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**Abstract** This Introduction situates the papers and commentaries of this Special Issue on 'Narrative and Cultural Memory' within the context of a new multidisciplinary research literature that suggests localizing memory in culture and, in doing so, focuses on the role of narrative. This literature is viewed against the backdrop of a fundamental critique of the traditional notion of memory as reflecting one strand in the emergence of a new post-positivist cultural research paradigm in the study of memory.

**Key Words** methodology, narrative, post-positivist paradigm of memory

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## Introduction: Searching for Cultural Memory

Perhaps there was a time when it could seem obvious what memory is, and why it matters. To be sure, for most philosophers and writers in the Western tradition, memory and the ability to remember the past were unquestionable and indisputable parts of the human condition. For a long time, it simply was taken for granted that memory was a unitary faculty of the individual, single mind, and that memories were passive and literal recordings of experience. Significantly enough, the archive and the wax tablet were the two most used metaphors of memory in Western literature—from Aristotle and Augustine to cognitive psychology. Many considered the way to this archive, remembering, as the golden path to wisdom and all knowledge that reaches beyond the here and now. Plato, one of the most influential thinkers in the Western history of thought, saw in the process of remembering, which he called *anamnesis*, the key to the deepest and most universal truths.

Yet this confidence in the power and moral weight of memory has faded in more recent times. Even in the eyes of modern neurocognitive scientists, memory's long-standing reputation as an objective, reliable, measurable and predictable cognitive system has been tarnished, as Schacter (1996) observed. Writers and artists, of course, have long been aware of the intricacies of memory and the manifold forms of remembering, which hardly seemed to be captured by the models

of experimental psychology. Most of the work of Samuel Beckett, for example, can be read as an attempt to think through the insight that personal identity construction can never be grounded in the putative certainties of autobiographical memory because remembering one's past is itself part and outcome of that very construction (Olney, 1998).

In fact, it was not in psychological memory research but in the literature and arts of the 20th century, followed and supported by history, philosophy and the social sciences, that the traditional picture of memory was critically scrutinized in the first place. As a consequence, today this picture, along with any naïve notion of 'the past', appears fundamentally questioned, if not blandly rejected (Gross, 2000; Lowenthal, 1985; Terdiman, 1993). The reference to memory's moral weight, particularly in political and socio-cultural discourse, has become more uncertain, ambiguous and contested (Werbner, 1998; Rasmussen, in this issue).

But what about psychology? It has often been argued that understanding memory from the vantage point of the social and historical dynamics of culture demands more appropriate concepts and models than those used in psychological research carried out in the Ebbinghaus tradition (e.g. Freeman, 1993; Neisser, 1981; Neisser & Fivush, 1994). There arguably have been many important insights into the nature of individual mnemonic processes as a result of the 'deliberate restrictions' in matters of topic and method as suggested by Ebbinghaus in the name of psychology's experimental scientificity—or, perhaps more precisely, what in the second half of the 19th century was considered to be scientific. But backed up by exactly this label, there also is a well-known negative agenda of losses: of reductions, distortions and falsifications. Valsiner's (2001) observation that, '[o]ver its history, psychology has had the collective habit of repressing psychological complexities (including culture) as often as has been possible' (p. 6) is rarely as true as in memory research.

As a matter of fact, many scholars outside psychology studying the cultural dynamics of memory have emphasized their difficulties in connecting to psychological memory research at all, if they do not explicitly reject or simply ignore it. Bloch (1996), drawing on anthropological and historical approaches to the cultural study of memory, summarizes a widespread stance towards psychological memory research:

The problem with psychologists' approach to memory in the real world comes from their failure to grasp the full complexity of the engagement of the mind in culture and history, and, in particular, their failure to understand

that culture and history are not just something created by people but that they are, to a certain extent, that which creates persons. (p. 216)

Again, such a view is all but new, and not only articulated by anthropologists, historians of culture and writers. What Habermas (1984/1989) described as the 'philosophical discourse of modernity', and perhaps even more the discourse of late or post-modernity, has led to a fundamental critique of the traditional notion of memory. And, furthermore, it has questioned the very idea of memory as a given human faculty. Unraveling the epistemic fabric of what the term 'memory' has meant in philosophical, historical and scientific contexts, as well as in everyday discourse, recent investigations have pointed out that at stake is first of all a conceptual construct that is meaningful only within a particular historical semantic. This semantic includes not only, as philosophers like Dennett (1991), Harré (1998) and Taylor (1989) argue, 'Cartesian notions' such as the mind (as a singular noun), consciousness, personal identity and the self, but also concepts as different as 'soul', 'subconsciousness' and 'repression'. In this view, then, there is no such (biological, mental or spiritual) thing as 'memory' but an array of different cultural-historical discourses within which this term, along with the other terms just mentioned, is used to describe and carry out certain practices. As a consequence, the topic and concept of memory must itself be seen as a cultural-historical phenomenon: a 'cultural vehicle', as Lambek and Antze (1996) put it, that carries with it a series of momentous suppositions about the world of the individual and the world of the social.

The implications of this post-metaphysical and post-positivist vision have been particularly foregrounded in the wake of Foucauldian arguments (Danziger, 1990; Hacking, 1995, 1996; Latour, 1991/1993; Rose, 1996). This new style of thought is also linked to a process of critical reflection in various human sciences on the empirical research on memory (e.g., Antze & Lambek, 1996; Nora, 1989). If 'memory' is not just out there in the world (or, more precisely, in the head of an isolated person), but a relational concept in a discursive field, then it is subject to the same changes that affect the entire field. Once this field begins to shift—for example, when human beings are viewed as persons who are embedded in material, social, historical contexts of action and interaction—the meaning of 'memory' and 'remembering' shifts accordingly. As we know from other paradigm shifts, these typically are two-sided processes. Critique and deconstruction of traditional concepts, models and methodologies go hand in hand with the emerging of alternative concepts, models and methodologies.

While the old loses credibility and appeal, new topics and subjects take on forms, and new problem horizons open up.

## Localizing Memory in Culture

The papers collected in this Special Issue (as well as the research literature they draw upon, and the questions they raise) reflect one strand in the emergence of a new post-positivist research paradigm in the study of memory. They seek to localize memory in culture and, as a consequence, to understand remembering as a cultural practice—be it under the name of social, collective or historical remembering. In doing so, they focus particularly on how these memory practices are carried out by and through another array of cultural practices: narrative.

Phenomenologically, one could associate this area of new work with the discursive and narrative turn in psychology and other human sciences; yet, at the same time, this turn itself is to be seen as part of larger reconstructions of the cultural architecture of our knowledge, following the crisis of the modernist episteme. In contrast with other new developments in the human sciences that have had a strong impact upon memory research—for example, in brain research, neuropsychology and cognitive and evolutionary anthropology—the spectrum considered in this issue draws on disciplines and interdisciplinary approaches in which new interpretive investigations have oriented attention towards social, discursive and cultural forms of life. All of these approaches, as different from each other as they may be, are opposed to the precarious search for universal laws of human behavior—laws that have often been criticized not only as epistemologically failing to capture change, diversity and openness of human forms of life, but also as being formulated according to Western standards.

In light of this critique, it is not surprising that the papers of this issue represent a broad range of different approaches and research styles. They are diverse not only in their understanding of what exactly cultural memory (or collective, social or historical memory) is, but also in what material and methodology they use in order to investigate it. That is to say, they differ in their themes and empirical subject matters, which include encounters among official and unofficial, vernacular narratives about Russian history in a St Louis history museum (Rowe, Wertsch and Kosyaeva), comments by witnesses of the 1999 total solar eclipse and a staff meeting of an intensive care unit providing care for newborn babies in Britain (Middleton), a memorial to the 1933 Nazi bookburning in Berlin (Brockmeier), intergenerational discourse

among members of a family about the German past during the national socialist regime (Tschuggnall and Welzer), and narratives told by American and Chinese children about the beginnings of their autobiographical memories (Wang and Brockmeier). They also differ in their disciplinary affiliation, ranging from social and developmental psychology to education, anthropology, sociology, philosophy and history. Finally, they differ in their methods, which include discourse analysis (Middleton), conversation analysis (Tschuggnall and Welzer; Fasulo), narrative and semiotic analysis (Brockmeier), social and cultural anthropological fieldwork (Rasmussen), museum studies (Rowe, Wertsch and Kosyaeva), and comparative developmental-psychological studies of children's narrative (Wang and Brockmeier).

Considering this diversity, we might wonder if there is any shared understanding of cultural memory at all. Which entails a second question: does it make sense to embrace such a variety of issues by one, patently rather vague, notion?

Perhaps it does. Certainly, at stake is not a clear-cut definition of cultural memory akin to, say, 'working memory', 'semantic memory' or 'autobiographical memory'. We should not expect any of these papers to give such a definition. What we are looking at is a relatively new field of work, a site of explorations that evade traditional categories of memory research. Yet could not just the way in which these papers and the literature they represent evade these categories indicate some underlying assumptions that indicate a new way to situate memory in and through culture's practices of remembering? Let me point out a number of these perspectives that, I think, characterize this new field of work.

(1) There is no principal separation of what traditionally is viewed as individual or personal memory from what traditionally is viewed as social, collective or historical memory. Considering the manifold layers of the cultural fabric that weaves together individual, group and society, the idea (not to mention the category) of an isolated and autonomous individual becomes meaningless. As a consequence, the investigative focus shifts to the forms of interaction and co-construction, interplay and mutual dependence, fusion and unity between the previously separated spheres of the individual and the collective, the private and the public, the timeless and the historical. In this way, a new gamut of structural, functional and developmental aspects of transition is brought into view.

(2) There is no principal separation between remembering and forgetting. Both are interpenetrating and interdependent features not only of communicative action, autobiographical discourse and identity

construction, but also of institutional forms of constitution and transmission of knowledge and values—for example, in and by textbooks and history books, museums, media discourse, memorials, commemorative rituals and the ‘invention’ of cultural traditions. Forgetting, as well as modifying a given memory’s intention or implication, is as much a function of memory-making as is remembering.

(3) There is no principal separation between intentional and unintentional, official and vernacular, dominant and subversive memory. This implies that the dynamics of memory cannot be understood without taking into account the categories of repression, suppression and power (Shi-xu). Drawing on the work of Werbner (1998), Rasmussen suggests that the notion of memory implies an idea of ‘anti-memory’, just in the same way, we might add, as the concept of narrative implies the idea of anti-narrative or counter-narrative: in telling one story about the past, other stories about real or possible alternative versions of the past are excluded, rejected or overwritten. Museum exhibits (as analyzed by Rowe, Wertsch and Kosyaeva), eyewitness accounts of war events (as studied by Tschuggnall and Welzer), and the memorial to the 1933 bookburning in Berlin (as examined by Brockmeier) find ambiguous, plural and contradictory resonance in the narratives of those who perceive them and retell *their* experience of perceiving and interpreting them. In this way, their already multiple meanings continue to be transformed and further multiplied by those who whisper them next—à la Bartlett, as Fasulo observes.

Fasulo’s commentary itself is a case in point, and it may serve here as a quick example. It offers a perspective that considers not only the narratives studied by Tschuggnall and Welzer but also the interview situation in which these narratives were elicited. Fasulo’s reading, from the point of view of a conversation analyst, is not principally concerned with the original recollections of ‘Third Reich’ eye-witnesses, and how these stories are grabbed by listeners who make them part of their own history, transforming them into new texts with new meanings. Fasulo, rather, understands these stories as metaphorical representations of the interactional context in which the interviews took place. Inspired by the idea that eliciting narratives to inspect other people’s past has some similarity to the panopticon, the architectural design—examined by Foucault—that permits total control of prisoners, Fasulo retells the war stories of Tschuggnall and Welzer’s interview partners (which are about houses being searched or invaded) as stories about the situation of exposition in which the interviewees find themselves ‘under investigation’. In this way, the meaning and function of the original war

experience is, in a chain of interpretations and transformations, once more adapted by a new listener/teller to a new narrative context. To be sure, the same takes place when Fasulo's version is now reported and, in the process, again interpreted from a different point of view—my point of view—in this Introduction. And this will again take place whenever a reader tries to follow this little story about the inextricable dialectic of intentional and unintentional representations of past experience. The meaning of the past, as Middleton puts it, is in-built in its communicative use in the present—which leads to the next general assumption.

(4) There is no principal separation between mnemonic processes and the discursive contexts—that is, the local culture—in which they occur. Thus, much investigative attention has been allotted to the study of local memory cultures, their practices of remembering and what Middleton calls their 'trajectories of significance and participation'. In contrast, for many, the search for universal laws and features has appeared to be motivated by misleading trans-cultural abstractions and ethnocentric ignorance. The different cultural trajectories of significance and participation that organize the practices of autobiographical remembering in China and the United States even suggest limitations in scope and analytical precision of the, after all, Western concepts of autobiographical memory and remembering (Wang and Brockmeier).

At the same time, much of the new literature on cultural forms of memory and remembering seems to confirm that narrative is a particularly powerful local discourse form that plays a pivotal role in the cultural organization of remembering. Why, then, is narrative so important here? To my mind, the study of cultural memory and of narrative mutually refer to, and depend on, each other. On the one hand, in order to understand why narrative plays such a central role in both individual and social life, we must examine its function in the constitution of what gives trans-generational, historical continuity and tradition to a community. It is in this process of 'cultural reproduction' (Connerton, 1989) that Assmann (1992) sees the role of cultural memory. On the other hand, to understand the individual and social modes of the transmission of what is considered to be important to a culture, in all its ambivalences and contradictions, we must study a culture's narrative registers, that is, the contents, forms and functions of its narrative practices. Narrative discourse, in this view, is crucial in binding an individual into culture—and, in doing so, it simultaneously re-creates culture in the mind, that is, in what traditionally is viewed as the *individual* mind. In other words, these dialectics between the

individual and the sociocultural-historical dimension of memory are at the center of the notion both of cultural memory and of narrative.

In order to study these dialectics it is useful to see the forms of narrative as embedded in what Wittgenstein (1953) called 'grammar'. Narratives, in this view, are fleeting constellations of forms of life that are best understood within a conception of structure as fluid patterns of action and of positioning:

The forms of narrative do not exist as templates to be made concrete but are constrained to take the forms they do by the exigencies of the situations in which they occur. Rather than conceiving of narrations as cognitive, linguistic, metalinguistic, or ontological entities, we suggest understanding them as *modus operandi* of specific discursive practices. Put another way, the term narrative names a variety of forms inherent in our getting knowledge, structuring action, and ordering experience. To study narrative we thus have to examine these discursive practices, their cultural texts and contexts. (Brockmeier & Harré, 2001, p. 53)

(5) There is no separation between linguistic (or discursive or narrative) memory practices and non-verbal practices, texts and performances. A culture's memory practices encompass a great variety of symbolic and material forms of commemoration, remembrance and historical self-reflection. These include not only cultural artifacts that are specifically produced for commemorative purposes (like exhibits, films, monuments), but also the use of general memory devices and archival institutions, as well as architectures and geographies in which memory is embodied and remembering semiotically coded.

## Hybrid Perspectives

In sum, all five assumptions set free hybrid perspectives that aim to overcome categories and research agendas set up by what Latour (1991/1993) called the 'work of purification'. Such purification work has resulted not only in modernity's categorial distinctions, such as mental vs material, culture vs nature, individual vs society, and timeless vs historical; it also led to standardized forms of academic compartmentalization, including the establishment of well-demarcated disciplinary domains. When the borderlines between anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, history and literature were drawn—at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century—the academic *Zeitgeist* was convinced that all knowledge and all that is knowledgeable would neatly fall into the categories of this institutional division of labor.

Today we know that this has been an illusion. Present research in



areas like ‘environment’, ‘dynamic systems’, ‘discourse’, ‘globalization’ and ‘literacy’—to name just a few—is hardly reflected by any of the traditional categorial and institutional grids. ‘Culture’ and ‘memory’, as it seems to me, are names for likewise open, dynamic and fleeting fields of new explorations and theoretical experiments: construction sites of new concepts, theories and methods that, at least for the foreseeable future, will challenge what we have taken to be familiar truths and convictions.

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