Lincoln's young adulthood when he was assassinated in 1865. But William Herndon, Lincoln's former law partner, located and interviewed 250 informants, including many former New Salem, Illinois, residents who had known Lincoln while he lived there in the 1830s. Because thirty-five to forty years had passed since these people had last seen Lincoln (an interval equivalent to that separating Mark's Gospel from the Crucifixion), Herndon conscientiously weeded out distortions, rumors, and mistakes in order to estimate the truth value of their testimony (Wilson and Davis 1998). He then used this adjusted store of information to publish the most comprehensive biography up to that time of Lincoln's early life (Herndon and Weik 1889).

In a second example, Katsuichi Honda ([1971] 1999) during the late 1960s interviewed survivors of the December 1937 to February 1938 Nanking Massacre. These illiterate victims could not have written their own stories, but their oral retellings more than thirty years later enlarged the records of the war crime tribunals.

Memories of Abraham Lincoln and the Nanking Massacre were transmitted orally across generations and have been retained long after the people who originally reported them have scattered or died. As these memories were passed on, they were modified, but their *essence* remained unchanged. *How* they remained unchanged is the problem.

### Redundancy

The Lincoln and Nanking narratives show that memory of a single event may have more than one "original" version. Edmund Leach (1976) explains how this is so in his account of myth transmission:

Let us imagine the situation of an individual A who is trying to get a message to a friend B who is almost out of earshot, and let us suppose that communication is further hampered by various kinds of interference—noise from wind, passing cars, and so on. What will A do? If he is sensible he will not be satisfied with shouting his message just once; he will shout it several times, and give a different wording to the message each time, supplementing his words with visual signals. At the receiving end B may likely get the meaning of each of the individual messages slightly wrong, but when he puts them together the redundancies and the mutual consistencies and inconsistencies will make it quite clear what is 'really' being said (pp. 63–4).

In brief, the "meaning" of the message is not in any single one of its versions or carriers but in all versions and all carriers taken together. To return to the examples noted earlier: Abraham Lincoln's friends did not fall silent when he died, and survivors of Japan's invasion of Nanking did not forget their suffering after their city was liberated. However, the eyewitnesses need not have told the same story in order for a good estimate of the real Lincoln and the real Nanking atrocity to appear on the "receiving end." As Leach has demonstrated, the more varied the narrative, the more accurately it is conveyed and remembered. Such stories contain bits of information that are vague at the individual level but coherent in their assemblage.

### Collective memory is emergent memory

Historical information remains stable when the narrative arising from the multiple versions becomes independent of its tellers—or, to put it technically, when *communicative memory* becomes *cultural memory* (Assmann 2008: 109–18). Folklore study demonstrates the point. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French folklorists recorded almost 10,000 popular tales

representing stable oral traditions spanning many generations. These anonymous storytellers, according to Robert Darnton, “kept the main elements [of the traditional narratives] intact, using repetitions, rhymes, and other mnemonic devices” (1984: 16; see also Rubin 1995). Recordings of these stories provide a point of entry into the mental world of the French peasant, who passed them on because he found in them a picture of himself and the hardships of his world. Folklorists could never reach this point had they confined themselves to one version of a story or to fine points of detail, and they felt no need to do so. With 35 variations on “Little Red Riding Hood,” 90 on “Tom Thumb,” and 105 on “Cinderella,” there is sufficient redundancy to discern the stem story’s theme, style, and tone. Redundancy discloses a collective memory that precedes and transcends any particular story telling.

Recent data further demonstrate the stickiness of emergent narratives. Over a thirteen-year period (1975–1988), historian Michael Frisch (1989) instructed his college students to “write down the first ten names that you think of in [relation] to ... American history from its beginning through the end of the Civil War.” He posed the questions to students with one or no previous college courses in American history and at two different universities in different states. The student cohorts had no previous communication with one another, used different textbooks, went to different high schools, and had different teachers. Nevertheless, their rank orderings of significant figures in American history were almost identical over the entire thirteen-year time span. Because the same names—George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson, in that order—occupied the top three presidential ranks for every test group, because these and other rankings were independent of knowledge of American history or differences in regional background, and because the test subjects regularly listed historical figures unmentioned in standard textbooks (notably Betsy Ross, who according to popular legend produced the first American flag), Frisch inferred the existence of a collective fixation on formative events. “[T]he list is not only composed of quasi-mythic figures: as a collective portrait, it has a kind of mythic structure and completeness itself, a character confirmed by its re-creation year after year in nearly identical terms” (p. 1,146). Collective memory’s consistency, Frisch concluded, presupposes its independence of the lives of individuals who retrieve and transmit it.

The redundancies in scores of French and American stories are generalizable to other oral and written histories, including the New Testament. Although there are only four partially independent Gospels in the New Testament, they make up in time and topic what they lack in number. They refer to a real historical figure, were based on an oral tradition comprising the memories of interacting contemporaries, were written shortly (a few decades) after his death, remained after their tellers vanished. They also conformed to external sources, including Paul’s letters, Roman and Judean historical accounts, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus’s sources, and the anonymous Gospel of Q (*Redenquelle* [“speech source”]), parts of which appear identically and independently in Matthew and Luke but is external to both. Such stories, in Emile Durkheim’s words, are “collective representations” ([1898] 1974) or “social facts” ([1895] 1982) that transcend and survive their individual sources (see also Durkheim [1901] 1951).

Does all this mean that the Gospels “reflect” the life of Jesus? Yes, but no more than any series of books reflect the life of Thomas Jefferson, no more than any series of skeletal remains reflect the path of evolution, no more than the Scholastic Aptitude Test, which has never accounted for much more than a third of the variation in freshman college performance.

### Preserving collective memory

Coherence of historical description results not only from the obdurateness of the reality it represents but also because this reality inspires preservation and transmission. On the other hand,



the perpetuation of material things—writings, recordings, and paintings stored in archives and museums or preserved on film—is necessary but insufficient for preservation, as many objects thus preserved are totally unknown or ignored. Because effective preservation maintains the past as a living thing, it requires a cognitive bridge connecting past and present. To this end, history must be relevant to the present and resonate with its conditions.

*Keying* makes this connection by aligning current events with happenings in the past, and by activating *frames* that shape the meaning of these current events (Schwartz 2000a). For example, Abraham Lincoln invoked the American Revolution as a frame for the Civil War by keying his Gettysburg Address into it (“Four-score and seven years ago...”). Carl Sandburg (1934) described the liberating power of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal by keying it to the frame of the Emancipation Proclamation. Similarly, the Gospels keyed Jesus’s activities and fate to Hebrew Scriptures an estimated 300 times. What we call the Old Testament strikingly frames the life of Jesus.

Keying and framing thus define collective memory’s function, matching the past to the present, as 1) a model of society—reflecting its needs, interests, fears, and aspirations; and 2) a model for society—a template for thought, sentiment, morality, and conduct. Presupposing one another, these models constitute the frames into which individuals key their experience and so realize its meaning (Schwartz 2000a; 2008; Poole 2008).

The meaning of individual experience, however, involves not only the history, memory, and commemorations which frame it but also their transmission across generations (Olick 1999: 9). Collective memory is “path dependent”—affected not only by its social contexts but also by previous representations of its contents. Once a memory is established within a collectivity, it is difficult to modify let alone ignore. In Georg Simmel’s words: “We are free to make the first move, but we are servants of the second” ([1905] 1977: 92). To the extent that earlier Gospel interpretations contributed to the content of later ones, for example, the latter possessed an inertia that only significant social change could modify. That 90 percent of the first Gospel, Mark, appears in Matthew and Luke exemplifies the relevance of path-dependency for tradition as well as collective memory (Kroeber [1923] 1963; Shils 1981).

### Reality, history, and memory

Historical events and persons are unobservable, and the only way one can know them is through memories of their influence on contemporaries. But how much stock can be placed in recent, let alone ancient, remembrances? Is not the destiny of all memory, in fact, to be annihilated by history? Pierre Nora (1989) tells us so, but if we take him uncritically we must be willing to assert that history can be recorded and understood independently of what witnesses directly or indirectly remember. In recent years, it is true, a nuanced relation between history and memory has emerged, but that revision has proven to be *too* nuanced—too ambiguous and too confusing. British historian Peter Burke (1989) recognized that “memory reflects what actually happened and that history reflects memory.” This traditional view, however, is no longer valid. “Neither memory nor history seem objective any longer” (p. 97). Jacques Le Goff (1992), among other historians, declares that memory is history’s raw material but is invariably warped and dependent on history to correct it—a confusingly delicate relationship. Other historians, including Pierre Vidal-Naquet (1992), claim that memory is the only antidote for historical error.

Dissensus on the relation between memory and history stems largely from the mentality of contemporary humanities and social science scholars who, being more suspicious of knowledge today than in any preceding generation, are more impressed than ever by evidence of memory’s imperfections. This new mood has its virtues, including the protection it affords against naïve

realism, but if we do not recognize this mood for what it is, we lose more than we gain. To say that history and memory are more “selective” and less “objective” than commonly believed is to make a useless statement, because partial (selective) knowledge is not synonymous with faulty knowledge. Failure to recognize the reality of selected events and persons *because* they are selected, or because existing data allow for incomplete knowledge, utterly confounds the relation among history, memory, and truth.

The problem is expressed in Maurice Halbwachs (1941) definition, with which few scholars today take serious issue. In *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels*, he declares: “If, as we believe, collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past, if it adapts the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present, then a knowledge of the origin of these facts must be secondary, if not altogether useless, for the reality of the past is no longer in the past” (p. 7). In other words, the reality of the past is in the present. After seventy years of subsequent scholarship, this statement seems as if it had been made yesterday—which is precisely the problem. No one can doubt that *present conditions* motivate us to remember in selective ways, but Halbwachs makes no provision for memory as a route to selective *realities*.

Memory is a form of perception, and perception is selective, observe Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin: “Motivations and needs sensitize us to specific stimuli or sometimes lead to distorted perception.... But these facts should not cause us to ignore the further fact that *reality sets limits to perception*.... No one can live in a real world if we see only what suits us” (1988: 124). Philosopher-social psychologist George Herbert Mead likewise defined “the past as that which *must* have been before it is present in experience as a past” (1929: 238, emphasis added). His point is a special case of Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin’s premise. Before we can take “the car to be where we are,” he observes, “we *must* have first arisen” from sleep (p. 238, emphasis added). That previous events *must* have happened in order for their consequences to occur does not mean that all memories are true; it does mean that present conditions can only be the result of past events. Such events have “an implied *objective existence*” and “they exist in the present through memory” (Maines, Sugrue, and Katovitch 1983: 164).

In many cases, this implied existence is itself exaggerated, underemphasized, falsified, misrepresented, and misunderstood, but it would be a mistake to take these distortions as collective memory’s paradigm. Nor may we assume that memories are usually, if not always, undistorted. Realism is critical, and its assumption is modest: perception of an event is more often forced upon the observer by its inherent quality than imposed by the observer’s worldview and interests. *Reality counts more than selective perception in the remembering of most events most of the time.*

Many scholars would reject even this qualified proposition. “To remember,” they repeatedly tell us, “is not like pulling files out of a cabinet.” But if memories do reflect, to some useful extent, an original happening, and if we do recall one thing at a time, then remembering is indeed comparable to pulling files out of a cabinet. Even more, if we do not know the past as Leopold von Ranke (1973) wished to know it, *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (as it *essentially* was), how could we know that a given representation of it is fabricated rather than authentic? If human memory were *typically* a “construction,” “fabrication,” or “invention,” it would utterly confound us by concealing rather than revealing reality.

The concept of agency—one of the worst sticking points in collective memory scholarship—can be equally misleading because events and persons cannot be known to a later generation unless they are remembered and transmitted by predecessors, including friends, family, and admirers (“reputational entrepreneurs” or memory carriers, as Gary Fine [1996] and Gladys and Kurt Lang [1990] would call them). This statement reminds us that nothing can be known without mediation, and if mediation is conceived as a process of distortion,



then the past becomes inherently unfathomable. We know about the past existence of distant galaxies, for example, because powerful but imperfect telescope lenses mediate the light they emit and gravity warps. Real objects, then, do not determine what we see; they affect it. That eyewitnesses, history texts, and commemorative objects, no less than accounts of the movement of light particles, should be totally independent of the reality they represent is difficult to conceive.

### Distortion's limits

Because constructionism is so evident in the way memory problems are selected and defined, its merits as well as limitations must be acknowledged. "Constructionism" refers to the conviction that collective memory depends more on contingencies of social experience than on qualities of the entities remembered. Positively, constructionism compels recognition that the past differs from what it now seems to have been. The number of examples is limitless.

Constructionism is a provocation, an invitation to interrogate memory by scrutinizing its contexts. Such is its most useful function, for there are no memories that remain the same forever or do not vary within a given place. Memory must always be taken as an estimate, not reproduction, of the past. The problem begins, however, when investigators attempt to understand propositions solely in terms of the situation within which they have been formed, and, above all, assume that social situations always induce a distorted perspective leading to falsehoods rather than essential or partial truths. Although warranted to an extent, the idea of situational distortion brings to mind Marx's account of how exposure to competitive capitalism sharpened Darwin's insight into natural selection. Darwin's economic "standpoint," Marx believed, led him to *valid*, not *faulty*, observations about nature (Angus 2009).

Paul Ricoeur (2004) was right when he warned against those who approach memory on the basis of its deficiencies and therefore mask its indispensability to social and natural history. Abraham Lincoln's relevance to America's present obsession with race relations is among the richest cases in point. His personal belief in the immorality of slavery is indisputable, and it is necessary to understand its relation to his political motivation. However, to insist even in the face of significant historical evidence that his emancipationist values trumped his mystical attachment to the Union is to transform a search for historical truth into a false ideological "backshadow": that we live in a society of relatively race-free opportunities means that a particular forbear of virtue and power *must* have been motivated to guarantee them (Schwartz 2008; Gallagher 2011).

Two cognitive models help to define the limits of such distortion. The first is exemplified by Frederic Bartlett's ([1932] 1950) oft-cited memory "experiments." After reading to his subjects a Native American folktale titled "The War of the Ghosts," a story of a mythical battle to the death involving supernatural forces, Bartlett asked them to replicate the story twenty minutes later. Applying the "repeated reproduction" method, he asked the same subjects to reproduce the story at later times. With each successive reproduction, the story became shorter and more coherent, with fewer mentions of supernatural powers. The order of events changed. The sacred narrative became mundane—a transformation involving omissions, simplification, and translation of esoteric into familiar detail. Gradually, a Native American folktale became a story that read as if had originated in England.

Bartlett formulated the concept of "schema" to describe this transformation. A schema is a cognitive framework for the organization of experience which enhances the capacity to remember. If two people are asked to watch a football game, the person who knows what

the game is about—its rules, strategies, player roles—will remember more of its content than the naïve spectator who knows little or nothing. The experienced viewer remembers better because his schema provides him with a grid on which to locate, then easily recall, the game's events. Accordingly, the transformation of a *Native American* tale can be explained as a translation through the schema of Bartlett's *British* subjects.

The problem with Bartlett's experiment, one that substantially reduces its relevance for understanding the relationship between memory and history, is that its design deprives subjects of key resources essential to remembering. Aside from his test narrative's being irrelevant to most of his subjects' interests, he failed to warn them that they would be tested and that something of importance might depend on their test performance. Because Bartlett's subjects believed (correctly) their responses would be inconsequential, they relied on the default option, performing as "cognitive misers"—treating the information indifferently and impassively, condensing and simplifying, reducing it to a simple and familiar schematic structure.

Most people *must* be cognitive misers in order to organize in their minds the vast amount of information to which they are exposed. But in many situations, people have a powerful interest in remembering accurately. Students preparing for career-determining examinations, military air controllers taking messages from besieged soldiers, detectives, scientists, and historians, among others, are highly *motivated* to remember because their interests depend on it. "Cognitive misers" in one situation thus become "motivated tacticians" in others (Fiske and Taylor 1991: 13). The ignoring or simplifying of information in one realm enables people to remember lengthy and complex details in realms that are most relevant to them.

Simplification is not the only cognitive tendency overgeneralized by memory scholars. Elizabeth Loftus's (1974) study of witness reliability involved test subjects watching a video of an automobile accident and being asked to estimate the speed of the vehicles on impact. Significantly, their responses varied with the words the researcher used to describe the impact (e.g., "How fast were the cars moving when they *collided* into one other?" versus "How fast were the cars moving when they *smashed* into one another?"). Subjects estimated car speed within a ten-point range: 30 to 40 miles per hour, but no subject estimated the cars to be traveling at 10 or 60 miles per hour. This experiment underestimated the efficiency of memory by overemphasizing its variations. Absence of extreme estimates is also evident in the conformity studies of Solomon Asch (1951), where confederates' estimates influenced subjects' later estimates of the length of lines, and Muzafir Sherif's (1935) experiment on perceived movement of a stationary light.

More recently, Daniel Kahneman's (2011) experimental distinction between the "experiencing self" and the "remembering self" demonstrates that concrete experience of an event always differs from our memory of it, which is stored in the narrative we create for ourselves afterward. Certain contingencies, including the narrative's ending, affect its remembrance as pleasant or unpleasant. Yet, Kahneman's conclusion is merely the most recent in a long series of observations which maximize memory's vulnerability to distortion by minimizing its dependence on experience. These include observation of "critical periods" in the life cycle *before* or *after* which memory of events is *least* accurate (Schuman and Corning 2012). At issue, however, is *how much* these contingencies affect memory's accuracy. To say that memory is "inference to the best recollection" is to recognize the way it works, that is to say what makes it imperfect—but efficiently so.

In these and all other experimental trials, memory regularly distorts reality to some degree, especially under conformity pressure, but within a limited range—and this limit confirms reality's constraint on the malleability of perception.



## Conclusion

In this essay, questions about collective memory began with a distinction between its pathological and normal states. The essay showed how collective memory gets started, how it literally emerges from interacting eyewitnesses and is transmitted as an emergent fact to a succeeding generation; finally, it demonstrated historical reality to be one of the factors—in some cases the major factor—determining what we perceive. Because we are able to capture history “as it essentially was,” the “dynamics of distortion” (Schudson 1995: 346–64) are offset if not negated by the dynamics of authenticity.

Most readers will recognize that my application of collective memory theory is open to the charge of naïve optimism, of exaggerating the soundness of what we know about the past and underestimating what we do not know. My inclination and my colleagues’ criticisms of it can be represented as two competing forms of metaphysical pathos. As defined by Arthur Lovejoy (1948: 11), “metaphysical pathos” refers to the affective climate in which objective propositions are conceived. The pathos of collective memory scholarship is fatalistic; it more often tells us how we manage to get the past wrong than how we get it right. This disposition is related to memory scholars’ interest in challenging conventional wisdom, but it relies less on evidence than it should. Memory’s pathologists underestimate the importance of fact because they are convinced that individual and collective memory is *inherently* subject to distortion. No assumption has done more to impede progress in understanding the relationships between history, memory, and commemoration. This is because every memory, like *every* scientific accomplishment, is based on inference from incomplete information.

In an opening section of this essay, I expressed the wish to explore memory in its normal rather than pathological operation, how it gets things right and preserves them over vast stretches of time. In the process, memory’s relation to history, one of its critical points of reference, is now clearer than before: although there can be no history without memory, assessment of memory’s accuracy depends on the accuracy of its historical criteria. As noted, if we know nothing about the essence of an event, we have no basis for claiming that we have described, distorted, or forgotten it. If such an event were unimportant to us, of course we would have no need to know about it. Realizing that commemorative symbolism is the primary indicator of an event’s importance, commemoration’s relation to memory and history becomes all the more evident.

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