

Memory and connection: Remembering the past and imagining the future in individuals, groups, and cultures

Memory Studies

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Contemporary memory research has benefited from the contributions of researchers in a broad range of disciplines. Neuroscientists have identified the cellular mechanisms of memory and brain networks that support various kinds of memory processes; psychologists have characterized component processes of memory and developed detailed models of their properties and interactions; historians, sociologists, and other scholars have analyzed how memory shapes the identity of groups and societies. Although it is difficult to specify a single idea or approach that all of these diverse approaches share, one theme common to them is that memory is a dynamic, constructive process that reflects the goals and biases of individuals and groups, rather than a static or literal reproduction of past experiences. This general perspective dates at least to the French sociologist and philosopher Maurice Halbwachs (1925) in his pioneering treatment of collective memory, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, and to the British psychologist Sir Frederic Bartlett (1932) in his classic monograph, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*, and has assumed increasing importance during recent years in multiple research areas.

The view that memory is a dynamic construction led Halbwachs, Bartlett, and many others to ask questions about the *functions* that memory serves, in part because understanding how we use memory should provide insights into why it is that memory operates in a constructive manner that is sometimes prone to error and distortion, rather than as a static and literal reproduction that is never mistaken (cf. Neisser, 1967, 2008; Newman and Lindsay, 2009; Ross and Wilson, 2003; Schacter, 2001). These characteristics of memory are strongly evident in the recollections of individuals, as demonstrated both in laboratory studies and in everyday life, where phenomena such as mistaken eyewitness recollections provide dramatic reminders of the fallibility of memory. But they are also evident in the memories of groups and cultures, where collective memories of past events may be shaped to serve the needs of the present.

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In June 2014, a workshop sponsored by the Templeton Foundation under the able guidance of Mary Ann Meyers brought together a diverse group of interdisciplinary scholars from psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, history, sociology, and religious studies to discuss the functions of memory, in particular, the ways in which memory serves to connect individuals and groups to both their pasts and their futures, as well as to other people. This Special Issue of *Memory Studies* is based on papers that were presented initially at the workshop, and subsequently modified in response to the other papers, as well as in response to comments elicited during peer review.

The papers in this Special Issue focus on two broad research areas that speak to different aspects of memory and connection. First, an important recent trend in cognitive and neuroscientific approaches to memory in individuals explores the realization that memory serves to connect individuals not only to their pasts but also to their futures. Thus, a number of neuroscientists and cognitive scientists have argued that human memory evolved not only to allow us to remember but also to allow us to imagine what might happen in the future (Klein, 2013; Schacter and Addis, 2007; Suddendorf and Corballis, 2007; Tulving, 2002). To create imagined future events, researchers have postulated that individuals recall previously experienced events, extract details, and recombine them to simulate what could happen in their personal futures. These ideas about how memory connects individuals to their personal futures have important implications for understanding how memory can be used to plan, make decisions, and solve problems and how memory-based simulations of the future may contribute to subjective well-being.

Second, memory is also important for helping to create social connections. At the level of individual memory, we now know that social connections and cultural influences play a key role in shaping what people remember and forget about their personal pasts (Congleton and Rajaram, 2014; Hirst and Echterhoff, 2012). The theme of memory and connection is also important when we consider cultural or collective memories, which are maintained through oral stories, texts, song, pictorial images, monuments, rites, and memorials, and both preserve the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and uniqueness and shape the way the societies think about the future (Assmann, 2011; Connerton, 1989; Halbwachs, 1925, 1980).

Contributors to this Special Issue come from a wide range of disciplines. Given the inherent breadth of the “memory and connection” theme, we believe that a multi-disciplinary approach is necessary to do justice to the many ways in which memory serves to connect individuals, groups, and cultures to both their past and futures. Our main hope in including contributions from a diverse group of scholars is to broaden the range of discussion concerning memory and connection in a way that raises issues and perspectives that might otherwise be missed.

Several papers in the Special Issue focus on how memory connects individuals to both their personal futures and personal pasts, exploring implications for understanding both memory mechanisms and functions. Daniel Schacter and Kevin Madore focus on the contributions of episodic memory—memory for specific personal experiences—to constructing simulations of future events and summarize a series of recent studies that illustrate how these contributions can be distinguished from those made by non-episodic mechanisms. Martin Conway, Catherine Loveday, and Scott Cole explore the relationship between memory and imagination in the context of a proposed “Remembering-Imagining System” that they link to related work on consciousness. Andrew MacLeod discusses how future thinking or “prospection” is related to well-being, focusing on disruptions of prospection in individuals with anxiety and depression. Yadin Dudai and Micah Edelson discuss neural mechanisms that support memory consolidation and reconsolidation and their susceptibility to social influence, which are critically important for understanding the reliability of memory.

Clint Merck, Meymune Topcu, and William Hirst attempt to explicitly link studies of remembering the past and imagining the future in individuals (“mental time travel”) with ideas about how

past and future are connected at the societal or collective level. Qi Wang analyzes cultural influences on the functioning and development of individuals' recall of everyday experiences in the context of a synthetic theoretical framework that she refers to as a cultural dynamic theory of autobiographical remembering and links these ideas to both collective memory and future thinking. Robyn Fivush and Natalie Merrill discuss family influences on memory and narrative, conceiving of family storytelling as a key process that links individual and collective memory. They delineate and distinguish among three distinct, though interacting, forms of family narrative that they term shared family narratives, communicative family narratives, and family history.

The foregoing papers reflect primarily the perspectives of psychology and neuroscience, whereas subsequent papers in the Special Issue reflect primarily the perspectives of sociology, history, and religious studies. Jeffrey Olick focuses on how social and cultural memory frame both individual and collective well-being, touching on provocative questions related to how resilient individuals and resilient groups remember traumatic events, and how these modes of remembering influence the capacity to move forward from trauma. James Young examines the evolution and functions of post-World War I and World War II memorials in the context of observations concerning the influence of Holocaust memorials on the selection of the 9/11 memorial. Guy Stroumsa considers the role of memory in religion and how personal memories are related to those of a religious community, and Michael Welker provides an analysis of relations between "micro-memory" and "micro-imagination," on one hand, and "macro-memory" and "macro-imagination," on the other, in the context of religious and philosophical conceptions concerning the nature of the human spirit.

In his closing commentary, *Memory Studies* editor Andrews Hoskins ties together issues addressed in several of the papers in the Special Issue to offer what he terms an "expanded" view of remembering and forgetting that emphasizes the importance of interactions between individuals and their social environments in constituting a highly linked ecology of memory. We think that an emphasis on such emergent qualities of memory will serve us well moving forward as scholars working from multiple disciplines attempt to forge a meaningful interdisciplinary analysis of memory that connects both individuals with cultures and pasts with futures.

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Author biographies

Daniel L Schacter received his PhD from the University of Toronto and is currently William R Kenan, Jr. Professor of Psychology at Harvard University. His research has explored numerous aspects of human memory and imagination, and he is the author of several books, including *Searching for Memory* (1996) and *The Seven Sins of Memory* (2001). Schacter has received a number of awards, including the American Psychological Association's Award for Distinguished Scientific Contributions, and has been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Science and the National Academy of Sciences.

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