

Sandra Obradović

Whose memory and why: a commentary on power and the construction of memory

**Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)**

Original citation: Obradović, Sandra (2017) *Whose memory and why: a commentary on power and the construction of memory*. [Culture & Psychology](#), 23 (2). pp. 208-216. ISSN 1354-067X
DOI: [10.1177/1354067X17695765](https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X17695765)

© 2017 The Author

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/83180/>
Available in LSE Research Online: July 2017

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

Whose memory and Why: A commentary on power and the construction of memory.

Sandra Obradović

**Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science
London School of Economics and Political Psychology**

Introduction

Within memory studies there has been a gradual move away from the dichotomous divide between individual and collective memory, with work emerging arguing for the importance of acknowledging the interrelations between self and other in processes of remembering. This strand of research, captured within this special issue, conceptualizes remembering as an active process of construction, influenced by the context in which it takes place. Much of this work builds on the ground breaking work by Bartlett in the early 20th century (Wagoner, this issue), but also as a reaction to literature that continues to separate the cognition of individuals from the socio-cultural setting in which it occurs.

At this intersection between the individual, the social and the context, remembering becomes a process further shaped by the underlying power dynamics that lend authority, credibility and ‘truth’ to specific version of both individual and collective memory. Particularly, we see this occurring in contexts of clear power asymmetries, where memory becomes constructed in reaction to the situational definition developed by the more dominant party (Brown & Reavey, this issue). Processes of remembering are thus not mere retrievals of existing information, but a negotiation, construction and at times, manipulation, of what is assumed to have occurred in the past.

This short commentary will explore the role of power in processes of remembering. It will do so by first considering what we mean by constructive memory, particularly drawing on Bartlett’s conceptualization. Secondly, the extent to which power has been considered in memory studies is discussed, arguing that this interrelationship is best captured within collective memory studies, particularly in politicized contexts. Following on from this, we explore how power-relations permeate three articles within this special issue (Brockmeier; Brown & Reavey and Wagoner). While power is not an explicitly prominent feature of these articles, an analysis of them through this lens can offer new insights into how the construction and reconstruction of events, aesthetic objects, and scientific theories become shaped by the dominant socio-cultural movements and power-asymmetries between individuals, but also groups and cultures. The paper concludes with a discussion about the benefits of explicitly acknowledging the power-relations present in process of collective remembering and the implications that this has for how we understand what becomes remembered and how.

Constructive Memory and its ‘Flaws’

According to Wagoner (this issue), studies on remembering which accept the constructed nature of memory, have tended to assume that this implies memory to be ‘flawed’, as inaccuracy becomes characteristic of it. This is particularly evident in studies of ‘false memory’, a field discussed and criticized by Brown and Reavey (this issue). Wagoner argues that a second conceptualization of constructive memory exists, which lies closer to

the original ideas of Bartlett from the early 20th century. Namely, by considering remembering as an active process of (re)construction, it offers memory a positive strength as it allows it to be flexible and future-oriented, adapting to new needs in an ever-changing world. This latter understanding of memory focuses less on the extent to which memories are 'true' or 'false', but rather on the importance in connecting the past with the present and the future. This was an important point that Bruner (1990) wished to add to Bartlett's account of memory, by developing further how narratives shape processes or recall and remembering. Bruner argued that Bartlett's reproduction experiments of the Native American folk tale, *War of the Ghosts*, became culturally conventionalized by participants in order for them to make sense not only to the participants themselves, but also for those assumed to be listening. Bruner thus argued that there was a dialogical function of recalling a past or retelling a story, in that remembering becomes an activity shaped by the interrelations between teller and listener, researcher and participants, or individual and collective. Wagoner illustrates this dialogical aspect of memory by mapping the ways in which the meaning of Bartlett's work itself has changed over time, becoming shaped by the interaction between an individual's background, the dominant socio-cultural trends of the time and other important social influences.

Before discussing this paper in more detail, it is important to consider the extent to which power has actually been part of research on memory studies, and the insights this has had to offer us so far.

Power in Memory Studies

Much work acknowledging the role of power in shaping what is remembered and how comes from the field of political psychology, peace psychology and intergroup conflict studies (Bar-Tal, 2011; Leone & Mastrovito, 2010; Nicholson, 2016). These fields have explored the ways in which hegemonic representations of the past become part of reproducing and keeping alive hostile intergroup relations (Paez & Liu, 2011), how stigmatized pasts become re-imagined in order to serve protective identity functions (Obradović, 2016), and how institutions become part of shaping these memory processes by legitimizing specific versions of the past (Podeh, 2002; van Ommering, 2015). This literature shows clearly what is at stake in processes of remembering, and the power one holds by being able to shape the ways in which the past is understood.

Research on collective continuity demonstrates the importance of linking the past, present and future in order to feel a sense of coherence, stability and collective belonging (Sani, Bowe, Herrera, manna, Cossa, Miao & Zhou, 2007; Sani, 2010). These studies have demonstrated the interconnectedness between memory, identity, public commemorations of events and the ways in which groups, nationals, and even continents choose to remember history. In particular, cross-cultural research by Liu and colleagues (Liu, Paez, Slawuta, Cabecinhas, Techio, Kokdermir et al., 2009; Cabercinhas, Liu, Klein, Mendes, Feijo and Niyubabwe, 2011) on representations of world history demonstrate the extent to which dominant nations and cultures, also become dominant actors and points of reference in memories of world history, even in less 'globally' dominant cultures. Certain countries thus hold the power to shape what is globally considered important to

remember, but also what model of the nation and ideology considered acceptable. As Molden (2016) argues “after 1989, it has become all but outrageous to argue, in mainstream media and discourse, outside the paradigm of market liberalism, as alternatives (communism, socialism) have been proclaimed historical errors that failed to survive the evolutionary competition of ideas.” (p.126). Thus, the ways in which we remember the past suggests a specific version of the present which is considered legitimate, just and ‘right’.

Another strand of research, while not within collective memory studies, has explored how power and the power-positions of specific social identities shape discourses and what can be said by whom (Duveen, 2001; Gillespie & Cornish, 2010; Linell, 2009, chapter 9; Psaltis & Duveen, 2007). As Gillespie & Cornish note, in an experimental setting, asymmetrical power relations in dialogue constrain not only what the subordinate say, but also what the dominant hears and accepts as ‘real’. We see the importance of power-relations in dialogue and interaction in Brown and Reavey’s paper, particularly in their discussion of the police interrogation of Brendan Dassey (from the documentary *Making a Murderer*) but also in the power-dynamics between researcher-subject and parent-child. As will be discussed shortly, it is important to consider the ways in which language, both in how we talk about remembering within memory studies, as well as how discourses become sites of power-struggles in memory negotiation in everyday life situations.

While it may seem logical that power has taken a larger role in context of politics and collective memory, studies of cultural psychology would nonetheless equally benefit from acknowledging the importance of whose version of an event, person, or conflict, is accepted and reproduced. While perhaps less explicitly, the papers by Wagoner, Brockmeier and Brown and Reavey in this special issue *do* address the role of power in shaping how we (re)construct individual memories, scientific theories and works of art. The following two sections will discuss how.

Language, Collective Memory and Power

As Brown and Reavey (this issue) argue, the language around memory, particularly the use of ‘true’ and ‘false’ memory becomes problematic as it conceptualizes memory not as a process of social construction, but an objective reality ‘out there’ to be uncovered. The dichotomy of true and false memory is rejected by the authors, and instead they argue for the need to consider the ‘setting-specificity’ of remembering, where “memory is approached as a property of jointly-managed activities that occur in a definite time and place, and which have their own distinct norms and procedures as to what constitutes ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’.” (xx). By considering memory as contextually sensitive, and remembering as a reconstructive process, the authors echo Bartlett’s argument in *Remembering* (1932), and recognize the social influences that come to shape even the most individual memories, such as a balloon ride experienced as a child (which while ‘remembered’, never actually took place). By emphasizing the setting-specificity of remembering, the authors also acknowledge that “the power to manage and control the situation clearly lies with the institution and its representative (i.e. investigators, reporters, experimenters) in a way that is tangible to the participants.” (p.xx). We find traces of this type of argument in Bartlett’s work as well, particularly in his discussion on

‘tendencies’ (Bartlett, 1923). When discussing social relationship tendencies, Bartlett includes within this category both dominance and submissiveness. As Wagoner (2017, p.11) explains “When there is asymmetry of power and status in a social relationship, the higher status individual or group takes on the *dominance* or *assertive* tendency, while the lower status actor takes on the *submissive* tendency. The *dominant* actor has influence through command and by making an impression on the other rather than being an expression of their way of thinking.”

Brown & Reavey’s article is a clear illustration of how this occurs. As the authors show, in contexts of police interrogations, childhood memories or accusations of sexual assault against famous individuals, those in positions of power and influence are also those who are able to specify the setting of remembering, and thus control what is remembered and how. As discussed in relation to collective memory studies within inter-group conflict contexts, having the power to get one’s version to become taken-for-granted, it comes as close to being ‘true’ as possible. This in and of itself is a huge accomplishment. Perhaps the case of Brendan Dassey becomes the most telling of this. Known from the documentary *Making a Murderer*, the young teenager is featured in the documentary when he is taken into custody and questioned at length for his involvement in the murder of a woman named Teresa Halbach. Throughout the interrogation, Brendan’s memory is scaffolded by police officers asking questions of confirmatory nature, construction one version of the past which is clearly contradicted by the version he tells his mother later on in the documentary. Brown and Reavey, using this example among others, illustrate how problematic it becomes to classify memory as ‘true’ or ‘false’, and the extent to which the field of false memory studies accomplishes what it sets out to do.

As the paper shows, false memory studies give us little guidance in how to improve confidence in memory and aiding vulnerable individuals through the process of recollection. Instead, the constructive nature of memory has made memory flawed, leading to scepticism towards individual recall. This in turn has implications for how individuals are treated in settings where institutions or authorities have the power to set the framework in which remembering occurs. These can thus become part not of protecting and safeguarding individuals in vulnerable and victimized situations, but rather abusing their power-position to shape what these individuals remember to be ‘true’. We must therefore unearth and make explicit the power-asymmetries present in processes of remembering, moving away from the assumption that ‘false’ memories are due to the inherent lack of individual cognitive abilities, and more the outcome of the malleability, and at times manipulation, of the dialogical activity of remembering.

Power in the Sciences and Arts

The importance of power is not limited to child-adult, individual-authority relations, but rather it also infiltrates larger, social processes of remembering. As Wagoner (this issue) shows, even scientific theories are not safeguarded from the constructive and context-specific nature of memory, but rather, their movement over history and time becomes shaped by the larger dominant trends within the science itself.

Focusing on the work of Bartlett, Wagoner asks the question “how did we get from one meaning of constructive to another?” and provides the answer by charting the (re)construction of Bartlett’s ideas and concepts over the last century. In doing so, Wagoner offers a detailed and extensive account of research reproducing Bartlett’s work on remembering, and the different turns these accounts have taken. Strikingly, the paper demonstrates how dominant movements within the field of psychology itself shaped the processes of (re)construction and even led to the replacement of his original concepts with concepts more suitably situated within the larger, dominant turn of psychology at the time.

Thus, here we see power working on a more subtle level via social influences, but also leading paradigms. Bartlett acknowledged the importance of social influences by considering construction as related to meaning-making taking place within a framework of familiarity, or common sense. In other words, remembering is always shaped by the social, cultural and ideological ideas dominant within the context in which the individual lives. Thus, the assimilation of Bartlett’s experiments within the familiar social, cultural and political backgrounds of researchers was anticipated by the theoretical work itself.

However, this process should not be assumed to occur as an accumulation, where new meaning is only added to pre-existing, unchanging knowledge and memories. Rather, remembering should be understood as a transformative process. As Wagoner writes in regards to Bartlett’s theorization about the constructive nature of remembering, “[w]hile the first notion of ‘constructive’ highlights the flexible adaptation of a past standard to the present, the second more radical notion of construction was used by Bartlett to describe the process of welding together elements from divergent sources into a new form.” (p. xx). Perhaps Brockmeier’s paper (this issue) on Picasso’s art shows best the ways in which the latter conceptualization of construction occurs in a real world context.

Brockmeier uses the work of Picasso as a case study to consider the interplay between individual and collective memory. However, even more revealing in the article is the power of Picasso to introduce and integrate African masks, and thus African culture, into the Western arts. Similarly to Brown and Reavey, as well as Wagoner, Brockmeier considered remembering (and forgetting) as a practice embedded within a larger social and cultural context, rejecting the assumption that individual memory is separated from its collective counterpart. Focusing in on Picasso and his art, Brockmeier demonstrates the benefits to taking a sociocultural approach to remembering. The approach emphasizes three important components of remembering; 1) mnemonic artefacts, 2) systems of signs and symbols and 3) the interconnections between individual and social/cultural memory.

Focusing in on Picasso and his famous *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* (The young ladies of Avignon), Brockmeier illustrates how power, within the larger backdrop of colonialism and global domination, enabled Picasso to introduce African culture and tradition into the Western art scene. As Brockmeier argues, “[w]hile he gave centre stage to African art and promoted tribal masks to enigmatic artworks, this came at a price: the masks became famous as icons of Western art, not African art. Before and outside of this implementation they were ‘primitive’ and certainly not considered as significant artefacts

within their own indigenous cultural traditions.” (p.xx). Returning again to Bartlett, we see the constructive process of remembering as the fusion of diverse elements, traditions and culture to create something new and innovative. However, while artists previously had fused Western and non-Western symbols within their work it was the influential social and cultural position of Picasso that opened up the stage for the inclusion of non-Western symbols within Western art. Thus, while ‘constructive’ processes occur constantly, it is social influence and power which will determine which one’s are remembered on a larger, collective scale.

Situating Picasso’s work within the larger, global context, Brockmeier points out that the criticality towards Picasso and ‘his’ masks changed in the wake of postcolonialism, moving from a perspective of colonial theft and cultural exploitation to a consideration of Picasso’s art as an act of recognition of another culture. Thus, we can see the attempt by non-Western artists to ‘reclaim’ the Picasso’s masks as African masks, considering Picasso’s work as praising, rather than dominating, the ‘Africaness’ inherent in *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. M.)*.

The Power of Remembering

This short commentary has explored the role of power in shaping what is remembered and how, particularly in contexts of socio-cultural psychology, where this intersection has been less explored. The papers in this section were discussed, considering the ways in which power-asymmetries on both the interpersonal, but also national and global level, allow for certain memories to become more prevalent and accepted as ‘truth’. However, as Brown and Reavey point out, the language around remembering which distinguishes between ‘true’ and ‘false’ memories can become detrimental as it moves away from considering constructive memory as adaptive and a consequence of flexible human cognition, to considering memories as inherently flawed and prone to inaccuracy. As this commentary has showed, it is often power-relations which come into play to shape what memories are considered more legitimate than others, and thus inaccuracy might not always be a flaw of individual memories, but rather lack of ability, influence or power to get one’s memories heard and accepted.

Finally then, it is perhaps worthwhile to take a critical approach to memory, unearthing the power-relations that underlie the process of remembering as it occurs at the intersection between self, other and the object of memory. A potential way of doing so is by considering more openly and critically the socio-cultural context in which remembering occurs. Who is doing the remembering and for what purpose? Who is the listener, or audience, of this act of remembering, and what is their role? Finally, what are the implications that come with one version of remembering over another? Asking these questions, even within contexts of socio-cultural studies of remembering can provide a starting-point for more explicitly acknowledging how power shapes memory. This in turn hopefully allows us to deal better with the scepticism felt towards individual recollections of events, particularly vulnerable individuals or recollections of traumatic occurrences. Together this will offer a better understand of the ways in which the context in which remembering occurs comes to shape memory itself.

References:

- Bartlett, F.C. (1923). *Psychology and Primitive Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bartlett, F.C. (1932). *Remembering: A study in experimental and social psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bar-Tal, D. (2011). *Intergroup Conflicts and Their Resolution: A Social Psychological Perspective*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Bruner, J. (1990). *Acts of meaning*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cabecinhas, R., Liu, J., Licata, L., Klein, O., Mendes, J., Feijó, J., & Niyubahwe, A. (2011). Hope in Africa? Social representations of world history and the future in six African countries. *International Journal of Psychology, 46*(5), 354-367.
- Duveen, G. (2001). Representations, identities, resistance. In K. Deaux and G. Philogene (Eds.), *Social representations: Introductions and explorations*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gillespie, A., & Cornish, F. (2010). What can be said? Identity as a constraint on knowledge production. *Papers on Social Representations, 19*(1), pp.5.1-5.13.
- Jetten, J., & Hutchison, P. (2011). When groups have a lot to lose: Historical continuity enhances resistance to a merger. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 41*(3), 335–343.
- Leone, G. & Mastrovito., T. (2010). Learning about our shameful past: A Socio-Psychological Analysis of Present-Day Historical Narratives of Italian Colonial Wars. *International Journal of Conflict & Violence, 4*(1). 11-27.
- Linell, P. (2009). *Rethinking language, mind and world dialogically: interactional and contextual theories of human sense-making*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Liu, J. H., Paez, D., Slawuta, P., Cabecinhas, R., Techio, E., Kokdemir, D., et al. (2009). Representing world history in the 21st Century: The impact of 9-11, the Iraq War, and the nation-state on dynamics of collective remembering. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 40*, 667–692.
- Molden, B. (2016). Resistant pasts versus mnemonic hegemony: On the power relations of collective memory. *Memory Studies, 9*(2), 125-142.

- Nicholson, C. (2016). The role of historical representations in Israeli-Palestinian relations: Narratives from abroad. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 22(1), 5-11.
- Obradović, S. (2016). Don't forget to Remember: Collective Memory of the Yugoslav Wars in Present-Day Serbia. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 22(1), 12-18.
- Podeh, E. (2002). The Arab-Israeli conflict in Israeli history textbooks, 1948–2000. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Psaltis, C., & Duveen, G. (2007). Conversation types and conservation: Forms of recognition and cognitive development. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 25, 79-102.
- Sani, F., Bowe, M., Herrera, M., Manna, C., Cossa, T., Miao, X., & Zhou, Y. (2007). Perceived collective continuity: seeing groups as entities that move through time. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 37(6), 1118–1134.
- Van Ommering, E. (2015). Formal history education in Lebanon: Crossroads of past conflicts and prospects for peace. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 41, 200–207.
- Wagoner, B. (2017). *The Constructive Mind: Bartlett's Psychology in Reconstruction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.