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# Private memories and their public context: Methodological reflections on individual and group memory

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**In terms of social science needs, memory is a plastic faculty which may be able to provide a limited range of accessible and assessable hard 'facts', but which in reality are in a continuous process of change to fit in with their owners' current needs.**

**Key words:** Memory, adaptation, change, unreliability.

## INTRODUCTION

Fieldwork in the social sciences is tied to the possibility that it can achieve results which have the same exactitude as 'hard' sciences. The data which they collect as contemporary assessments come almost entirely from the memories of informants and that of the social scientists themselves. A review of the experimental data on memory seems to stress two major approaches amenable to the requirements of scientific methodology. These are both dominated by professional need to express data in statistical terms despite the difficulties of conforming human activities to the limitations imposed by necessary categorisations.

Firstly, the data relate only to individuals whose status are without exact definition and have not been subject to any scientific evaluations which are not statistically tautological. No methods have been developed to test memory in the social environment on which it depends and from which it is impossible to isolate them. Even a hermit has social relationships in order to be fed while avoiding more complex social ones. Of course individuals may be alone in the privacies of their own minds but this is beyond experiment. Similarly, there would be no means of knowing to what extent these 'private' thoughts have been influenced by what they have seen, heard and smelt. Memory is nearly always about something that has been shared. It could be that its memory keeping potential is related to this sharing and its relative social importance. So to some extent the importance of memory and memories may be correlated to their communal

importance that the memory retains certain facts and events. It relegates much human activity to a no-need to remember limbo. After all, very little of what we do is retained in memory because it is categorized as just regular, although we know well enough that no so-called regular activity is the same as the one preceding it.

The second factor in such experimental work is that it concentrates on accurate memorising and the remembering of specific facts. It seems likely that the requirement for the brain to remember hard data correlates to literacy which makes it available. In preliterate societies era there could have been no hard data to remember; furthermore, this connection between memory and 'facts' has come late into human life. Even in societies with a high proportion of literates, the need to have accurate memories may not be generally important since for them most needed facts are available in print and can be referred to when necessary. Thus, it would seem that such thorough experimental work ignores the social dimension of memory which is not accurate but adjustable. Memory has always had a dominating updating function in relation to other people and its use of the past from which memories must come, will always be largely and unconsciously selective.

## COLLECTIVE MEMORY

The focus for any study of memory has always been the

individual who can have their memories and the capability of memorising tied down by questioning and experiment, although much of what is remembered are shared experiences, cultural inheritance or part of an instinctive paradigm possibly common to all humans. It is necessary to start with the memories of individuals if only because no method has been developed so far for finding out its collective elements which are not based on individualised data; the difficult question is what is being shared rather than being prompted by the methodology.

For memory to be shared there have to be reasons for the individual to accept into their minds something which has to be useful to and for them. People would not take into their minds and retain there something for which they would have had no reason for keeping 'on file' in the mind. What is kept in the memory of a peasant, a production engineer and professional social scientists are what they need to keep there for use. There is similarly no reason to suppose that what is retained in the memories of one member of a group or society are retained in the same form in the minds of others. Even if they are demographically similar, their individual psychological and social makeup would vary apart from their constantly varying environments. There may be two processes involved in any collective memory, its modification to fit in with individual needs and the collective memory adjusting to individualised memory needs. The fact that individuals have memories is beyond doubt unless their brains have been damaged or chemically modified, but they should rarely if ever be accepted as not being constantly modified by the circumstances in which the ongoing mind of the individual finds itself. A dramatic event becomes a memory from the instant that it has occurred and as the time distance between the event and the memory lengthens, the memory must be continually changing; there are no reasons either psychological or social for it to remain the same; no text has been memorised. Most memories involve others as few activities and events are totally or socially isolated in the mind. It may be that in this process there is some paring down of the memory into some lower common denominator and in a parallel process the collective aspects of memory will go through some simplification. Into this comes an additional set of factors from specialised memories which while they can be individual are often a feature of socially confined groupings and the settings for additional memorisation which comes from literacy and its social requirements.

Although memories are retained by individuals, what is retained in almost every case has a social and thus, shared social origin with those individuals with whom they are currently interrelating. The intensity of sharing a mutuality of memory will vary between primary relationships in which facts are shared in a long-term identity of interests to tertiary 'touch and go' flash-bulb memories in which there is little to remember other than the unusualness of the event. Even in key rites of passage events there may be no substantial accuracy.

The initiation rites of Sukuma Branch of Buchwezi so-called secret society were photographed in the same locality by this anthropologist ten years apart. The senior men participating assured him that the second occasion was the same as the one he had seen previously. In fact there were no similarities at all except the beaded headdresses of the informants. In primary relationships there may be memories related to routine and continuous themes which may be held in the memory but it is the breaks in these routine which may be remembered. These are two parallel and different processes in which the pay-offs are different. Why memories of past events should be expected to be both static and accurate when every other human characteristic which is not genetic varies with social experience and again with such variables as ageing. So memory of what has been experienced like any other social characteristic can be expected to move with social times (Robinson, 1986; Bartlett, 1963). This concept of change is too passive a word as it is an active conscious and unconscious adjustment to current needs.

#### **THE DRAWBACKS TO THE EXPERIMENTAL EVALUATION OF MEMORY**

It seems obvious enough that memory is environmentally situated and that none of the elements used in checking on memory are inorganically static. Experimental work on memory involves encoding differences, orthographic, phonological and semantic in the memories of those experimentally used (Parkin, 1993). This data must surely be largely compromised by the social isolation of the experimental situation, variations in the subjects of the experiments and the sui generis basis of their experiments which test what they are testing in isolation from those tested as the experiments have little if any relationship to their overall social needs to memorize. Memory is a social tool and not an abstract and identifiable quality (Tanner, 2002).

The results are no doubt accurate within the experimental situation but the extension of these conclusions into a wider and necessarily social world raises any number of experimentally uncontrollable issues. If memory is a social tool then those tested are trying to perform adequately in relationship to the testing situation. This ability or lack of ability may have no relationship at all to their ability to recognise thousands of different plants, the racing colours of jockeys or how much money they paid for a cow bought twenty years previously. It is an untested leap of understanding to link these date testable conclusions based on controlled experiments with the variations in memory abilities which must occur in pluralistic social situations. To be required to use one's memory on demand and in isolation for one off situations is both rare and confined to experiments and examinations of which the latter are a modern requirement although it may have existed for very small elitist minorities for some literacy embellished millennia.

The restraints on inaccuracy may have a moral dimension, so far as the individual feels the need to stick to a single version. In any social environment it is contemporary and socially powerful public opinion which establishes what facts should be when they are not more personally controllable. It may well be that the mind has some species wide ability to remember and that this can be potentially identified by experiments. These tests are detached from actual social environments, in which the individual mind has an active and personal situational role. In fact, the ability to remember has to exist as it enables the individual to function adequately as a social being. However, it seems likely that the individual mind in this respect has two functional poles; what individuals need to remember for their specific and specialised needs and what they need to remember in order to function in terms of group membership as part of their necessary social existence. Muslims can remember the Koran often as religious sounds without attaching further meaning to what they have learnt, just as some Hindus can recite a 'purana' and others their particular line of descent from the Prophet Muhammad. There can be little doubt that the memory of even specific events, may be constantly adjusting to the up to date needs of individuals in their social roles. The accuracy of recall is a recent imposed requirement which ignores the communal nature of memorised events.

## LEARNING AND MEMORY

Since humans are psychologically and socially complex and exist in various forms of pluralistic environments, it is optimistic to see ethologically based factors in the memory ability of animals, even the higher primates, to have much applicability to human behaviour and their memorising abilities. We have to accept the narrowness of animal conditioning while marvelling at the versatility of individual chimpanzees or rats. It is difficult to determine the connections between habituation and both conscious and unconscious memory in generalised social life. Whatever complicated subdivisions which every involved social scientist has developed (Bartlett, 1932), memory will always be subject to the demands of what is necessary to know and remember at a particular time. There at least seems to be working memories which individuals need to get along on a daily basis (Baddley, 1992) and long-term memories which can be called up when required, but these are very opaque classifications which elide into each other as the individual's situation requires. The boxing in of types of memory in experiments avoids the issue of constant variations as individual situations change.

The isolation of items in a memory takes it away from the socio-psychological environment in which it has a varying and variable function. It would perhaps be prudent to see a memory rather than memory as

responding to some variations on a hierarchy of the conscious and unconscious needs of the individual and of their social environments (Maslow, 1987).

## THE STOCK OF WHAT IS REMEMBERED

Presumably everything that occurs to an individual can become a memory and at least initially it goes into the mental stock-pool of what has happened. Many of the events that happen around us is too common to be retained and nothing is achieved by remembering it. There is an overload of meals, defecating, washing and working on the farm or on the computer and even the memories of such activities are not likely to be highly inaccurate. It seems likely that the mind only retains consciously or unconsciously and brings into memory old events which may or may not have happened and which are activated by some new event, it serves a renewed purpose and has some current relevance.

The connection can be made and found useful by new and possibly unrelated events which occur to the individual. They are likely to have some collective elements shared by those in some shared social group. There is no guarantee that any shared memory is a correct repetition of what may have occurred originally. Individuals can bring into their memory virtually anything that they consider to be relevant regardless of what may have actually happened; it may be and indeed will be believed to be 'true' but that is an entirely personal evaluation.

## COLLECTIVE SOCIAL MEMORIES

Memories coalesce around linear and cyclical social events as well as of events which are almost inevitably shared to some extent with others. Although, individuals will have had personal and unshared memories but then we have no evidence that such an event did happen within an individual's mind and none at all as to the form in which it has been remembered other than what was recounted by the individuals even though they could be prophets, philosophers or poets.

Family events, the rites of passage of every society will be remembered because they are refreshed by their consequences, reunions and necessary references to them as the individuals' lives continue. These are all connected to people, places, costume and conversations and indeed it would be difficult to forget these occasions. This also applies to crises related to death and disease, accidents and economic misfortunes. Climate may also be a factor in the extent to which community provides and maintains certain types of memory needs. With warmer climates more social life occurs in public and precludes much privacy and thus possibly more information is shared with more people. This may not be the case with

cultures in colder environments which have most of their social life indoors and within small groups. A widening of what is memorised in warmer climates which did not occur in colder ones until electronics became a factor (Heath, 1989). Thus, there is in such events a collective need for a shared or collective memory and to be a member of a community may require conformity through memory to some current situation. To be a member of a tribe as much as a social group may require the constant reactivation of memories. This indeed may be a form of conformity in which memories are created to justify a present need out of a past which is only nominally remembered.

Many Chinese have been through the individual and collective traumas of cultural revolution and recognise the power of the state to react violently against protests by the masses about the ways they are been treated by authority. It would seem that now many communities have activated what they consider to be memories of their pre-communist religious practices.

To some extent the same scenario has occurred in Malaysia where the widespread shared uncertainties of modernisation, have been modified by the Dakwah movement; the inventing of Islamic certainty from the recreated memories of a largely non-existent Muslim past. In both these situations, individuals can have no personal memories of the past to which they are recreating nor are there either written records of the past or people who are sufficiently specialised in their literacy to relate these records to specific communities. So individuals as part of communities experience the advantages of having a non-memory created in their minds which they feel to be part of their own current understandings. While of course there are certain traumatic events which may have some sort of permanent survival scare in the memory, there is no guarantee that the event experienced happened in the form remembered. The need has changed with ageing and different environments. To question the personal realities of horrifying experiences is perhaps inhuman and methodologically unreliable. Soldiers have recorded events in warfare detailing the physical surroundings which subsequent visits have shown to be very inaccurate.

### **MEMORIES AS RESPONSES TO SOCIAL NEEDS**

We view memories by sight rather than memory as responses to social needs in which there will be biological, social and psychological variables within any individual's competence. Also an item of memory will be called into play when there is a need for it to be remembered in a particular contemporary form. Why indeed should we have memory at all unless it served some behavioural function which would surely apply as much to potato growers, paediatricians, musicians and

medicine-men. In some situations there is a need to remember and in others there are none at all beyond some generalities of communally required behaviour. Memory is both highly adaptive and adapting so that in some cases it is highly creative. We forget what we do not need to remember very soon after a particular need has passed as in the amassing of information for an examination. With reference to personal factors we usually find ways of remembering what we need to immediately remember through mnemonics and indexes which are memory replacements.

The informants of a social scientist provide information in response to very specific situations. This stranger from whom they get social, economic and personal profit wants information and they provide it. This may change with retelling (Tanner, 1970). Social scientists are far less qualified to assess the truth of what is provided by informants than detectives or lawyers (Vrij et al., 2001). While certain elements may be commonplace such as how to board a bus, eat fish and chips or clean oneself in the lavatory, others will be shared as in the mutual recognition of a certain number of faces which will be correlated to social distance and social refreshment. Above all the memories of most individuals will have specialised aspects; they will remember what they want to remember and what they need to remember (Gilsenan, 1976). Even amongst quasi-traditional peoples with limited material assets, there will be those with specialised memories of how to recognise trees, plants and soils and the personal histories of everyone they have social dealings with. In fact, they as well as highly trained professionals will be technically competent within their specialisations as well as some general knowledge memory requirements; what is needed to get by on a day to day basis in that environment.

### **DEMANDS ON MEMORY IN PLURALISTIC SOCIETIES**

There may have been a few totally isolated societies in which a small community faced inwards on itself without any contact from outside such may have been the case for the inhabitants of Easter Island for several centuries. Most societies will have had continual contacts with other social systems outside their own as we see in the spread of styles disclosed by archaeological excavations. Even the most isolated of traditional people living a self-sufficient group life will have some on-going knowledge of surrounding societies which are different to their own and of events which do not conform to their own ideas of what constitutes reasonable ways of living; they eat people and bananas and we do not. So in their group memories they will usually have ways of explaining away or coping with such variations. Memory is an important tool in adjusting to both differences and difficulties of which the intrusive social scientist is an important element. It would seem that in any society which is to some extent

pluralistic from culture contacts beyond its own social boundaries and the divisionary nature of their own social, economic and religious systems, there are more demands on memory than might be required within a single self-defined social system. In any society there will be a corpus of knowledge, which can be memorised in part by its members but most members will remember what they find useful or obligatory to remember and only change this when they have a reason to do so or when there is some functional pay-off.

### **MODERNITY AND THE CHANGES IN GROUP IDENTITY**

It is widely accepted that modernity has led to some supposed redefinition of how people see themselves from being individually part of a group to being grouped in terms of their individuality. This reduction in a narrow overall group involvement can be correlated to demographic factors such as lower birth rates, lengthening of life and higher survival rates of the young, the intermittent and permanent migration from natal areas, the involvement in outside employment and the touch and go nature of urban-industrial living. Any such changes will be correlated to alterations in what has to be remembered because the needs for particular memories would have changed.

With increasing or increased individuality which may be an amalgam of specialisation and isolation and not necessarily any part of modernity, correlated memory needs change, while at the same time memory correlated to the group may occupy less space in the mind. As the primary group becomes less functionally important in urban-industrial environments, the range of required unspecialised memory enlarges as the range of specialisations makes extra demands on individual memory. The range and scope of what individuals have to remember changes.

### **LITERACY AND THE DEMANDS ON MEMORY**

Without literacy, memory has a self-adjusting capacity in which matters which the individual mind consciously or unconsciously does not consider necessary to remember is forgotten or rearranged, but can of course be remembered later when appropriate clues are provided by new situations. The specialisations of the individual memory have a tenuous functional connection with the outside society and may well be constantly varying. Once literacy appears it becomes correlated to a new function of memory; static facts quite independent of the individual. Firstly simple literacy opens gateways which cannot have been made available in any other way.

Modern society relentlessly dictates that literacy is a necessity while the vast majority of human contacts

remain verbal and visible.

From then on the memorising of theoretical rather than material facts becomes increasingly a bureaucratically part of social, economic and religious life. In order to be anything at all, developed societies increasingly require individuals to pass examinations on theoretical rather than practical facts. Test papers have to be answered from memorised facts in situations which have been arbitrarily detached from any functional social environment. Thus to go beyond the subsistence level of individual social and economic survival, the mind is required to memorise large amounts of information which have little use except for passing examinations hurdles which enable some people to assume relatively more exclusive roles in specialised social groups. As a contribution to this, much education is needed in the memorising of standard texts from which the assumption of uniformities to a large extent can never exist in social life.

### **THE HIERARCHY OF MEMORY NEEDS**

It may well be that memory is seen as an individual capacity; it is much more a facet of group needs and demands. At the lowest level of safety needs, memory may be no more than a combination of instinct and ethological factors in which the latter predominant in the higher need for physiological survival.

In our view, memory becomes predominantly important when it is related to the subsistence survival of individuals in which their individuality is elided into the requirements group living. The concept of subsistence has usually been related to the simpler forms of agriculture but it seems more appropriate to see it as related to the standard living procedures of most people everywhere in pre-industrial, industrial and post industrial living conditions. All individuals have a subsistence memory as to how they should be able to survive in their current social environment whether it is subsistence farming or subsistence shopping; in both there are memory budgets of time, need and opportunity. There is no need for the memory to remember more when it performs no personal function and most of these are group provided. There is very little individuality in what most people do most of the time. A subsistence farmer and an unskilled or semi-skilled worker have the same range of memory needs which are related to their social roles and their relationships to the social world outside themselves. In this the pre-literate may well have more demands made on their memories than in literate societies which provide signs, instructions and maps which do not require so much memorising. It must surely be that literacy as part of the required structure of societies has fundamentally altered the functions and range of memory which is mainly dictated by each society. However language at this level and its literate

correlations is transparent, the words which these people have to remember represent a clear reality, the words for a plant or a power-tool go together small (Benjafield, 1992). The social life of the individual provides what has to be memorised and for most people there are few compulsions to go further. The questioning of a social scientist or a questionnaire is an invitation to go imaginatively further.

For a small minority in any society this subsistence existence will not bring enough satisfaction. So therefore there is some compulsion for self-actualisation and to go beyond the ordinary living conditions of the majority and with this comes extra demands on memory. In quasi-traditional societies there will always be a small number of unusual people whose roles in their societies make special demands on their memories. They are the story tellers, the knowledgeable people about plants, spirits and the trials and tribulations of others. Their numbers in any such society are limited by a combination of the socially useful excellence of their memories and what such societies can afford to maintain. Their personal intellectual skills often respond in part to opportunities and ambition. There may be few of these people in an agricultural community but many more in urban environments. The number of such people and opportunities for them increase with the number of specialised roles available. In traditional Sukuma society in Tanzania there may only have been two specialised roles; political and religious leaders but now the country has doctors, lawyers, teachers, computer programmers, architects and informants to outside agencies. All these men and women require large specialised memory banks of background knowledge combined with the memory needs of group membership in addition to the required stock of subsistence memory for their appropriate social living. There are also people who have extensive memory banks of specialised knowledge such as the histories of particular football clubs and pop musicians. These provide them with status in narrower social groupings.

Finally, there is an even smaller minority whose personal self-actualisation leads to the development of memory independent of any ostensible social functions. These are individuals who use their personal memories to create music, poetry, plays, painting and literature. Such a person may have been Muchona the Hornet, the Ndembu diviner to whom Turner devoted so much of his understanding of their rituals (Turner, 1967). Towards the end of this scale of memory needs, it may be freer for the demands of group living but even they in their idiosyncratic isolation will still require the lower grades of memory requirements in order to stay socially and materially alive. For these people there is a movement away from the understandable and correct language which in its transparencies is not too difficult to memorise for one in which the key words are ambiguous. In any direct sense they represent nothing and indeed may provide high potential meanings which may have been

attached to them by societies and individuals without initially being based on any clarity of facts. While it may be so is that this type of language comes late into semantic use (Olson and Astington, 1986), we can presume that it similarly comes later into effective individual use when these people go beyond the linguistic barriers of subsistence existence. This meta-language in which word use goes beyond facts such as justice and spirit presences in a particular social environment projects into the possibilities of abstraction, a syllogistic framework of having to think and places great strains on memory because of the necklace of facts which prevents a one to one connection between any word and any event. This leaves memory without either a social in put or social support. The social scientist should become more aware of the unreliability of memory to provide facts in what they themselves see and in what they are provided by informants. It would be prudent to regard all organically based information without substantial triangulation as social suspect providing ideas rather than facts.

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