

Review

Collective remembering and imagining futures

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This review explores the intertwined psychological processes of collective remembering and imagining, emphasizing their shared roots in present-day uncertainty. We propose a multidirectional model of collective mental time travel, where the present acts as a catalyst for navigating both the past and future through culturally embedded narratives and symbolic resources. Drawing on recent interdisciplinary research, we argue that these processes are not linear but multilinear, shaped by social identities, historical contexts, and culturally specific worldviews of time. Collective remembering and imagining serve as mechanisms of meaning-making and self-regulation, enabling social groups to interpret uncertainty, foster agency, and mobilize for change. While nostalgia may anchor groups in idealized pasts, utopian visions can inspire transformative futures. However, the direction and impact of these temporal orientations vary across cultures and depend on how time is conceptualized. Our model highlights the feedback loop between temporal reflection and present-day action, showing how collective memory and imagination can either reinforce the status quo or catalyse social transformation. Ultimately, we advocate for a nuanced understanding of CMTT as a dynamic, socially situated process that plays a critical role in shaping collective agency and envisioning alternative futures.

Addresses¹ Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science, London School of Economics, UK² LIRA Lab, Department of Psychology, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, SerbiaCorresponding author: Obradović, Sandra (s.obradovic@lse.ac.uk)**Introduction**

The growing use of history as a source of legitimacy and authority in times of socio-political uncertainty highlights the psychological power of the past [1]. This review explores how remembering the past, mobilizing in the present, and imagining the future are interconnected.

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We argue that remembering the past and imagining the future are similar psychological processes that are often triggered by real, or perceived, uncertainty in the present. In this review, we synthesize and discuss the most recent research in the field of collective remembering and imagining. We propose a process model which demonstrates 1) the multi-directionality of mental time travel, beginning in the present and moving both towards the past and the future, 2) these active processes flow through the lens of social groups situated in a specific historical moment (e.g., wider cultural understandings of time) and draw on the same set of symbolic resources (e.g., narrative templates) to conceptualize the relationship between the past, present and future, and 3) the meaning making of function of remembering and imagining loops back into the present which can drive a sense of agency and promote collective action for alternative futures (e.g., sustaining or challenging the political status quo).

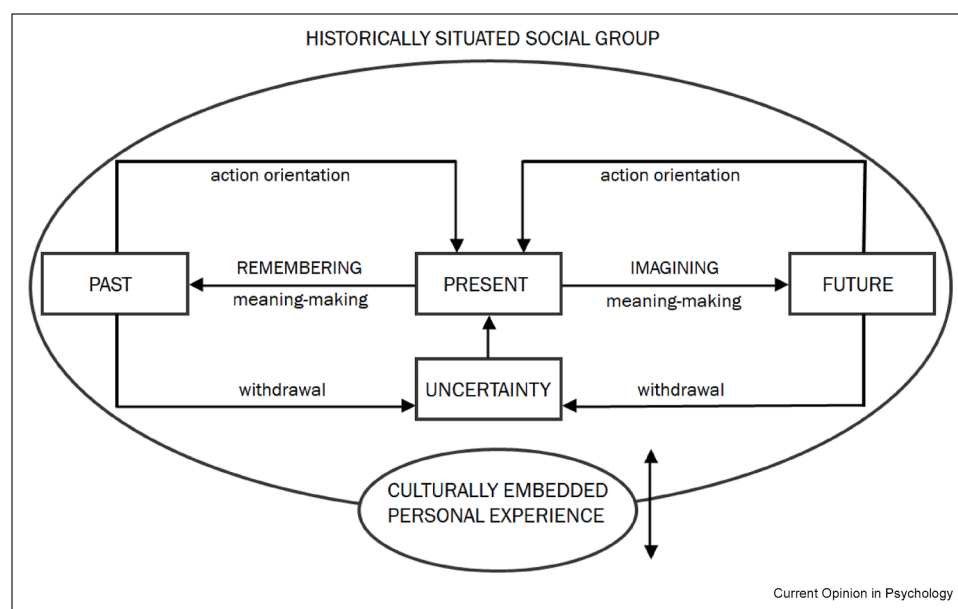
Figure 1 below visualizes our argument and model.

Though our focus is collective remembering and imagining, we note that these psychological processes overlap but are relatively independent of personal remembering and imagining [2–4]. However, recent research suggests that extreme societal events may blur the distinction between the two by fusing collective and personal identities [5].

From memories to remembering, and imagined to imagining

Before we unpack our proposed model, a note on terminology is needed. Collective memories, as a body of knowledge about the past as it pertains to a social group rather than individual, are fundamental for providing social groups with a foundation for shared identity, continuity and action. Collective remembering, in turn, can be considered the active process through which the past is negotiated, contested and reimagined from the vantage point of the needs of the present [6]. In the present review, we focus on the latter concept, to capture better how meaning-making is action-oriented, and how the past is frequently as much imagined as the future. This also means our conceptualization of ‘imagined futures’ focuses not on the end-product but rather on the process of imagining, and how this too is triggered by the needs of the present.

Figure 1



Process model of collective remembering and imagining.

Mental time travel is multidirectional, triggered by the present

Humans have the unique ability to think beyond the present and engage in mental time travel, both on an individual and collective level [7–9]. Through the concept of collective mental time travel (CMTT) the focus is on social groups rather than the self. It is a multidirectional and context-specific process, often drawing on cultural tools such as narratives [10] to frame the relationship between temporal periods [11]. Thinking beyond the present is often triggered by the needs of a social group *in* the present, and this in turn will also shape remembering of the past and imagining of the future [12*]. Importantly, uncertainty is a key present-day trigger of mental time travel, but this uncertainty can lead us to turn to the past to identify its causes by nostalgically identifying a time when society was ‘better’ [13,14]. Alternatively, it can lead us to project this sense of uncertainty onto the future, extending a sense of threat beyond the present [15,16*]. For example, in a French study [16*], when participants perceived high societal disintegration in the present (anomie), they imagined negative national futures (wars, poverty, conflicts) and experienced collective angst, signalling that the negative uncertainty of the present was projected onto the future. Regardless, both responses rely on meaning-making and trigger action-orientations in the present [17**] playing a key role in collective self-regulation [18].

As such, many authors have argued for the need to understand collective remembering and imagining as

intertwined processes [7,19] serving similar functions [20]. The bidirectionality of influence between remembering and imagining is well documented in existing research, demonstrating how collective remembering can shape how we orient to the future [21] and imagining collective futures can lead to reconstructions of the past [22]. However not all individuals and social groups are equally prone to the same patterns of mental time travel, with the concept of collective temporal orientation [23] capturing the extent to which we focus more on our group’s past, present or future. Similarly, not all humans share the same understanding of time or temporal trajectories. Here it is important to bring in wider socio-cultural and historical contexts which shed light on diverse ways of thinking about time and how it intersects with power [24–27]. Maphosa and Makama [27] show how historical contexts and power structures shape temporal experiences differently – the South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission allowed white perpetrators like F.W. De Klerk to move seamlessly into a new future while Black victims like Winnie Madikizela remained trapped by their past, demonstrating how colonial temporality grants different groups unequal access to healing and moving forward in time.

Remembering and imagining flow through the lens of social groups and their narratives

Collective remembering and imagining of the future relate to social groups, and so far, implicit in the paper is

the ways in which social groups become the lens through which present-day needs trigger mental time travel. Social identities are central for framing how and what we remember of the past, and how and what we imagine for the future [28,29]. For example, expecting a more positive future is related to higher identification with the group [30] and perceiving group's well-being in the present [16].

From a different angle, collective remembering and imagining are essential for social groups as they provide them with a sense of continuity. On the one hand, when continuity is threatened by feeling collective angst about the future, individuals may draw from a better past (collective nostalgia) to bolster continuity, which often sparks exclusionary tendencies towards outgroups [13]. On the other hand, perceiving that the group will stay the same in the future has positive benefits for group's entitativity, individual well-being and intergroup attitudes [17**]. Nevertheless, there are exceptions when continuity is not desirable, depending on the valence of the past [31,32].

In much of the existing research on collective remembering and future imagining there is an assumed linearity of time that is demonstrated both by the expectations of researchers and the response patterns of participants [13,32]. However, we argue that collective mental time travel is not only multidirectional but also multilinear, generating complex temporal trajectories [33], worldviews about change [34**], and utopian visions [35]. For instance, Bain and colleagues [34**] identify five such worldviews: Progress, Golden Age, Endless Cycle, Maintenance and Balance. We see these worldviews as important temporal meaning-making templates, which from the vantage point of the present shape our socio-political attitudes (e.g., the Golden Age worldview predicted voting preference for Trump/Republicans in the 2016 US elections) and could become “national narrative projects” about the group's mission in the future (e.g., “Moscow as third Rome” in Russia [36]). At the same time, we argue that these temporal templates transcend specific social groups, providing wider cultural frameworks for understanding time as in the case of the Progress worldview dominant in Western countries. Namely, Progress as a worldview, associated with the Enlightenment movement and the advent of modernity frames time as linear [24] and society as continuously improving. The rise of liberal democracy and the proclamation of the ‘end of history’ meant that there was no need for imagining alternative futures, as the ‘ideal’ destination had finally been reached [37]. Consequently, this has led, some argue, to an impoverished imagination in the west [38].

Research seems to support this claim, as trends in research in the West demonstrates a tendency in Western countries to be more negative in evaluations of

relevant pasts [39] and in evaluations of collective futures (compared to personal ones [32]), a pattern not replicated in non-Western countries to the same extent [16*]. Furthermore, this trend is often evidence of a temporal trajectory of ‘decline’ [33,40], which are rooted in how the social group is perceived in the present.

Collective remembering and imagining can drive change through heightened sense of collective agency

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, remembering the past and imagining the future are both processes that play a key role in collective self-regulation [18]. The capacity to imagine enables symbolic mobility [41] and can promote collective action for the future [42,43] as it enables us to imagine alternatives and possibilities [44]. As such, imagination and transformation go together [45] because imagination enables agency [46]. This creates a feedback loop, where a perceived sense of present-day uncertainty, through triggering processes of mental time travel, can function to use the past or the future to promote action to transform the present. However, it can also lead to collective action aimed at reproducing the status quo [22]. Research on the functions of utopias evidence the motivational potential of that imagining favorable futures has on driving agency in the present and triggering collective-self regulation [47*] [48].

Not all imagining leads to an action-orientation. Instead, *how we* remember the past or imagining the future seems an important pre-condition for motivating a sense of agency and action-orientation in the present [49,50]. In an experiment on how utopian thoughts shape collective climate action, Daysh et al. [49] found that positive (utopian) vs. negative (dystopian) thoughts about the future either stimulated or reduced a sense of agency and desire to engage in collective action via future-oriented emotions of fear and hope. Research on radical hope among minorities further evidences the importance of agency gained through remembering and imagining as crucial for promoting a sense of possibility [51]. As such, meaning-making shapes how the present connects to the past and future, influencing whether collective self-regulation is seen as possible and desirable.

Conclusion and future directions

We reviewed evidence on the multidirectional, contextual, and political links between collective remembering and imagining. Present-day uncertainty—marked by threat, angst, or instability—often prompts a turn to the past or future to make sense of current events. Our temporal orientation and the narratives we construct shape how we interpret uncertainty: where it came from and where it might lead. The “we” refers to the relevant

social group, which frames how the past is remembered and whose future is imagined and acted upon. As argued, these processes are action-oriented, feeding back into the present to either reinforce or challenge the status quo. However, the potential for collective self-regulation depends on the sense of group agency derived from mentally engaging with the past or future.

Future research should further explore the multidirectional, multilinear, and political nature of collective remembering and imagining. This calls for interdisciplinary approaches and diverse methods. Potential research questions include, which factors condition the multidirectional relationship between collective remembering and imagining, which temporal trajectories are dominant in certain contexts in different historical moments and what are their implications for socio-political attitudes, especially considering research shows these trajectories “were distinct from major individual difference constructs such as values and political orientation” (Bain et al., 2023 [34])? And finally, how does collective remembering and imagining manifest for social groups of different statuses in society?

Credit author statement

Sandra Obradović Conceptualization, Writing — Original Draft; Writing — Review & Editing. **Jovan Ivanović** Conceptualization, Visualization, Writing — Review & Editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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- * of special interest
 - ** of outstanding interest
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Further information on references of particular interest

12. The paper showed how the global crisis of COVID-19 shaped remembering and imagining across 15 countries, as about 85% of all events were related to COVID-19 across past and future orientations, reflecting a pattern of remembering and simulation congruent with active goals and concerns of the collective. Themes of infection and lockdown dominated reports of public past events, and themes of impact on the economy and a second wave dominated future thought. Across all conditions, the event themes differed depending on the severity of the pandemic and the stringency of governmental response at the national level. Future events were reported as less negative than past events. Furthermore, events reported from the perspective of the future of the nation were less negative and more vivid than global future events, suggesting that the collective group from which events are constructed influences the phenomenological characteristics of past and future events.
16. The paper examined the characteristics of collective future thinking in Turkish, Chinese, and US adults and tested the roles of country identification and perceived national well-being as underlying mechanisms for the valence of collective future thinking. Find cross-cultural differences, where Chinese participants anticipated future events to be more positive than did US participants (Study 1), they also anticipated future events to be more positive than both US and Turkish participants across all three time points (Study 2), who did not differ from each other. The differences reflect a variety of cultural-societal factors such as economic growth, political stability, nationalism, and combat against COVID-19 that differed in the three countries. These findings highlight the importance of the macro-cultural context in shaping the collective future thinking.
17. Proposes the concept of 'future collective continuity' to capture expectations of strong similarity between present a future of national ingroup. Across three studies the authors show that believing the ingroup will not change in the future (FCC) can lead to more openness towards outgroup members in the present. The study evidences the importance of temporal trajectories for how we evaluate others in intergroup relations. Present-day uncertainties can lead to hostility towards other, as fears of uncertainties having negative implications for the group's future. When these fears are alleviated through framing the future as more stable and like the 'good parts' of the present, we seem to experience less group-based threat and more openness to others.
34. The paper identified Five basic worldviews about change (i.e. forms of collective thinking about evaluating past-present-future

trajectory) in US and international samples: Progress, Golden Age, Endless Cycle, Maintenance, and Balance. While these change worldviews are not mutually exclusive, they were distinct from major individual difference constructs such as values and political orientation. Change worldviews were associated with people's views and intentions across diverse cultures and contexts, even after controlling for widely used individual difference constructs (e.g., values), and context-specific predictors (e.g., political party identification for voting; self-perceived innovativeness for innovations). The results suggested that people's worldviews about change can act as a broad lens people use to inform their responses in a wide range of contexts involving social change. Examining associations with social change issues across

countries/ regions suggested that the associations identified in US samples are unlikely to be universal.

47. This study tests a social psychological model of utopian thinking and collective action. The model hypothesizes two routes through which the relationship between utopian thinking and collective action unfolds: an emotional pathway (via hope) and a cognitive-motivational pathway (via abstraction). Most of the study's results support the hypothesized mechanisms by which utopian thinking — i.e., imagining better societies in the future — promotes collective action geared toward social change. Utopian thinking increased both personal and social hope, promoted an abstract (vs. concrete) mindset, and decreased system justification tendencies.