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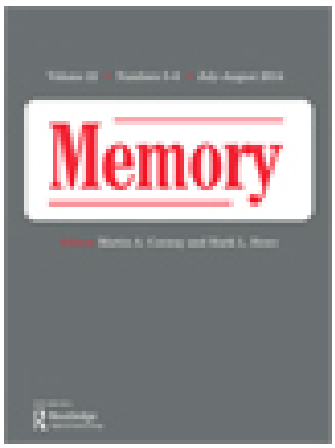

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Collective memory: Conceptual foundations and theoretical approaches

James V. Wertsch [a] & Henry L. Roediger III [a]
[a] Washington University , St. Louis, MO, USA
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Collective memory: Conceptual foundations and theoretical approaches

James V. Wertsch and Henry L. Roediger III
Washington University in St. Louis, MO, USA

In order to outline the conceptual landscape that frames discussions of collective memory, three oppositions are proposed: collective memory versus collective remembering; history versus collective memory; and individual memory versus collective remembering. From this perspective collective remembering is viewed as an active process that often involves contention and contestation among people rather than a static body of knowledge that they possess. Collective remembering is also viewed as privileging identity formation and contestation over the sort of objective representation of the past that is the aspiration of formal historical analysis. And finally, while collective remembering involves individual minds, it also suggests something more in the form of socially situated individuals, a claim that can usefully be formulated in terms of how members of a groups share a common set of cultural tools (e.g., narrative forms) and similar content.

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Collective memory is a term that is widely used, yet poorly understood in contemporary academic discourse. It has been part of this discourse at least since the 1920s, when the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1887–1945)[1] published his seminal works. For much of the period since then, however, it has been used as a loosely defined notion when examining issues such as the Holocaust rather than as a construct that deserves focused attention in its own right. Over the past few decades, collective memory has become a topic of renewed interest in the humanities and social sciences and is now a key part of emerging interdisciplinary activity in "memory studies" (Roediger & Wertsch, 2007). However, it continues to be plagued by the fact that it has almost as many definitions as investigators writing about it. Perhaps the only generally agreed-upon feature is that collective memory is a form of memory that transcends individuals and is shared by a group.

One of the reasons for the problems in defining collective memory is 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, & Rimé, 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.

In *Memory from A to Z*, Yadin Dudai remarked that "The term 'collective memory' actually refers to three entities: *a body of knowledge*, an *attribute*, and a *process*" (2002, p. 51). The body of knowledge is a feature of the culture of the individuals who share some similarity, and individuals may participate in various different groups (with different collective memories) defined by generation, countries of origin, locale

[1] The two major works by Halbwachs in English, *On collective memory* (1992) and *The collective memory* (1980), are compilations of French publications from the 1920s, 30s, and early 40s. He died in Buchenwald concentration camp shortly before the end of World War II.

Address correspondence to: James V. Wertsch, Department of Anthropology – Box 1173, Washington University, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis, MO 63130, USA. E-mail: jwertsch@wustl.edu

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(e.g., Texans), and so on. The attribute is ''the distinctive holistic image of the past in the group'' (e.g., World War II veterans in the US who are referred to as ''the greatest generation'' by some). The process is the continual evolution of understanding between the individual and the group, as individuals may influence and change the collective memory of the group, and the group can change the individual's understanding and consciousness of being a member of the group (for more on this topic, see Reese & Fivush, 2008 this issue). These three entities capture some (but not all) of the various senses of collective memory used by scholars in different academic disciplines.

SOME BASIC OPPOSITIONS

Given the fragmented state of the discussion, a single, widely accepted definition of collective memory has remained elusive. Indeed, the very term is often used almost interchangeably with others such as ''public memory'' and ''cultural memory'', a practice that reflects the range of perspectives as well as the lack of organisation in this discussion. We believe that rather than searching for a single, neat definition it is more productive to outline a set of conceptual oppositions that delineate the conceptual field within which collective memory is discussed. We hope that such an effort can begin a process of developing a clearer set of concepts that can be operationalised in productive ways. In what follows, we outline three such oppositions and then explore how they apply to some issues having to do with the role of language in remembering. The first two of these oppositions—collective memory versus collective remembering and history versus collective remembering—provide the foundation for a set of issues we shall consider in more detail under the heading of the opposition between individual and collective remembering.

Collective memory versus collective remembering

This first conceptual opposition contrasts collective memory as a static base of knowledge with collective remembering, which involves the repeated reconstruction of representations of the past, a process that is often quite contentious. Dudai's (2002) notion of ''collective memory'' as a body of knowledge shared by a ''culture of individuals'' would seem to qualify as an example of collective memory. A focus on collective remembering, in contrast, would give greater emphasis to the social and political contestation that is part of many accounts of the past. Such contestation is closer to what Dudai calls process. An example of this can be found in the writings of Bodnar (1992), an historian who has formulated an account that presupposes an unending dialectic between ''official culture'' and ''vernacular culture''. From this perspective, collective memory is more like a space of contestation than a body of knowledge—a space in which local groups engage in an ongoing struggle against elites and state authorities to control the understanding of the past.

The sites of the contestation over collective remembering include family discussions (Reese & Fivush, 2008 this issue), museums, monuments and memorials, history textbooks, and national holidays. For example, the presentation of Native Americans in national museums in the US has undergone fundamental change as newly empowered perspectives have emerged in what is often termed the ''politics of memory'' (e.g., Kramer, 1996). The fact that the National Museum of the American Indian exists today as an official, state-sponsored institution in Washington, DC is a reflection on a debate about the ''real story'' of America that has been going on since the country was founded.

Or consider the discussion that surrounded plans for an exhibit in the National Air and Space Museum, another member institution of the Smithsonian system in Washington, DC. In the early 1990s plans were underway for an exhibit on the bombing of Hiroshima in 1945, but as the project unfolded, the politics of memory became increasingly heated as US veterans and eventually the US Congress became deeply embroiled in what Linenthal and Engelhardt (1996) call a ''history war''. The veterans and many members of the public perceived the use of the bomb as a justifiable act that helped bring World War II to an end, but the original plans for the exhibit questioned the need for the bomb to be used and noted the suffering of the Japanese civilians who were affected. In this case the controversy led to scrapping the original plans for the exhibit, and museum authorities in essence withdrew their efforts to debate historical events in a public forum.

Such disputes are at the centre of many analyses of collective memory, highlighting the

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need to focus on process and debate rather than static shared knowledge. In some cases, the process may take the form of continual evolution between individual and group, but in cases such as those just outlined a great deal of contention is involved as well and resolving it may take decades—or may never occur at all. With this focus on process and contestation in what follows, we shall often refer to collective remembering rather than collective memory.

History versus collective remembering

A second distinction that can help sort out the conceptual field in which collective remembering exists concerns history. If collective remembering is a representation of the past, how does it differ from history, which is also a representation of the past? This is a question that was raised in the 1920s by Halbwachs (1980, 1992), and its roots can be traced back even further. For example, it was an object of debate in the nineteenth century in writings by Renan (1990/1882), who viewed serious historical research as often posing a threat to popular efforts at collective remembering.

In contemporary debates this question has re-emerged in philosophy and historiography, where history and collective remembering are often viewed not just as different, but in basic conflict. The reason for this situation stems from the different aspirations of the two modes of representing the past. For its part, history aspires to provide an accurate account of the past, even if it means we must give up favoured and often self-serving narratives. In contrast, collective remembering inevitably involves some identity project—remembering in the service of constructing what kind of people we are—and hence is resistant to change even in the face of contradictory evidence. In collective remembering, the past is tied interpretatively to the present, and if necessary part of an account of the past may be deleted or distorted in the service of present needs. For example, Schuman, Schwartz, and D'Arcy (2005) have documented that even though historians and the intellectual elite in the US no longer accept the claim that Columbus "discovered" America, belief in this proposition remains resistant to change in the general population.

The contradiction between history and collective memory is central to the argument Nora (1989) makes that "real memory" has been largely pushed aside, if not eradicated, by the practices of creating critical historical accounts. For him, the upshot is that "we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left" (p. 7), and we have a felt need to create *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) "because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory" (p. 7). That is, representations of the past based on traditional practices such as rituals—representations that are often quite self-serving—can come into question and be threatened by critical historical accounts.

A similar opposition between history and collective memory can be found in the account Assmann (1997) has provided of two figures from the past: Moses and Akhenaten. The existence of Akhenaten, Pharaoh Amenophis IV, as a real person has been documented through archaeological research in the nineteenth century. To be sure, he was forgotten for many centuries after his name was deleted from the king-lists, his monuments were dismantled, and his inscriptions were erased, and even today the past is not tied interpretatively to the present in his case. Moses presents the opposite case. While no evidence has been found for his historical existence, he has for centuries been an essential part of collective remembering in the Judaeo-Christian monotheistic tradition. Indeed, as Assmann notes, Moses "grew and developed only as a figure of memory, absorbing and embodying all traditions that pertained to legislation, liberation, and monotheism" (1997, p. 23).

For something to qualify as collective remembering from this perspective, it must have an ongoing, vital connection with contemporary cultural discourse and identity, whereas this need not be a prerequisite for history. In collective remembering, "The past is not simply 'received' by the present. The present is 'haunted' by the past and the past is modeled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present." (Assmann, 1997, p. 9)

Historians routinely warn against practices of inventing, reinventing, and reconstructing the past in the service of the present, but this is precisely what is encouraged—indeed celebrated—in the case of collective remembering. The processes involved are usually tied to schematisation and

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simplification that stand in contrast to the aspirations of analytic history. As noted by the historian Novick (1999, pp. 3–4):

> To understand something historically is to be aware of its complexity, to have sufficient detachment to see it from multiple perspectives, to accept the ambiguities, including moral ambiguities, of protagonists' motives and behavior. Collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes.

While maintaining the distinction between history and memory, Assmann warns against a stark and overly simple opposition, one that would lead to ''an all-too antiseptic conception of 'pure facts' as opposed to the egocentrism of myth-making memory'' (1997, p. 14). For him the key to understanding the difference between these two ways of relating to the past is the degree to which they are shaped in accordance with, and through the lens of, the present: ''History turns into myth as soon as it is remembered, narrated, and used, that is, woven into the fabric of the present'' (p. 14).

To sum up, the opposition between collective remembering and analytic history can be outlined as follows:
Collective remembering:

- involves an identity project (usually based on a narrative of heroism, a golden age, victimhood, etc.);
- is impatient with ambiguity;
- ignores counter-evidence in order to preserve established narratives;
- relies on implicit theories, schemas, and scripts that simplify the past and ignore substantiated findings that do not fit the narrative;
- is conservative and resistant to change.

In contrast, formal history:

- aspires to arrive at an objective account of the past, regardless of consequences for identity;
- recognises complexity and ambiguity;
- may revise existing narratives in light of new evidence (from archives, etc.);
- is constrained by archival materials;
- can change in response to new information.

Individual versus collective remembering

The third opposition we outline contrasts individual and collective remembering. The analysis of individual remembering has been the focus of much more attention over the past century and is more organised as a field of study than the analysis of collective remembering. Literally thousands of studies have been conducted in psychology, neuroscience, and related disciplines on varieties of memory in the individual. Despite the fact that many findings and terms remain open to dispute, researchers studying individual memory have arrived at a few basic distinctions and definitions. Terms such as ''episodic memory'', ''semantic memory'' (or knowledge), and ''working memory'' are widely employed, even as their specifics continue to be debated (see Roediger, Marsh, & Lee, 2002, for an overview).

The situation in collective memory studies is quite different. In fact, scholars employ a variety of terms when discussing issues that fall under the broad umbrella of what is here called collective remembering. In further contrast to research on individual memory, where there is agreement on the basic set of methods to be employed, the study of collective remembering has little in the way of agreed-upon sets of objects or methodological tools (see Roediger & Wertsch, 2008).

Some scholars have drawn a stark opposition between individual and collective remembering, going to far as to assert that only one or the other exists. Bartlett (1932/1995), for example, raised the issue of whether collective remembering exists, at least in the ''strong'' sense that a group, qua group, ''can be usefully characterized as having some sort of memory in its own right'' (Wertsch, 2002, p. 22). In contrast to this, scholars such as Schudson (1995), p. 347) have questioned whether memory can be anything *but* collective in that ''memory is social. . . . it is located in institutions rather than in individual human minds in the form of rules, laws, standardized procedures, and records, a whole set of cultural practices through which people recognize a debt to the past''. Such statements suggest that there is little agreement on how to relate individual and collective remembering, but in reality, a point of contact can be identified. Namely, there is often agreement on the point that *socially situated individuals* are the agents of remembering.

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One way to understand what it means to say that individuals are socially situated is to consider how their use of "cultural tools" for remembering reflects their sociocultural setting (Wertsch, 2002). These cultural tools are items such as written symbols, information storage in computers, and "mnemotechnics" (Yates, 1966), and what makes collective remembering collective is that members of a group share the same "cultural tool kit" (Bruner, 1990). This does not mean that the tools somehow remember on their own, a claim that would amount to instrumental reductionism, but it does emphasise the memory is "distributed" and relies extensively on semiotic means provided by cultural, historical, and institutional contexts.

As an example of distributed memory at the individual level, consider the analysis of Hutchins (1995) of "how a cockpit remembers its speed". By seeming to give cultural tools or cognitive instruments their own agency ("a *cockpit* remembers"), Hutchins emphasises the importance that they can play. In this particular case, he examines how a pilot can set and then check with recording devices in an airplane cockpit to keep track of information, and in the process he argues that any assignment of memory to the individual or to instrumentation alone is misguided. Instead, human agents and the cultural tools they employ must be viewed as integral components of a memory system.

In most studies of how agents and cultural tools function together in "distributed remembering", the emphasis is on how written or spoken language serves as a cultural tool. A major historical transformation in this regard came with what Donald (1991) calls the third transition in human cognitive evolution, one characterised by "the emergence of visual symbolism and external memory as major factors in cognitive architecture" (p. 17). The primary engine of change in this case was not within the individual, but "external symbolic storage" such as written texts and financial records. Donald stresses that these new forms of external symbolic storage have a transformational impact on psychological and neurological processes; they "impose search strategies, new storage strategies, new memory access routes, new options in both the control of an analysis of one's own thinking" (1991, p. 19). As a contemporary example in the early twenty-first century, consider the new skills and strategies that have emerged with the appearance of Google, GoogleScholar, and other search engines on the Internet. The remarkable speed and power of these tools permit us to participate in a form of collective remembering for all sorts of remarkable information. For example, entering the term *collective memory* in GoogleScholar provides 148,000 hits in 0.14 of a second.

A focus on distributed remembering raises the question of how different cultural tools might give rise to different forms of memory. Instead of being viewed as simply facilitating existing processes, leaving them otherwise unchanged, such tools are assumed to shape remembering in fundamental ways. Language has frequently been at the centre of these discussions, and this has led investigators to examine various properties of language and its use that might shape memory. For example, the fact that human language has several functions led Middleton and Brown (2005) to the conclusion that the language used to recount the past may depend as much on the need for speakers to be convincing as it does on any inclination to provide an accurate account of past events.

At a more basic level, Carmichael, Hogan, and Walters (1932) showed that when students were shown ambiguous objects and asked to remember their visual forms, the label applied to an object (e.g., gun or broom) greatly affected the way the object was recalled and drawn on a later test. Similarly, Loftus and Palmer (1974) had students watch a videotape of an automobile accident. In a later questionnaire, students were asked a question about the speed of the automobiles. The authors showed that the recalled speed depended heavily on the power of the verb used in communicating about the event. When they asked how fast the cars were going when they *smashed* into each other, the recollection was 41 mph. When other participants were asked how fast they were going when they *hit* each other, they said 34 mph. So the way in which a query of memory is posed helps to determine the answer provided. In a later phase of the experiment, the participants were asked if they saw any broken glass in the accident. No broken glass had been present, but 34% of the students who had previously been asked the question with *smashed* recalled having seen glass, whereas only 14% of those who had been asked the question with *hit* made this error. Loftus and Palmer (1974) argued that when students got the question with *smashed* on the questionnaire, it caused them to recode their memories of the accident to be more severe than it had really been. A huge literature using this technique and

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others shows that the language in which events are described after their initial occurrence can mould the form of later memory. Many memory distortions are caused by language not mapping perfectly onto experience. Inferences made during an event can be recalled as actually having been stated during the event (Roediger & Gallo, 2002).

A major focus in the study of how language shapes remembering is the role of narrative. Researchers from a variety of disciplines have found it useful to make a basic distinction between forms of memory mediated by narratives and those that are not. In the case of individual memory, for example, Pillemer (1998) distinguishes between imagistic and narrative forms of ''personal event memories'' (p. 7). Pillemer and White (1989) argue that imagistic memory is ''present from birth and operational throughout life. ... The memories are expressed through images, behaviors, or emotions'' (p. 326). In contrast, the narrative memory system ''emerges during the preschool years. ... Event representations entering the higher-order system are actively thought about or mentally processed and thus are encoded in narrative form. ... Memories in the higher-order system can be accessed and recounted in response to social demands'' (Pillemer & White, 1989, p. 326).

Pillemer formulated this distinction in order to analyse developmental issues such as childhood amnesia, where the concern is how imagistic memory is eventually supplemented by remembering that is mediated by narratives. However, this does not mean that the former is thought to disappear, because a great variety of experimental evidence shows the influence of imagery in adult cognition (see Paivio, 1986, for a review). In autobiographical and collective memory, imaginal processes can be observed in Brown and Kulik's (1977) account of flashbulb memory, which they speculated ''is not a narrative and not even in verbal form, but represented in other, perhaps imaginal ways'' (p. 85).

A related set of distinctions in the research literature on individual memory focus on the difference between implicit and explicit memory (Roediger, 1990; Schacter, 1996) or unaware and aware uses of memory (Jacoby, 1988). An essential property of implicit memory is that the underlying processes are largely nonconscious (Tulving & Schacter, 1990), which contrasts with explicit memory involving episodic and autobiographical forms. These latter types of memory are assumed to use organisational structures such as schemas, scripts, and narratives. Such narrative form is taken to be essential in organising information and making it accessible to consciousness. According to Schacter (1994), ''a key function of the episodic system is to bind together perceptual with other kinds of information (e.g., semantic, contextual) and thereby allow subsequent recall or recognition of multiattribute events'' (p. 257).

The relationship between imagistic and narrative forms of remembering is sometimes formulated in terms of translation. For example, Pillemer provides an alternative account of ''repressed memories'' in terms of a ''failure of translation'' (1998, p.133). From this perspective it is a failure to translate imagistic forms of remembering into narratives that gives rise to what others have called repression. And in the quite distinct realm of historical research, the semiotician Lotman (1990), p. 221) made an analogous claim:

> Even when the historian is an observer of the events described (examples of this rare occurrence are Herodotus and Julius Caesar) the observations still have to be mentally transformed into a verbal text, since the historian writes not of what was seen but a digest of what was seen in narrative form. ... The transformation of an event into a text involves, first, narrating it in the system of a particular language, i.e., subjecting it to a previously given structural organisation.

From a psychological perspective, one of the important implications of such translation is that it makes possible reflection and control, processes that take on particular importance when dealing with traumatic experience. In a discussion of overcoming traumatic events, for example, Harber and Pennebaker (1992) report that ''victims must consciously confront the memories and emotions associated with their traumatic ordeals. This confrontation is best accomplished by translating the chaotic swirl of traumatic ideation and feelings into coherent language'' (p. 360).

As in the case of research on memory in individuals, narrative form provides the basis for distinguishing between different types of collective remembering. Assmann (2007), for example, distinguishes between ''non-narrative'' forms of cultural memory, such as those involved in foods and landscapes, on the one hand, and ''national

narratives'', which impose ''a coherent ordering of events along a strict narrative line serving as an intellectual and emotional backbone of national identity'' (p. 40), on the other. As is the case for narratives in general, national narratives are assumed to ''grasp together'' (Ricouer, 1985, p. 44) events, characters, and motives into a coherent representation of the past—much in the way that Schacter says episodic memory ''binds together'' information for the individual.

Something that distinguishes research on individual and collective remembering is an assumption about the source of the narratives involved. Psychological studies of episodic memory typically assume that narrative organisation is generated by the individual. There is little doubt that ''narrative cognition'' (Feldman & Kalmar, 1996) is widely used in the effort after meaning that shapes collective remembering as well, but studies of collective remembering typically focus on how the sociocultural context in which individuals function shapes the narrative tools employed. From this perspective, what makes collective remembering collective is the fact that these narrative tools are shared across the members of a group.

In this account, collective remembering harnesses existing narratives in the ''tool-kit'' that is ''already 'there,' deeply entrenched in culture and language'' (Bruner, 1990, p. 11) to make sense of the past. Of course active agents are always involved and every use of these tools is unique, even creative in some way, but this performance is viewed as harnessing items in what MacIntyre (1984) calls a society's ''stock of stories''.

Heated debates and ''memory wars'' provide striking illustrations of these issues. Such debates occur over commemorative monuments, holidays, museums, and history teaching. In the US these debates have been over how to represent the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Linenthal & Engelhardt, 1991); in India they reflect an ongoing struggle between secularists and religious parties over what narrative would be appropriate for school textbooks (Thapar, 2003); and in China they may touch on Japan's ''collective amnesia'' (Chang, 1997) about the rape of Nanking in the 1930s, and continue today in debates about forced prostitution there and in Korea.

CONCLUSION

Although the term ''collective memory'' is widely used, a shared understanding of what it means is only beginning to emerge. This situation has arisen in part because of the varying uses of the concept springing from the array of disciplines involved in the discussion. In order to bring some coherence to this discussion, we have outlined the conceptual field on which it is carried out. We have done so by outlining three basic oppositions along which research on collective memory is conducted: collective memory versus collective remembering, history versus collective remembering, and individual versus collective remembering.

In the first of these oppositions we have argued for the need to recognise the active, often contentious nature of collective remembering. We drew on ideas from historiography and the philosophy of history to formulate our second opposition. History and collective remembering represent two ways of relating to the past, and the pictures they provide are often related. However, it is important to keep in mind the essential difference in function and aspiration of these two approaches. History's aspiration to present an objective account of the past often comes into direct conflict with collective memory's simplifying, subjective approach that serves an essential role in identity formation. In a nutshell, one could say that history is willing to change a narrative in order to be loyal to facts, whereas collective remembering is willing to change information (even facts) in order to be loyal to a narrative.

In the case of the third opposition, we have argued for the need to understand the relationship, as well as the fundamental distinction between individual and collective processes. In this view, what makes collective memory collective is the fact that members of a group share a similar set of cultural tools, especially narrative forms, when understanding the past. From this perspective, it is incumbent on investigators to examine these cultural tools as well as the particular use made of them on particular occasions. This requires collaborating across disciplinary lines, a fundamental part of what we see as the future of productive research on collective memory.

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