

Continuing commentary: Beyond recollection: Toward a dialogical psychology of collective memory

Andrés Haye

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Chile

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Abstract

Collective memory implies the social and psychological production of meaningful acts of memory, a special kind of truth claim about a controversial past. Memory acts are thus conceptualized as ideological positioning movements toward others, which is impossible to account for from individual cognition. What kind of psychological processes, if any, would be involved in collective memory? A three-fold model is sketched to account for a whole act of memory. One analytical component is the generation of a knowledge structure about the past object. A second component is the construction of an attitude toward the theme. The third is the understanding of the ideological dimension within which the knowledge structure and the attitude under production are contextualized. An information storage-and-retrieval mechanism is not needed in this theoretical account. It is suggested that psychology of memory may contribute to accounting for these three micro-genetic levels as integrated into meaningful memory acts.

Keywords

acts of memory, collective memory, dialogical approach to memory, rhetorical meaning, September 11

It is almost a decade since, in 2002, Ken Loach released a short film included in *11'' 9' 1*, an omnibus of eleven films about September 11th, all of them eleven minutes nine seconds and one frame long, by well-known directors all over the world. This event was quickly judged as one the most shocking public event for Western

Corresponding author:

Andrés Haye, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Escuela de Psicología, Vicuña Mackenna 4860, Santiago 7820436, Chile

Email: ahaye@uc.cl

Civilization in the last times (Slovic, 2002). A French television director, Alain Brigand, had the idea the day after the attacks. To the surprise of the audience, however, the British director's film focuses on another September 11th:

the day in 1973 when the democratically elected Chilean government of Salvador Allende was bloodily overthrown with the backing of the Nixon administration. Against a backdrop of black-and-white footage of the coup and subsequent terror, Loach's character, Pablo, a Chilean living in exile in London, speaks sympathetically to the families of those who died on September 11, but points out that 30,000 people died after "your leaders set out to destroy us": George Bush's "enemies of freedom" also reside in America. The film ends: "On September 11, we will remember you. We hope you will remember us". (*The Guardian*, September 5, 2002)

The character constructs a narrative based upon both personal recollections and images known to every Chilean citizen. He draws upon commonplaces that connect his experience with widespread Western values. He also selects and organizes the information in a way that happens to be typical of a Chilean from the left wing. In constructing the narrative, then, available ideological positions, common places, narrative styles, group memberships, and other social frameworks of memory help produce an account of the past beyond the realm of the individual speaker. Likewise, the production of the film, as a memory artifact, is constrained by the director's social identity, his persistent interests and beliefs, and the cultural landscape in which he moves. The Chilean man's chain of memories is nested within another chain, namely Loach's provocative association between a recent and a remote event in the history of the US, thus bringing the past to the present.

The specific dynamics of collective memory involve the elaboration of memories about a common past, relevant for the identity of given community (Billig, 1990; Halbwachs, 1925/1992; Irwin-Zarecka, 1994; Lowenthal, 1994; Schwartz, 1996; Wertsch, 2009). As Loach's film illustrates, collective memory acts take place as ideological stands about the controversial past, essentially involving social processes in their production. It is clear, at least, that they are more than cognitions within individual minds. Even if not shared, social memories are encounters with others, beyond the scope of psychological processes of recollection (Engel, 1999; Frijda, 1997; Larsen, 1988; Pennebaker & Banasic, 1997). Let us explore some aspects of memory and its psychological processes from this standpoint of collective memory.

What is "social" about social memories?

Memory is not only the differential capacity to store and retrieve perceptual information on the part of individual living beings but, more broadly, the operation of the past in the present, the surviving of the past (Bergson, 1896/2004). This takes place in a diversity of manners, from those developed by non-speaking living beings

with different degrees of complexity and training, to those performed by speaking beings through different cultural means.

Not only in collective memory practices involving a controversial common past, but also in autobiographical memory, speakers help each other to remember and rely on external clues as sources of information to represent the past. It is possible to argue that cultural artifacts like writing (Vygotsky, 1987), and stabilized patterns of social practices such as division of labor (Hutchins, 1994), make possible socially distributed mnemonic traces, working jointly with individual, bodily mnemonic traces. In collective memory dynamics, in particular, memories are mainly embodied in socially organized traces, “written” in cultural forms, giving them stability and a scope beyond the retention capacity of individual minds (Goody, 1998; Noyes & Abrahams, 1999; Radley, 1990; Traister, 1999; Zelizer, 1998).

For instance, commemoration sites and history textbooks can be conceived of as types of long-lasting changes in the semiotic fabric of culture, enabling speakers to reconstruct a common past each in a singular manner but preserving the possibility to communicate each other, at least to disagree. Although the remembered past is not a direct, mechanic cause of the social means of remembering, it becomes signified only by conventionalized schemes of interaction, symbolic forms, or other cultural products through which the past is preserved in the present. Thus, any individual act of remembering a socially relevant past has to deal with the way in which that past situation has been represented by others, more than with the past situation itself. Moreover, in collective memory there may be no original traces of the event stored in an individual memory system (Bar On, Ostrovsky, & Fromer, 1998; Cole, 1990; Lang & Lang, 1990; Larsen, 1988; Shank & Abelson, 1995; Wyer, Adaval, & Colcombe, 2002). Consequently, the specific psychological processes involved in collective memory are different from retrieval of traces from the brain, but have to do with social interaction.

To understand this relationship between memory and social interaction, and thus to identify the role of psychology in accounting for collective memory, the present paper elaborates on the concept of memory act.

Acts of memory

To approach this notion from a familiar perspective, consider the traditional “two phase” models of recall (Anderson & Bower, 1973; Hollingworth, 1913; James, 1890; Kintsch, 1970). In recall, candidates must first be *generated*, that is, searched for, or retrieved. Only then, generated items can be subjects of a discrimination *judgment* to decide whether the item is appropriate. The difference between recall and recognition is that in the latter the generation process is skipped: The perceptual presentation of items to recognize makes it unnecessary to generate them. They are, so to say, already generated by the environment. What is particularly appealing is the hypothetical distinction between the building up of knowledge structures—images or words with semantic meaning—and the judgment to which they are submitted. Moreover, it is this judgmental process, and not the

knowledge-structure construction, that which is shared between recall and recognition, suggesting that the psychological definition of memory should focus on the nature of this judgment. Yet memory needs more than the capacity to generate a knowledge structure; it also needs the capacity of the organism to react upon it, and take a position toward the knowledge structure arisen.

I dispute, however, that knowledge construction and position taking are sequential steps. In addition, regarding collective memory acts, I propose a three-fold model of memory micro-genesis (in line with Wagoner 2009, 2011). One aspect is the generation of a knowledge structure used to represent a past situation, being an image in whatever modality or a word in whichever format, aloud or silent. A second component is the construction of an attitude toward the object as it is represented. The third is the understanding of the social field within which both the knowledge structure and the attitude toward it are contextualized from within the very memory act. These three parts are interactive sub-processes, constraining each other, integrating the production process of an act of memory. The production is said to reach a satisfactory end only when the three parts are co-ordinated so as to give the speaker a commitment with a certain position toward a certain piece of knowledge in a certain social landscape. Figure 1 presents a simplified diagram of the micro-genetic processes specified by this model.

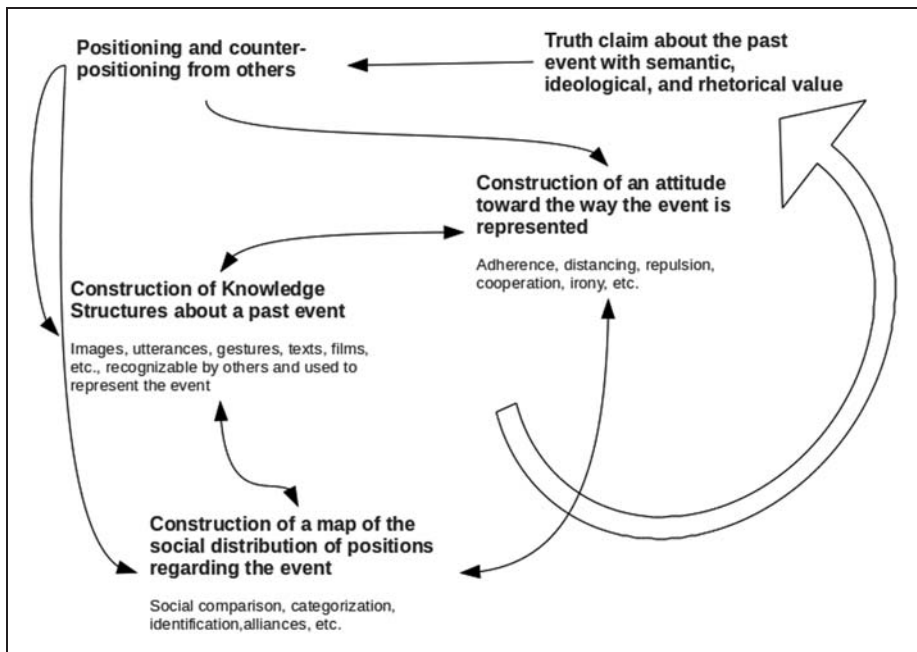


Figure 1. Model of memory production.

In what follows it is argued that the three micro-genetic components are essential aspects of a whole memory act, dialogically conceptualized as intertwined with socio-genesis. The goal of this paper is not to develop this model in detail, but to offer a general framework to dialogically approach different memory phenomena and types of memory acts.

The meaning of memory acts

Collective memory requires that individual speakers generate symbolic representations with a subjective commitment (Mori, 2010), and employ them as a personal stand regarding the controversial past within a community (Wertsch, 2011). Social memories are not just mental representations characterized by their semantic value; they involve a value judgment toward that which is represented, and the virtual encounter with the representations and attitudes of others to whom the speaker is responding, or addressing, on the basis of conventional signs. The psychological construction of a knowledge structure about September 11th composing a semiotic arrangement is only part of the story. For example, the knowledge structure “there were casualties on both sides” may have a conventional denotative meaning, as long as it is used as a description of a state of affairs in a specific context. However, to commit oneself to its truthfulness or to deny it are clearly different acts of memory. This is so not only because of the propositional attitude attached to this declarative knowledge structure, but also because this symbolic structure is used as an ideological truth-claim about September 11th.

Ideological

Collective memory acts are not understood by interlocutors as psychological truths, that is, claims about the subjective experience, as if claiming that a given representation is a authentic recollection (neither perception nor imagination). Likewise, their truth is not understood in terms of neutral descriptions of factual data. Rather, social memories are claims about the the (un)just or (in)correct way to interpret facts according to dignity or to other values. Likewise, Wertsch (2011) calls attention to the “narrative truth” of social and autobiographical memories, and Freud (1939) stressed the “historical truth” of past-accounts even if materially false. Consistently, in collective memory we say that memories essentially have an ideological value (Billig, 1990). Put simply, truth-judgments involved in collective memory have political and ethical implications for present and future life in a given community of memory.

Dialogical

Moreover, because social memories are truth-judgments made toward a given potential audience, they are not in social isolation but related to acts of memory

to be performed by others (Echterhoff, 2010). To borrow terms from Bakhtin (1981), in each act of memory the speaker gets implicated in multiple argumentative encounters with the voices of others, ideological stands, memory genres, perceived or imagined memory acts, and also speaker's past memory acts. A given act of memory is a response to and an intervention into an ongoing dialogue. In collective memory, the question about the meaning of memories is not whether they adaptively represent a given past event, but *from which position* and *before whom*—present or absent—they are raised.

Rhetorical

The semantic, the ideological, and the dialogical aspects of a collective memory act are organized such that social memories' meaning is fairly called rhetorical, because they are not a descriptive truth-claim but an effort after showing the truth of one among opposing value-laden interpretive frameworks; and because this claim of verisimilitude is always responding to, or addressed to, others without whom no claim of this kind can be made. To be sure, acts of memory involve physiological and psychological processes; these are however necessary but not sufficient. As argued, a complete act of collective memory essentially involves a rhetorical positioning in thinking or in talking. In this particular sense, collective memory acts are discursive processes.

Discursive

I employ the term “acts of memory” rephrasing Jerome Bruner's *Acts of meaning* (1990), an expression that he rises to re-frame the original but forgotten aim of the cognitive revolution at focusing on meaning-making activity within human behavior, in turn borrowing the notion of act from an analogy with speech acts theory, stressing the central role of language practices in meaning-making. However, only a gross analogy with Searle's (1969) concept of speech acts is pertinent here. An act of memory would encompass several components. To start with, a memory act ought to have a symbolic means of representation and declarative meaning, in the same way as the speech act needs a *locutionary* act, that is, the production of an utterance and the ensuing propositional content. Acts of memory, though, do not need to be verbal utterances, but semiotic changes of any kind in either thinking or talking. Then, in the same sense that the *illocutionary* act is a component more important to determine an act of speech, I have argued above that the rhetorical truth-judgment concerning a common past is an essential component of memory acts. As depicted in Figure 1 and argued below, this implies that collective memory acts are not only products of individual speakers but at the same time the social production of memories involving the collective.

The social field within memories

In collective memory dynamics, such as in the controversy regarding September 11th 1973, the psychological generation of social memories cannot be accounted for without attending to the way in which attitudes, beliefs, and social values are distributed within the relevant community of memory. The social field of inter-location, *contextualizing from-within* the cognitive representation of the past and the attitudinal positioning toward it, plays a constitutive role in the production of memory acts. As such, social fields are the collective frames mediating the micro-genesis of memory in each interaction; and a dynamic interface between individual micro-genetic and socio-genetic processes.

Psychologically, both the knowledge structure and the attitude toward it have to be constructed as within an organized setting or background according to which they acquire meaning. Typically, the understanding of the context of inter-location is given, not needing a special interpretive effort. Only sometimes the generation of memories requires the revision of one's own assumptions concerning the field of interaction, thus making apparent the problem of selecting appropriate social dimensions. Either selected during the very micro-genesis of memories, or pre-selected in the broader socio-genetic process of memory production, these dimensions are used to frame the object coordinated with other potential or actual speakers. The construction of contextual fields are well described metaphorically as the building up of a "map" of the manner in which knowledge and attitudes are distributed within a given community of memory, so to know not only that there are sides, but also who the sides are (Price, 1989). This involves not only the use of social norms to adopt a stand but also stereotyping and social identification (Sherif & Hovland, 1961).

To start with, in making a representation about September 11th it does matter whether the speaker is originally from Chile or from New York. Each time these memories are experienced by a person, they are generated in relation to a social identity that imposes specific constraints. For example, suppose a Chilean speaker says "there were casualties on both sides" within a conversation about September 11th. The Chilean hearer would be compelled to generate a memory as well. She may start by comprehending the ideological meaning of the last memory by discriminating the social group of which this memory is typical. Then she may intuitively compare herself with the social category of the source, feeling a sense of (in)congruency with what has been heard. If she realizes that she herself and the source come from opposing groups, she may use her in-group's ideology to generate her own act of memory.

Representation as dialogically contextualized

The very point of departure of the production of a memory act is a knowledge structure constructed a moment before by another speaker, or implied by her meaningful behavior. It takes place as a reaction to, or as a continuation of, the

comprehension of an utterance made by others. The construction of a representation of a past event takes place in internal or external dialogue with previous or anticipated meanings, and as a responsive understanding of them. Therefore, information concerning the interlocution field may be used as an important source of information in such a construction.

Attitude as social positioning

The job of a memory does not stop with the articulation of a representation of the object, but actually unfolds as a social stance, that is, as a particular way of relating to others. As soon as one takes a position, the others tend to respond supporting or opposing, or even changing their previous position toward or against the reference stance, thus modifying the configuration of positions in the interlocution field. These polarization and social influence phenomena illustrate that the generation of memories in individual psychological lives change the social conditions of memory production themselves.

Conclusion: Beyond “cognition versus culture”

Traditional psychology of memory addresses memory phenomena at the level of individual cognition, conceiving culture as an external context of “pure” memory. On the contrary, collective memory studies converge in a picture of human memory as a cultural phenomenon, where psychological processes are mediated by social processes (Kirschner, 2010). However, from the standpoint of the framework proposed here, this social mediation of the psychological process can be regarded, also, as a psychological mediation of the social process of production of collective memories (Salomon, 1993).

It is true that, as claimed by Brockmeier (2010), the crisis of the archive conception of memory not only tends to undermine the storage-and-retrieval model of individual cognition, but also to dissolve the unitary concept of memory taken as granted in Western culture into multiple meanings of memory without a clear center. As a matter of fact, the cultural and the cognitive approaches to memory have developed views so different that one is tempted to judge them incommensurable. Within such historical horizon, it might be interesting to think that neither cognition explains culture nor culture explains cognition; but that the key to explaining both is to understand their interplay. A step beyond the gross claim concerning the need to build conceptual bridges between collective and individual memory (Markowitsch, 2010; and especially, contributions in Boyer & Wertsch, 2009), would be to account for the micro-genesis of memory acts.

Cognitive-oriented psychology helps understand some processes involved in memory acts, such as attitude formation and knowledge representation, but fails regarding the micro-genetic integration of them in complete acts of memory (Mori, 2010), as well as in relating the micro-genetic level with the socio-genesis of memories. The approach outlined here is an attempt to help surpass these limitations,

and an invitation for the psychology of memory to contribute with explanations beyond the “cognition vs. culture” dichotomy. Particularly, in focusing on collective memory, I point out lessons regarding the kind of psychological processes involved in memory truth-judgments and the interplay of micro- and socio-genetic levels.

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Note

1. The expression “acts of memory” has also been used in social and cultural memory studies (see for instance Bal, Crewe, & Spitzer, 1999).

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Author Biography

Andrés Haye is Associate Professor at the School of Psychology, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. PhD in Psychology, by the University of Sheffield, UK. His areas of interest are social psychology, philosophical psychology, and social theory, making research about topics related to the bond of mind and society: the social basis of memory, involving historical memory of political events; the physiological, cognitive, and cultural aspects of intergroup and political attitudes, comparing generations; and the nature of language operations in biographical discourse both among the youth and the elder.