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# Memory ecologies

Andrew Hoskins, University of Glasgow, UK

## Abstract

The individual and collective and also cultural domains have long constituted challenging boundaries for the study of memory. These are often clearly demarcated between approaches drawn from the human and the social sciences and also humanities, respectively. But recent work turns the enduring imagination – the world view – of these domains on its head by treating memory as serving a link between both the individual and collective past and future. Here I employ some of the contributions form Schacter and Welker's special issue of *Memory Studies* on 'Memory and Connection' to offer an 'expanded view'[1] of memory that sees remembering and forgetting as the outcome of interactional trajectories of experience, both emergent and predisposed.

## Keywords

Individual memory, collective memory, connective memory, connective turn, new memory ecology, nexus analysis

**Introduction**

Memory is egocentric yet deeply social. Psychologists have seen memory as a fundamental condition of consciousness and unsurprisingly have constructed a variety of complex models of individual remembering (Parkin 1993: 3-25). Yet memories also require distinct social frameworks, patterned ways of framing the flow of remembered actions, images, sounds, smells, sensations and impressions. Without social frameworks, memories would flicker like dreams without anchors in the theatre of consciousness, in the paramount reality of everyday life (Schutz 1962) (Boden and Hoskins 1995). This is a key faultline between the human and the social sciences and humanities in memory studies: How can we account for memory without over-privileging or underplaying its individual and social or cultural dimensions? Where does remembering and forgetting begin and end: in the brain, the body, the group, or in media?

A more productive way of formulating these questions is to look for memory as a link or connection between the individual and the collective, rather than attempting to establish its location in either domain. And this is precisely the task set by Daniel Schacter and Michael Welker in editing this special issue of *Memory Studies* on 'Memory and Connection[2]'. And, a principal way they and their contributors achieve this is through offering fresh and exciting ways to illuminate memory as a vehicle of connection between past and present.

For me, this issue constitutes a major marker of a much broader 'connective turn' (Hoskins 2011a and b). In reflecting here on some of these contributions, I explore the value of 'connectivity' in aiding interdisciplinary advances in the field, consider some of its influences (acknowledged or otherwise), and finally, I offer 'ecology' as a holistic perspective for revealing and imagining memory's multiple connections and functions.

**Movement**

In sociology, John Urry set a new 'agenda of mobility' for this century in his *Sociology Beyond Societies* (2000). He interrogates how material transformations are remaking the social include 'diverse mobilities that, through multiple senses, imaginative travel, movements of images and information, virtuality and physical movement, are materially reconstructing the 'social as society' into the 'social as mobility' (2000:2). And this more mobile or fluid conception of social relations is

increasingly influential in accounts of memory. Thus, the relatively fixed or fixable (in time and/or space) concepts of 'prosthetic', 'collective' and 'cultural' memory, for example, are being complicated by the: 'transcultural' (Crownshaw 2011); 'transindividual' (Stiegler 2010); 'travelling' (Erll 2011); and 'multidirectional' (Rothberg 2009). Memory in these accounts (predominantly from the humanities) tend to treat memory as mobile, unsettled, emergent.

What then drives such mobilities? The unsettling of memory is part of an overarching trend towards the greater connectivity of individuals and groups (with themselves as well as with each other) in effect part of a living archive following the connective turn. This turn is the massively increased abundance, pervasiveness and potential accessibility of digital technologies, devices and media, that shape an ongoing re-calibration of time, space (and place) and memory by individuals and groups as they connect with, inhabit and constitute both dense and diffused social networks (Hoskins 2011b). And in these circumstances in which connectivity itself is a new interlocutor of experience, as in the case of digital networks, the very categories of the individual and of the collective and their relationship and boundaries, are recast.

Even the sciences-of-the-mind increasingly search for cognition – the mental process of awareness, perception, remembering – outside of the head, extended and distributed across social and cultural worlds. The connective turn has busted human memory well and truly out of its containers: mind, body, skin, whilst at the same time it seems to have pulled memory in-the-world closer to the self – social, cultural, collective. But even aside from its digital drivers, connectivity helps us to imagine the recasting of the individual and collective to bring focus on the multiple functions of memory. For example, 'connective memory' (Hoskins 2011a) is <u>memory as emergent</u> shaped as individuals and groups encounter or interact with objects, interfaces and others, in an ongoing fashion.

This moves us away from memory as fixed, competitive and as a 'zero-sum game' (Olick this issue; Rothberg 2009:3) to more open and productive encounters. For example, Young (this issue) sees the breaking down of the distinction between the individual and the collective in the form of Germany's national "Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe." Young was a member of the Berlin Senate appointed commission that recommended Peter Eisenman's design for a field of waving stelae as the above ground element of this memorial. He explains: 'Able to see over and

around these pillars, visitors would have to find their way through this field of stelae, on the one hand, even as they would never actually get lost in or overcome by the memorial act. In effect, they will make and choose their own individual spaces for memory, even as they do so collectively' (Young, this issue). Young highlights the memorial's seemingly oppositional or contradictory visitor experiences: individual/collective, lonely/belonging, noise/silence. These are effected by movement, both of the visitor moving through the stelae and the 'multiple and variegated sizes' of the stelae, so: 'The land sways and moves beneath these pillars so that each one is some 3 degrees off vertical: we would not be reassured by such memory, but now disoriented by it' (Young, this issue).

For Young then there is co-existence between, and at times simultaneity of, individual and collective experience in navigating the memorial, contrasting with the overbearing effects of some monuments, which tend to dominate human scale. Thus, the 'human-proportions' of the waving stelae 'put people on an even-footing with memory' (Young, this issue). Achieving even-footedness with memory, in Young's terms, above, is not straightforward in relation to ideas of the individual and the collective. And I now turn to mention briefly some of these antagonisms of memory.


**Mind the gap**
The individual and the collective have long been seen in unequal relation to one another, or, at least, that one needs the other. Durkheim, for instance, argued that individual consciousness was lacking when not part of the social force gathered in and of the present moment: 'Without symbols, social sentiments could only have a precarious existence. Though very strong as long as men are together and influence each other reciprocally, they exist only in the form of recollections after the assembly has ended, and when left to themselves, these become feebler and feebler, for since the group is no longer *present* and *active*, individual temperaments easily regain the upper hand' (1915: 231). Thus, the strength of the group bonding of Durkheim's assembled, co-present collective conscience, diminishes in time with its diffusion. Furthermore, Ferrarotti argues: 'memory is not simply an individual question. It has a base, a link with the community. It is at bottom a community experience. It involves the group, the collective unconscious, a stream of consciousness which links everything' (1990: 30). It is easy to go on with examples of both individual and collective-dominant models and studies of memory, but what can be clearly stated is

that there is little consensus within or across fields as to the definition and characteristics of collective memory (Harris et al. 2008: 215).

And there is an increasing discomfort claimed by some of the leading theorists of collective memory, even as they continue nonetheless to employ the term as pivotal to their work. For instance, as Jeffrey Olick (2008:152) states: 'I agree with the charge that collective memory over-totalizes a variety of retrospective products, practices, and processes. Nevertheless… Because of its general sensitizing powers, I use 'collective memory' as the guiding concept for my own work'. So, as Bill Niven observes: 'while authors distance themselves from the term 'collective memory', they still appear to operate within its parameters' (2008:428). Barry Schwartz (2008: 307) for example, summarizes: 'The welter of criticism, plainly, contains no concrete alternatives' and he goes onto say that: 'The confusion… refers to the analysis, not the reality, of collective memory'.

Elsewhere, collective memory is much more explicitly contested and rejected. For example, the very influential historian of war, Jay Winter states: 'The loose usage of the term "collective memory" – framed to mean virtually anything at all – in every corner of the arts and humanities, has persuaded me to abandon the term whenever possible' (2006:4). Instead, Winter is effective in his usage of 'collective remembrance' as: 'it points to time and place and above all, to evidence, to traces enabling us to understand what groups of people try to do when they act in public to conjure up the past' (2006:5). Thus, overall, collective memory has become somewhat ungrounded as a concept suffering from its voluminous and sprawling application to describe and position an array of alleged group rememberings and circumstances.

Some important guidance however has been provided by Jeffrey Olick (1999, 2008) and not least through his influential distinction between collective and collected memories. Collected memories, he suggests, are memories based on the individual, 'the aggregated individual memories of members of a group' (1999: 338), and collective memory presupposes that there is something that transcends the individual, the idea that 'symbols and their systems of relations have a degree of autonomy from the subjective perceptions of individuals' (1999: 341). Collective memory is then more than the sum of its (individual) parts.

In response to these challenges and the trends in mobility and connectivity referred to above, there is a growing body of work that does not accept the individual

and the collective as separate spheres, but rather attends to their interplay, interaction, interdependence and fusion, 'offering new comprehensive perspectives' (Brockmeier 2015: 200). For example, Merck et al (this issue) drawing upon Hirst and Stone (2015) in seeing memory as constructive reject the 'bifurcation' of the individual and the collective. Rather, they argue, 'Each recollection is built out of not only an internalized potential to remember, but also external factors, including social factors. As a result, memories are not stored in the head, encoded in some yet understood way in neurological tissue. Rather they grow out of the interactions between the internal and external'. All of this sounds entirely reasonable, but what is the evidence for a growing attention in memory studies to individual and collective connectivity? And what is its empirical basis? And, on critiques of collective memory, what constitutes, in Schwartz's terms (above) 'concrete alternatives'?

**The connective future**

In studies of memory the future has long been expected, or at least what became the present was 'built out of the relation of our attitude towards a whole active mass of organised past reactions or experience' (Bartlett 1932: 213). And the significance of 'schemata' (after Bartlett) in the organization of this experience has been revived since the 1970s (Neisser 1982/2000; Brown and Hoskins 2010). This idea also has a formulation in sociology, viewing each moment as being lived and experienced as what Garfinkel (1992:186) calls 'another next first time', namely a recognizable and sequentially placed new moment, a patterned new moment understood because of its likeness to previous moments and because of its location in the joint unfolding of biography and history (Boden and Hoskins 1995; Hoskins forthcoming). But there is something of a leap from making experience intelligible through what Connerton (1989: 6) calls 'an organized body of expectations based on recollection' to relating memory to *imagining* the future.

Yet, there is a growing body of work that call for a refocusing of memory studies to rebalance its past-oriented modus operandi to more fully account for the influence of the future as imagined, desired and feared by individuals and groups, on how the past is remembered, interpreted and managed and vice versa (Gutman et al 2010:1; Szpunar and Szpunar in press). And contributors to this issue on memory and connection demonstrate that thinking about the future employs certain kinds memory in particular ways. MacLeod (this issue) argues that although future-thinking involves

both semantic and episodic knowledge systems, because of the comparable uncertainty over what will happen as to what has happened, the role for semantic memory in constructing the future is stronger.

Merck et al (this issue) bring their (psychological) empirical work on mental time travel to bear on understandings of collective memory (two areas they claim are usually divided through their parameters of the individual and the collective). They observe that a great deal of collective memory scholarship draws on large communities, including the nation. Moving beyond this kind of collective knowledge of national history and events[3] they focus on another kind of collective memory in the form of scientific knowledge, namely of climate change. And in a turn from traditional experimental work that compares recollections and prospections to assess simulations of the future, Merck et al show by selectively shaping the exposure of participants to knowledge about climate change, this not only shapes memories but also imaginings of the future of the world's climate.

Their version of the collective (following Cuc et al., 2007) is 'socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting' (SSRIF), whereby both remembers and listeners suffer from the same pattern of selective forgetting. This collective work is often characterized by psychologists as 'collaborative' (see Harris et al 2011) and also here as 'socially shared'. It does not have the same scale of the nation or the community, but possesses a perhaps more intimate quality through the interaction between, but perhaps not being transcendent of, of its constituent members, and in this way sits somewhere between Olick's 'collected' and 'collective' distinction (above).

Of course a major challenge for any claims as to the constituents and the force of collective memory is in establishing any kind of consensus around the threshold for that collective. And it is perhaps indicative of the conceptual and everyday power of the term 'collective memory' that a number of psychologists are running with the term, rather than keeping with merely the shared, the collaborative, and the group. However, by shifting focus to both forgetting and the future, Merck et al contribute to this issue's development of understandings of the shifting relations of memory between the individual and others.

Conway et al (this issue) also bring forgetting and the future together in their 'remembering-imagining system' (RIS). This they see as a form of extended consciousness wherein memories of the recent past shape imaginings and expectations of the near future. They argue this functions as part of a 'goal system'

that through offering access to memories of recent events, expectations of the future are plausibly imagined and current goal-related activities are tracked. Equally, if episodic memory is impaired in some way, Conway et al argue that this would also constrain capacity to imagine future events that are 'linked to 'now'' and thus plausible. Through the use of a 'Mental Time Travel Questionnaire' for a patient (HCM) who had lost the ability to form new episodic memories, Conway et al found that his future episodic simulations were highly implausible. Thus they argue: 'HCM is a patient not only stranded in the past but also in the future' (this issue).

Conway et al's idea of the remembering-imagining system has some interesting corollaries in the social sciences and the humanities in terms of the expanded present and its consequences. For example, the overburdening of the present is seen to threaten the prospects of future. This is through the past made present that proffers increasingly uncomfortable cohabitation with a series of 'memory shocks' (Hoskins 2015, Lowenthal 2012). So, rather than the memory boom's turn *to* the past, today increasingly there is a turn *on* a past that is increasingly alien and unfathomable. In other words, the past has lost its reassuring schema that once helped render the incoming present intelligible and manageable. And this social impairment of memory (through overload and non-recognition in this case) distracts from proper attention being given to care for the future.

Relatedly, the 'capacity to imagine future events that are 'linked to 'now'' and thus plausible' in Conway et al's terms seem diminished at a societal level and beyond. There is said to be a growing disjuncture between the effects present actions have on the future and the capacity to imagine that future. For example, Adam and Groves (2007:112) argue: 'Since the valorisation of speed is a central feature of the industrial way of life and its operational logic, regard for the long-term future or concern for the wellbeing of future generations of humans and fellow beings becomes a contradiction in terms'. They also state: 'While our actions reach ever further into the future, our perspective and concern continue to contract to the operational realm of the present' (Adam and Grove 2007: 111). And, that operational realm of the present, I would add, is increasingly dominated by a significantly unsettled past (Hoskins 2015).

Perhaps the other side of Conway et al's notion of plausibility in making the imaginary move through past-present-future, is uncertainty. In studies of media for example, 'premediation' is seen as one strategy in attempting to bring the uncertainty

and risk of the future under some kind of control on the basis of the experience of the past. Grusin (2010: 4) for example, argues: 'Premediation is not about getting the future right, but about proliferating multiple remediations of the future both to maintain a low level of fear in the present and to prevent a recurrence of the kind of tremendous media shock that the United States and much of the networked world experienced on 9/11' (cf Erll 2008: 392-3). And John Tulloch and I show that there was a kind of forgetting of the term 'neoliberalism' within many parts of the British newspaper industry in the wake of the shock of the Global Financial Crisis as part of a wider competitive reconfiguration of the discourses of neoliberalism when the future of capitalism itself was seen at stake (Hoskins and Tulloch 2016). At such times the past becomes overwrought through media and political deployment of the shock and uncertainty of the recent past measured against resurrected 'media templates' (Kitzinger 2000, Hoskins 2004) of earlier shocks deemed comparative, to arrest the future in one direction, or another. And it is precisely through the extended present of catastrophic events that different kinds of futures are opened up – rendered 'plausible' – in Conway et al's terms (above). And it may be that the plausibility test for an individual's effective future imaginary ('episodic future simulations') being related to the strength of its association with recent episodic memories (Schacter and Madore, this issue), could also hold for the recent collective past and collective future imaginaries.

**Ecologies of memory**

One way to connect the individual and the collective is through affording greater attention to the environment in which remembering and forgetting takes place, as with Young's example above. Fivush and Merill (this issue) adopt this approach with autobiographical memories, showing how the individual (at the centre) moves through different micro and macro systems or 'ecologies' over time which provide multiple narratives around which identity and memory establish, develop and cohere. For instance, they see the family as the core of a micro-system as the first and continuing principal ecology of development and this is embedded in the exo-system of 'ecologies that impinge on the child even if not directly experienced, such as the parent's workplace'. And, Fivush and Merill take the 'outermost level' as the macro-system 'comprised of the cultural constructs, social and economic conditions and history'. They stress the 'permeable and dynamically interacting' character of these

systems and the shared meaning constructed through individuals' participation in them.

Fivush and Merill's approach has similarities with Bartlett's (1932: 201) idea of the 'organised setting' developed by Middleton and Brown (2005: 189) who define it as 'a complex of cognition and emotion that is located within, and dependent on, the cultural and material particularities of the local environment" (p. 189). Middleton and Brown see remembering and forgetting as situated activities where cultural settings, objects and discourses are interdependent with one another, in effect imagining together the cultural/material approach of Young with the narrative focus of Fivush and Merill.

Steven D. Brown and I (2010) develop this work in our study of mediated commemorations in which we identify the multiple forms, flows and iterations of the remembrances of the 2005 London bombings as together constituting a 'new memory ecology'. In other words, we advocate connecting and working across the micro, meso and macro levels (in Fivush and Merill's terms) to illuminate the work of the 'organised setting' wherein persons must share schemata to achieve what Bartlett (1932) called 'cultural conventionalisation' namely the rendering intelligible of what is unfamiliar through our existing frameworks of experience. And it is these schemata which are at once personal, since they are the means of organising experience, and collective, since they are embedded in cultural settings and materials (Brown and Hoskins 2010).

However, whereas Fivush and Merill's (this issue) model builds on Brofenbrenner's (1979) 'ecological systems approach' and McLean's (in press) idea of 'narrative ecologies', Brown and I draw on a long trajectory of work around the idea of 'media ecology.'

'Media ecology' is a term that has been variously applied to highlight the impact of our interactions with media, with others through media, and also increasingly the dynamic processes that occur between media. Many associate the term itself with the late 1950s and 1960s work of Marshall McLuhan, although it has a much longer history[4]. 'Media ecology' is often traced to Neil Postman in a 1970 edited volume *High School 1980* that attempted to imagine the shape of American secondary education a decade hence. Postman championed the teaching of media ecology as an alternative to English in the future high school, namely as 'the study of media as environments', but also the 'study [of] the interaction between people and

their communications technology' (1970: 161). For us, the study of the new memory ecology is founded upon similar principles of seeing the material and cultural environment in consort with cognition and emotion availed through it to illuminate the emergence of remembering and forgetting (Brown and Hoskins 2010).

But just as schemata of the mind predispose individual experience with a base-level of recollected expectations, these recollections are also embedded in socio-cultural milieux that do not float free of trajectories of experience and trajectories of memory. Tracing these connectivities in and over time in the new memory ecology is a complex challenge. To this end, John Tulloch and I (2016) in our exploration of the (re)ordering of the past by and through multiple connectivities of times, actors, events in our study of the 2010-11 Coroner's Inquests into the 2005 London bombings, adapted Scollon and Scollon's (2004) methodology of 'nexus analysis'. This approach 'explores the past, present and future trajectories of meaning implicated in the sum of communications around the phenomenon'. Through this we show how the memorial dynamics of the Coroner's Inquests were forged through the intersection of three elements of 'social action': the 'discourses in place '(the set of immediate discourses relevant to the action of the person in that place at that time); the 'interaction order' (the various people and their social arrangement and unfolding dialogue in these areas) and the 'historical body' of the actors  (the multiple and sometimes conflicting aims and experiences brought to that interaction).

And this model of nexus analysis shares some strikingly similar characteristics to Wang's (this issue) cultural dynamic theory of autobiographical memory in seeing memory as emergent, embedded in the shifting environment, yet also constrained by the historical body of the rememberers, For Wang, autobiographical memory is not formed in isolation in the mind, but is 'thoroughly contextual'. Thus, 'It can be viewed as an open system immersed in the cultural milieu where the individual is in constant transaction with the environment'.

It is then through keeping the intersecting dimensions of the new memory ecology in play that we can reveal the emergent articulations of remembering and forgetting, at once individual and collective, rather than as siloed, static, or set adrift. Making these connections across people, environments and timescales, requires an expanded view of remembering and forgetting, and concomitant bold forays into once alien disciplinary territories and new collaborations with those that reside there. And, as I have argued, to realise connective memory, is to invoke a world of individuals

and groups encountering and interacting with objects, interfaces and others, in a situated, ongoing, and yet predisposed fashion.

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Author Biography

**Andrew Hoskins** is Interdisciplinary Research Professor in the College of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow. His research connects multiple aspects of emergent digital society: media, memory, conflict, security, and privacy, to explore holistically the interplay of contemporary media and memory ecologies. His latest book (with John Tulloch) is *Risk and Hyperconnectivity: Media and Memories of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2016). He is founding Editor-in-Chief of *Memory Studies*.

He holds an AHRC Research Fellowship: 'Memory and archival regimes: War diaries before and after the connective turn'. This work interrogates the intersecting and contesting roles of individual and organizational memory of warfare through an original ethnography of Historical Branch (Army) in Whitehall (the keepers of the official operational record of the British Army). http://archivesofwar.com andrew.hoskins@glasgow.ac.uk. Twitter @andrewhoskins.

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**Notes**

[1] I borrow this concept from Steven D. Brown and Paula Reavey (2015) who argue for an 'expanded view' of memory in the discipline of psychology, and my approach similarly emphasises the value of focusing on social and cultural interactions in strengthening interdisciplinary understandings of remembering and forgetting.

[2] This follows from a workshop sponsored by the Templeton Foundation held in June 2014.

[3] For example, there are a studies of individual and collective memory for public events abound and particularly of surprising or shocking events said to form so-called 'flashbulb memories' (Hoskins 2009).

[4] For a comprehensive account of the history of competing versions of 'media ecology' and its theoretical influences and uses, see Lance Strate 2006.