

# Using Social Knowledge: A Case Study of a Diarist's Meaning Making During World War II

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The end of 1940. Who is sorry to see the last of this grim & anxious year? We have certainly lived history this year. How we have wondered & puzzled what the news in the next week would bring. . . . We have got used to being at war now & the inconveniences of the petty annoyances such as the blackout & rations have become a habit. We don't stir at night when we hear the guns & Nasties now, we have got used to them. I would not have believed that a day would come when the petrol pumps would lay empty, & I would actually have summer Sundays off from work & most marvellous of all a weeks holiday together in August. (June's Diary, 31 December 1940)

## 1 From the Production of Social Knowledge to the Uses of Knowledge

The history of societies is marked by ruptures such as wars, pandemics, new technologies and natural disasters. In response to such ruptures, societies generate social knowledge that enables the population to master the given rupture. The concept of social representations theorizes this production of social knowledge (Moscovici 1984). Social representations make the unfamiliar or uninvited rupture, familiar. For instance, social representations enable people to interact with intangible illnesses such as AIDS (Joffe 1995), they enable people to imagine a distant or unintelligible other (Jodelet 1989), they enable people to imagine what happens in the psychoanalyst's office (Moscovici 1973), and they provide people with concrete images to guide thought and action in regard to genetically modified foods (Wagner et al. 2002). Emerging out of "the crisis in social

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psychology” and the critique of the individualization of social psychology (Moscovici 1973), the theory of social representations has provided a means for theorizing collective phenomena in their own right (Farr 1998). Hence, Moscovici’s well-known statement that social representations “lead a life of their own, circulate, merge, attract and repel each other and give birth to new representations, while old ones die out” (Moscovici 1984, p. 13). In this statement, the unit of social psychological analysis is the social representation, which appears as an autonomous, almost intentional, unit. Social psychological phenomena appear, in this statement, to happen between social representations rather than between people.

Without denying that social knowledge can be studied at the collective level, our concern in this chapter is with the relation between the person and social knowledge. Individual persons are immersed in collectively constructed symbolic streams (Gillespie 2007; Valsiner 1998). As a collective rupture affects them personally, it is within these symbolic streams that they find ways to handle the newness, the unknown, the abstract, or the unthinkable. Accordingly, the question we address in the present chapter is: How are meanings, drawn from the stream of social knowledge, mobilized for the person’s individual action?

Bauer and Gaskell (1999) distinguish four modes of representation: habitual behavior (such as behavioral routines), individual cognition (ways of categorizing the world), informal communication (everyday discussion, gossip), and formal communication (novels, media, propaganda). In the present paper we are primarily concerned with informal and formal communication. We are interested in the social knowledge that flows through communicative channels, such as the mass media, artistic production, advertising, propaganda, and rumor. Specifically we are interested in how collective ruptures manifest at the level of the individual person, and in how the person then mobilizes social knowledge as a resource to master the given rupture. In our framework, a resource is a cultural element which is drawn from the symbolic stream to be used by someone to achieve something (Zittoun et al. 2003; Zittoun 2006).

At the level of the person, ruptures can raise three different kinds of challenges (Perret-Clermont and Zittoun 2002). First: ruptures in people’s lives call for new actions. Practical steps need to be taken to adjust to the rupture. Second: ruptures raise challenges to a personal sense of meaning, and so in response to a rupture, people seek to make meaning – engaging in representational labor and in efforts to regulate and integrate emotional and unconscious responses. Third: as they develop their new actions and understanding, people position themselves toward the rupture, also developing new identities, and thus engaging in the dynamics of social recognition. We propose to examine how an individual uses social knowledge to address these three facets of a rupture.

In this paper, we approach the question of the use of social knowledge through an analysis of a young woman’s diary during World War II in England. Unlike more recent wars, World War II affected people in England on an everyday basis. Decisions made at the level of government had huge consequences for the practices and experiences of individuals. The whole country was asked to support the

war effort and make sacrifices in ways that are difficult to envision today. The war entailed a rupture in social, cultural and economic institutions; it broke up families and social networks, and deprived people of taken-for-granted commodities. The unknown appears at all levels: What will the next army movements be? Who are the enemies? How will events affect each person's life? How does one think through news about destruction and deaths? Very aware of the disorganizing power of people's anxiety when passively facing the unknown, the British government and various associations put much effort into diffusing information and social knowledge during World War II. Quality radio broadcasting, theatre, cinema and adult education programs were funded to actively produce social knowledge about the war. In informal communication, rumors, opinions and advice were diffused.

This formal and informal communication creates social knowledge of the collective form identified at the start of this chapter. We ask how people actually use the social knowledge at their disposal: Do they use it as a resource to address the consequences of the rupture of war in their lives? And if so, how do they use it? Examining a young woman's diary during the war years enables us to identify the portion of social knowledge to which she has access, and how she uses it. The question we thus explore is: Facing the collective rupture that is a war, how does one single person *use* social knowledge to address the three facets of rupture: to support action, to elaborate meaning and to guide identity positioning?

## 2 Method

The data for the present study is diaries drawn from the Mass-Observation Archive (Sheridan et al. 2000). Mass-Observation (M.O.), established in Britain in 1937, aimed to create a "people's anthropology" to redress the relative neglect of the perspective of ordinary people in social science (Bloome et al. 1993). Following public appeals by the founders of Mass-Observation, several hundred ordinary people across Britain volunteered to keep daily diaries about their lives and their communities and to respond to regular surveys (called "directive replies"). Mass-Observation has archived these diaries and survey responses making them available to interested researchers. Methodologically this is an important point. One of the best ways for qualitative researchers to ensure quality in their research is for other researchers to have access to the primary data (Gillespie 2005). Accordingly, any researcher can gain access to our primary data by contacting the Mass-Observation Archive at the University of Sussex and requesting the diaries from diarist number 5324.

Out of the several hundred available diaries, we chose to focus upon a single diarist, who will be referred to as June.<sup>1</sup> The procedure for selecting June had two stages. First, we selected all the diarists with a family member also submitting

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<sup>1</sup> All names and identifying details have been changed.

diaries to Mass-Observation as this gives a second point of view, enabling triangulation (Flick 1992). Second, out of this sub-set we selected the pair that had, together, sent the greatest number of diaries to Mass-Observation. Of these criteria, June, and her sister, Bella (diarist number 5323), were selected. Since June wrote significantly more than Bella (about one page per day), we chose, in this paper, to focus upon June.

In August 1939, just before Britain declared war on Germany, both June and Bella responded to the Mass-Observation appeal to help create “an anthropology of ourselves” by sending in their first diary installment. Aged 18 when she began, June continued to submit her diaries to Mass-Observation until the war ended in 1945.

At the outbreak of the war, June is living at home, in a small, close-knit village on the East Coast. She lives with her mother and older sister with whom she has a very close relationship. Working in the family business – a small village garage and shop selling sweets and tobacco – June is in a prime position to observe the changes to her village resulting from the advent of war, as well as to share the reflections of others, both village members and those, such as travelling salespeople and holiday makers, passing through from other areas of England.

In April 1941, following Labour Minister Bevin’s call for women to enter the workforce, she leaves her home village and makes the first of several transitions. She moves to the southwest of England, where she trains and works as a gardener. Initially she works with her sister in stately homes whose grounds have been converted to agricultural production in the “dig for victory” campaign, and whose buildings became billets to accommodate war-workers – other gardeners and soldiers. Then, in March 1943 June and her sister move once again, this time to be head gardeners at a war hostel, charged with producing vegetables to feed the hostel staff and factory workers billeted there. After several months of successful gardening, June suffers from appendicitis and is unable to continue with arduous physical work. She therefore takes a position as shop assistant and “front desk” receptionist in the hostel.

During these years, June always has access to a wide range of social knowledge: she regularly mentions radio news and shows, as well as newspapers; she regularly goes to the cinema and to the theatre; she visits local libraries; and she attends lectures and summer schools organized by the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA). During these years, she is also exposed to gossip and rumors, posters, billboards, and official leaflets.

We are not under the illusion that diaries offer a transparent window onto the reality of June’s life. June’s reasons for writing are many, and the nature and quantity of her writing are influenced by the free time she has at disposal, her state of tiredness, her degree of interest in the events of her day, and her mood. Moreover, diary-writing adds a specific form of reflexivity or self-consciousness to one’s life narrative. For one, turning one’s experience into a narrative is a means of disengaging from the here and now stream of experience a form of distancing, and self transformation (Gilbert 2001; Ricoeur 1985), mediated by various cultural means (the rules of the genre of a diary, its appropriate

vocabulary and grammatical style – Bruner 1991; McAdams 2006). Moreover, June’s diary is addressed to a variety of real and imagined audiences. Especially at the beginning of the war, it is addressed towards M. O. experts, seeking to give objective descriptions of the reactions of people that June observes to the war, in line with M.O.’s stated aims. During the war, the diary’s role changes, becoming much more a space for June’s reflection about her personal current experiences and dilemmas. Thus, June’s diary is a peculiar mixture of meaning-making and self-presentation. Yet, still, it informs us about factual events, about what seems normal and what seems exceptional in June’s everyday life, about aspects of social knowledge to which she is exposed and, most importantly, what social knowledge she is using to construct her response to the rupture of war.

### 3 People’s Story within History: Ruptures and Resources

June’s immediate experience of the War was of the “Home Front”. Characteristics of the war such as disruptions to trade and intensive bombing of cities undermined British citizens’ morale. The British government reacted by trying to boost morale. It thus intensively provided people with information about the war and with entertainment: films, radio, and theatre were considered essential weapons against the enemy (Calder 1969; Catsiapis 1996). People were also called upon to be actively engaged, rather than being passive victims of the sky’s rage. Those who were not conscripted were enrolled in various sorts of civic activities. And propaganda was intended to diffuse values, pride and hope. Providing encouraging interpretations of the war and promoting individual agency, the government, mass media and cultural associations attempted to prevent the population from experiencing anxiety and helplessness.

How does the big history – the rupture that is war – affect personal stories? And what do individual people do with the general messages, the political discourses, and propaganda? How did June use social knowledge as a resource to deal with the war? We analyze June’s responses to the war in terms of the three types of challenges raised by a rupture. Thus, we ask: How does June use social knowledge to guide new actions, elaborate meaning, and position herself in relation to the war?

#### 3.1 Ruptures and Uses of Resources to Define New Actions

World War II demanded a response from the people of England. Bombings were frequent and an invasion seemed imminent. But how does one protect oneself from an imminent *blitzkrieg*? How does one prepare for a hundred thousand German soldiers landing on the nearby beaches? What social knowledge was June able to draw upon to plan her action in the event of an invasion?

Before England’s formal entry into the war in September 1939, the government believed that Germany would invade through the air. An intense civilian preparation was underway across the country. From February 1939, people were

asked to construct air-shelters; in March, every household was given a booklet entitled “Protection of Your Home Against Air Raids” (Kelly 2004), and Air Raid Protection (ARP) wardens were appointed to oversee the preparation of shelters and blackout; people had to carry gas masks. In April, compulsory conscription of men was announced. As expected, Germany attempted to vanquish England through the air in September 1940, during what became the “Battle of Britain.”

Thus, for eighteen months (early 1939 to September 1940), people are actively engaged in material practices linked to the expected invasion. Everyday life is radically disrupted. For June and her sister Bella, the beginning of war concretely means the need to blackout one’s windows, the construction of shelters, the excitement around gas masks, the anticipation of the first airplanes and bombings, the rationing of food, candles and clothing. Their family business is affected by the shortage of petrol and cigarettes. Nonetheless, during the day they carry on their habitual leisure activities such as ice-skating, tennis and cycling. But at night, on the East coast of England, the bombs fall.

In preparing for the nightly bombing, June draws upon the ARP leaflets. In a diary entry in September 1939, she describes how she uses this social knowledge to enable her to make decisions about what actions to take:

Bring out public information leaflets & ARP book and read through the lot. Decide bathroom to be refuge room in air raid because it is downstairs & has only one small 18” sq window, and has outside walls 18” thick. It already has in most things in ARP book washing things, disinfectant, bandages, etc. We take in a tin of Smiths potato crisps, 3 bottles lemonade, several packets of chocolate from business stock, & some old magazines to read (September, 1939).

The leaflet provides categories with which to analyze rooms (location, size, thickness of walls), which enable June to argue for the choice of bathroom as refuge. It also advises her on what to put in the room (first aid and foodstuffs). The leaflet does not have to convince June that to prepare a refuge is necessary. She has probably already picked up this background assumption from contemporary discussions about the war and the need for civilian protection, in formal and informal communication. By engaging in such practices, people concretely render the idea of the coming war, and create material security which might help them regulate their anxiety when imagining war. Later on, in 1940, when overhead airplanes become quite familiar (and June’s village remains untouched), June, her sister and their neighbors tend to disregard the formal advice about taking cover when airplanes are heard. Instead, they agree that they often feel it is more important to get a good night’s sleep, or indeed that they might as well take the risk of watching the planes from the garden, to see the exciting events of the war.

June not only reactively makes use of such knowledge as it becomes available to her, but she also expects such knowledge to be available to guide her actions. This is clearly demonstrated in the following excerpt:

Woke up at five. Laid in bed & heard the men go to work at the shingle quarry. I was not listening but overheard the word “parachutes” by two workmen. The next two a few minutes later were also talking of invasion of England. Everybody round here has it in their minds about what we shall do if invaded. Most people seem to expect it. Most have wild ideas about what we ought to do. Why have we not had instructions? Why not a Public Information Leaflet on the subject along with other wartime instructions we have had? After all we had plenty of pre-war on ARP & even since the war not a word to the civil population on what to do on enemy invasion. I wonder if the government has any plans. Everyone here is wondering if we stay put or hop it if they land. Some think both ways. We keep debating the subject of fleeing or remaining, & do not know whether to pack a case as some people have or not. We have had out handbags ready with bank books in since the day war was declared (May, 1940).

Here, June expresses clearly her wish for government instructions on the appropriate action to take in the event of invasion. The absence of such important information undermines confidence in the government’s preparation. Confronting a rupture so unfamiliar that its consequences cannot be anticipated, June, her family, and her neighbors search for suggestions on what it is that they should *do*. If June does not get such advice through formal communication channels, the informal ones are flooded with it. People discuss what the Germans will do to them, whether and how they might appease the soldiers, whether they should flee the East coast while they are still safe, and how they should prepare themselves in case they have to leave in a hurry. Some people recommend opening the doors to the Germans. Others, including June, pack cases with essentials ready to flee, while an acquaintance of June decides that he will take his go-cart, so that he can take his dog with him. June’s sister visits the man’s wife, and June reports:

She had hung out an old thick coat to air on the line. She said she had brought it out to flee with if necessary, as she says you want to look scruffy so that if a fund for refugees is raised you will be more pitied. We decided it would be better to wear your best clothes though (April, 1941).

In such exchanges, people are generating the social knowledge of what to do in response to an anticipated rupture of invasion, to make up for the lack of advice from the government. Having a thought-out plan of what to do allays some of the anxiety brought about by the rupture.

In these examples, we see that the instructions in the leaflets are followed with various degrees of adhesion. The leaflets are considered as a source of knowledge to guide the shelter construction when aerial bombardment is anticipated at the commencement of war, but are increasingly ignored as the months go by without bombs falling in June’s own village. Formal communications (ARP leaflets) do not always respond to the community’s immediate fears, such as the fear of invasion, and have to be completed by informal communication (social exchange, rumors). June reads newspapers and listens to the radio (formal communication), but she also engages in intense discussions, especially while she works in the garage or at the hostel shop (informal communication). She thus writes that “I



form my opinions from discussion among customers and friends and my own common sense” (Directive replies, January, 1940). Thus, uses of social knowledge are rarely homogenous. Rather, sets of information are collected through various modes, and used to complete each other, to compete with each other, or to define new forms of understanding or self-positioning.

### *3.2 Ruptures and Uses of Resources to Support Meaning Making*

As with any major rupture, the outbreak of war raises the question of its meaning. To support commitment to new and at times unpleasant actions, to accept hardships and the postponement of personal goals in the name of an imposed purpose, to accept participation in a collective effort, and to maintain morale, every citizen needs to make sense of events and the part one might play in it. Let us follow June’s uses of social knowledge to confer meaning to the political significance of war, to its day-to-day events, and to the personal impact of these events.

During the early months of war, people are actively seeking out understandings of what the war actually is, and what is happening. For this, the most immediate source of information is given by daily news. June quite often mentions listening to the radio. In her social sphere, there seems to be a consensus about the importance of radio news: many times, a discussion is cut short by people wanting to be home in time for the news. June and her family listen to the news of the progress of the war, to political calls and Churchill’s speeches, but also to various comedy shows.

Although the BBC is providing the news and opinions to be heard by the entire country, people are not necessarily passive consumers. June does not take for granted that the BBC’s version of the war is truthful. Within families and communities, people comment on and discuss the news, developing shared interpretations and doubts about the information that they receive. Working in the garage and, later, the hostel shop, June encounters a variety of people’s perspectives. She listens both to the BBC and the German propaganda of Lord Haw-Haw.<sup>2</sup> Asked by Mass Observation “What do you believe about the news you are getting nowadays (Give us all your feelings & opinions about this.)”, June answers:

I never do, [I] only half believe the news. I like to hear both sides of the story that’s why I always listen to [Lord Haw-Haw] as well as the BBC I think one is as true as the other & they are both biased to their own benefit (February, 1940).

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<sup>2</sup> Lord Haw-Haw broadcast German propaganda in English targeted at the English population. The nickname “Haw-Haw” comes from the upper class English accent of the broadcaster (who was actually a number of different broadcasters). The broadcasts derided the British war effort while glorifying the German war effort. The tone was sarcastic, and the broadcaster urged Britain to surrender. Despite the British government discouraging people from listening to Lord Haw-Haw, he was very popular in Britain as it was one of the few channels by which the British public could escape the narrow confines of the censored British media.



Hence, the outbreak of war requires people to use available information to create a representation of the war, to be able to understand it, evaluate it, and predict its evolution. Although the formal communication suggests that it is the definitive interpretation, June uses divergent sources of (formal and informal) information to create a dialogical tension – “I like to hear both sides of the story” – through which she can create her own opinion. June is thus not passively enacting a hegemonic representation. Rather, she is actively looking for contrasting social knowledge, which helps her to reflect upon the various representations of the war.

A second aspect of conferring meaning to the war is to link it to a superordinate principle or idea, which would confer a *raison-d’être* to the war. To come to such a general principle, June engages in a work of distancing from the here-and-now of war events, and placing them within the broader context of European politics and history. Resources used to create such distance are given by both collective memory and expert knowledge. On the one hand, June and her sister have been exposed to discourses from their father, mother and teachers about the First World War, in which they learned that the First World War was justifiable as the war that would end all wars. The commencement of World War II refutes that interpretation of the First World War, but the power of the idea persists. June uses this idea to provide an interpretation of how the current war might be justifiable: “We have got to win this war and make certain this time about it being a war to end wars” (Directive replies, October, 1940).

The idea that knowledge is a weapon against war leads June to engage in a process of continuous education, through reading, lectures and summer schools. June and her sister regularly attend weekly lectures organized by the Worker’s Educational Association (WEA), in which they seem to find resources for elaborating the broader picture. They attend lectures on such topics as “Propaganda in Peace & War,” “The Nature of Nazi Germany,” “American Foreign Policy” and “Russian Foreign Policy.” The sisters seem to appreciate these lectures and often actively prepare for them by going to the library. Not only sources of knowledge, the lectures also offer a frame for social meeting and discussion: June reports how a WEA meeting was the occasion to debate Churchill’s broadcast, most people disagreeing with him (Directive replies, January, 1940). In winter 1940–1941, the tutor discusses with the class the loss of his family under the bombings, and people discuss rationing.

WEA activities thus appear to be used to give some intelligibility to the world. For example, when a Mass Observation directive asked June “What do you consider is the main thing which leads you to form your opinion on current events at present?” She answers “WEA tutors & classes on international affairs” (Directive replies, December, 1940). Different aspects of WEA events are used for meaning making: the actual knowledge they provide (rendering visible the wider political and historical determination of the war); the possibility of engaging in shared attempts to interpret events, as part of the general project of a “war to end all wars”; and the actual creation of a feeling of a community of fate, united by this shared understanding and project.

A third aspect of meaning making regards the more personal prolongation of politics and war events. Fears, wishes and desires that a young woman might have in a time of war also need to be given a thinkable form. Fiction can become a symbolic resource to elaborate emotional, personal conscious and unconscious experiences (Zittoun 2006). Both sisters are avid readers of novels, and have easy access to public county libraries. For example, between September, 1939 and March, 1941, June mentions 34 visits to the library. In a Mass Observation directive reply from May, 1942, June also mentions that, at that time, her reading matter was mostly novels and she would take two books at once. The only comment June gives about her novel reading is written while she is a gardener: To the question “Which books that you have read during the past six months have made most impression on you? Why?”, June answers:

*How Green was my Valley* – Richard Llewellyn impressed me considerably, because now I work on the land I can more appreciate the nearness to the soil and the beauties of an outdoor natural life, especially as I have worked in Suffolk (Directive replies, October, 1942).

Here, June explains how the poetic description of the countryside enables her to see the nature that surrounds her (and to which she is quite sensitive) differently; it is as if it enables a naming of her more personal and unclear experience of its beauty. Thus, she might find a semiotic form for a fuzzy experience, and as it is done through words, this might in turn socially validate it. Thus, working in the field is not only legitimated by it being part of the war effort, but in everyday life, it can also become a poetic experience. Through such use of a book, June might thus be said to confer a more personal sense to the work in the fields.

Novels are not the only cultural tools of imaginary experiences to which June has access; films are also very important in her life. During the war June sees many films, and, as with novels, she uses them as symbolic resources. Contrary to her interest in war-related WEA lectures, she is least interested in films which address the war directly. The film *Immortal Sergeant* makes her “depressed and upset” (March, 1944); regarding *First Comes Courage*, she says: “We get very sick of these occupied Europe films. They are so depressing.” Other films upset or disappoint her for being too obviously propagandist: *Tarzan triumphs* (June, 1944), or *The Desert Song* (December, 1944). One might think that war films would facilitate imagination of what occurs on the front – after all, June never has direct access to the violence or fighting; these might also offer a safe space to experience aggression, hatred, and other feelings which cannot be lived in everyday life on the home front. However, June obviously dislikes films depicting the “war front” and avoids engaging in them. Too close to a threatening reality, they fail to offer June a safe space to experiment with feelings otherwise to be contained (Winnicott 1971).

However, June’s reaction to films depicting the home front shows that she strongly connects these films to her own experience. For example, she mentions *Mrs. Miniver* in October 1942, which she sees two or three times. The film is

described as “the biggest box office success of 1942: it describes the impact of the war on an “average” middle-class family in England, the raids, marriages and deaths, the local people, the alteration of outlook” (Richards and Sheridan 1987, p. 293). June stands in line to see the film, and comments “I am sure [it] will do the Gloucestershireites good as they don’t realize what it is like to live on the East Coast.” Now living in Gloucester, June uses the film as a resource to maintain her link with the vulnerable East coast, while presenting her home community to the local others. Retrospectively, it also suggests the hardship she felt during the first months of the war (which the film depicts).

June reacts very positively to films which do not address the war at all. Walt Disney produced films which had a huge success during the war. In May 1942, while working as a gardener, June twice sees *Dumbo* and comments “I liked it immensely but not as much as *Snow White*. The music is not so catching, though *Baby Mine* brought tears to me.” This might suggest that such a sweet fantasy found some resonance in her interiority. *Dumbo* is the story of a baby elephant whose mother tries to comfort him when he is upset about his enormous ears. The lyrics of the song that make her cry are:

Baby mine, don’t you cry  
 Baby mine, dry your eyes  
 Rest your head close to my heart  
 Never to part, baby of mine  
 Little one when you play  
 Don’t you mind what they say  
 Let those eyes sparkle and shine  
 Never a tear, baby of mine  
 If they knew sweet little you  
 They’d end up loving you too  
 All those same people who scold you  
 What they’d give just for  
 The right to hold you  
 From your head to your toes  
 You’re not much, goodness knows  
 But you’re so precious to me  
 Cute as can be, baby of mine

(Washington 1941)

Fantasy creates a safe space, remote from the rules of socially shared reality, in which more personal and intimate emotions can be experienced in an imaginary form (Winnicott 1971). Thus, although it is impossible to interpret June’s emotions with such a limited example, it can be suggested that the song acknowledges a person’s intrinsic value in a hostile world. It may well reflect a young girl’s feelings of loneliness and isolation as the rupture of war has forced her to move into a hostile environment. It is thus neither the objective relevance, nor the popularity of a film that predicts whether June will use it as a symbolic resource.

The rupture of war has various concrete consequences in June’s life. She leaves her village, changes communities (Gillespie et al. 2008), changes her occupation

and has new opportunities to socialize with soldiers and other war workers. To preserve a sense of self integrity through change, June has to confer meaning to what happens. Thus she uses social knowledge, distributed and crystallized in various forms, in her attempts to confer meaning to the war. This process operates at various levels of mediation. At a first, rather abstract level, June uses resources to define values which make sense of “the big picture” – that of a “war to end wars.” At a second level, this, in turn, confers sense to her own action of being engaged in the acquisition and transmission of knowledge. At a third level, the actual cultural elements with which she interacts become resources with which to confer sense to and elaborate here-and-now situations (see also Valsiner 1998; Zittoun 2006).

However, in order to be used by June, these available cultural elements have to carry a social meaning which can be linked to June’s own sense of events: a film which appears to represent women at work cannot be used as a resource if it fails to capture the emotions or actions that *June* feels lie at the core of being a working woman. Social knowledge has to be in a “proximal zone” to her personal experience (Valsiner 1998, Vygotsky 1962). This again highlights the importance of separating the meaning of a cultural element at the collective level of social knowledge, and the very specific sense emerging through its use by a given person.

### 3.3 *Ruptures and Uses of Resources in Identity Processes*

The rupture of war entails a repositioning of identity. As the war is a highly value-laden issue, one’s position toward the war and one’s role in it become important matters of identity. Moreover, one can be brought to engage in actions which radically alter one’s sense of who one is. In what follows, we highlight uses of social knowledge which support June’s identity processes and positioning toward the war.

June’s personal commitment to the war is conditional upon the idea that it is a war to end all wars. One of the direct consequences of holding such a conviction, appropriated from the previous generation, is that it positions her toward the previous generation. In October 40, June writes:

I feel very annoyed that the generation before mine did not manage things better so that this war was prevented. I think it is up to all young people to study events which have led from the last war up to this one and learn by the mistakes and strive to see that it shall not happen again. We have got to win this war and make certain this time about it being a war to end wars (Directive replies, October, 1940).

Here, June is positioning herself as part of a “*we young people*” In contrast to the previous generation, who failed to prevent war, they have to win and end all wars. June’s contribution to that generational task is possible through study, observation and critical thinking. These activities will define important facets of her identity, distinguishing her from her peers to such an extent that, according to June’s sister, other students call both of them “those brave young people trying

to solve the problems of Europe in a week” (August, 1940). She thus develops a sense of exception relying on two further identity dimensions: she is a critical person, and she is a Mass Observer.

At the beginning of the war, June’s eagerness to find information and to be active in meaning making and war preparation creates a particular sense of who she is, for her and for others. For example, in her diary, which might reflect positions she takes publicly, she positions herself as someone who is not duped by propaganda. June thus writes about a WEA lecture on “Propaganda in peace and war,” apparently followed by an “amusing discussion,” during which she saw that “those most influenced by propaganda think Britain is free from it” (October, 1939).

In contrast, she presents *herself* as someone who does not take information for granted, even though it is produced by a political authority or a majority e.g., “I don’t take much notice of the newspapers or the radio, taking every thing on these with a pinch of salt” (Directive replies, January, 1940), and who only reads critical editorialists (Directive replies, May, 1940). In taking up this position, she uses the media to mark her critical stance and distance herself from more credulous people. As earlier, June shows herself to be aware of the symbolic stream that she is embedded in, and a selective and reflective user of the social knowledge that is offered to her.

June’s belonging to the group of Mass Observation researchers is another important identity dimension, supporting her sense of “exception”: It is clearly present at the beginning of the war: she often mentions collecting leaflets or church magazines for MO, the sisters look for MO books in libraries, which they call “our” book. Her sense of identification with MO is such that she is “very insulted and offended” when the shops don’t stock it (April, 1949); she has a strong admiration for Tom Harrison (one of the founders of MO), listening to his radio show, reading his biography, and finding him “very charming” when she briefly meets him (May, 1941). Her sister notices that their eagerness to approach people and ask questions in the name of MO makes them seem like eccentric young ladies (August, 1940). MO, with its books, its authorities, its ideology and its members, creates an informal community, to which June has a feeling of belonging and which differentiates her from others. In turn, this reinforces her sense of self – it supports, for example, her reflection on war events, as she notes that her diary is addressed to someone who might read it (October, 1943); it punctuates her time (wherever she is, she regularly fills in MO questionnaires); and gives her a legitimacy in awkward social situations. For example, in July 1941, in the midst of complicated love affairs, she writes – not without humor – “My excuse is I am mass observing the forces’ love affairs.”

Although June’s relationship to knowledge is constitutive of her identity, its salience varies through the war. Her actual engagement with the war, her practices and her meaning making necessitate that she repositions her identity. In 1939, England launches the “digging for victory” campaign, encouraging people to turn every garden into a cultivable surface. The campaign is diffused through posters, billboards, newspapers and cinema programs, in which average families

are shown turning their garden into small fields, and guidance is given for doing the same. Later, women are required to engage in the land army.<sup>3</sup> Posters and pictures show healthy young women happily working. Initially, June positions herself against “digging for victory”. She describes it as “hard”, “dull & demoralising” work, adding “I hate gardening” (March, 1941). However, following the movement towards the conscription of women, June chooses to become a land-girl: she can avoid doing military work while still contributing to the war effort. Thus by trying to avoid conscription she ends up “digging for victory.” The discourse that she had previously scorned as propaganda she now enacts. The interesting thing, however, is that her identity becomes increasingly built upon her new practices as a contributor to the war effort. Engaging in new practices (agriculture for the war effort) repositions June in relation to the war, entailing a re-elaboration both of her understanding of the war and of her own identity.

As June’s identity becomes increasingly built upon her gardening activities, she starts actively constituting this new identity. In the summer of 1941, she has the opportunity to go to a Cambridge summer school run by the WEA. The previous year, she had chosen a course on social and political approaches to contemporary Europe; this time, however, she opts for a botany course. Similarly, when she became an under-gardener in April, 1942, growing tomatoes, she was asked by Mass Observation about the books she might want to buy and she answers: “I want one on tomato growing now and that is to refer to, now I have got tomatoes in my entire charge” (Directive replies, April, 1942). In such examples, June very deliberately intends to use books which contain the knowledge she needs to achieve some practical end, thus rendering consistent her new identity as land-worker, her ways of understanding the world and her competencies and practices.

#### 4 Conclusion: The Interdependence of Identity, Meaning and Action

Collective ruptures challenge the cohesiveness and functioning of societies, and societies produce collective forms of knowledge with which to address ruptures and facilitate their resolution. Our concern has not been with such collective knowledge *per se*, but instead we have been examining an individual’s appropriation and use of such knowledge. Social knowledge, available in its various modes – informal everyday exchange or rumors, and formal radio news, articles, novels,

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<sup>3</sup> Because of conscription in 1938, most men between 18 and 41 were sent to the armed forces, which created a severe labour shortage in Britain. Consequently, in December, 1941, the National Service Act was passed by the Parliament. This legislation called up unmarried women aged twenty to thirty, who could choose to join one of the auxiliary services, the Women’s Voluntary Service (to help in supplying a wide variety of emergency services at home), or the Women’s Land Army to help on British farms (The National Archive 2005).

films and posters – is used by a person as a resource to adapt to the ruptures that she faces.

More specifically, our analysis has shown that a person is not necessarily passively absorbing or enacting social knowledge. Rather, there is a margin of choice, of active re-appropriation, and reflective elaboration. Secondly, we have shown that such uses of social knowledge can bring the person to define new practices, to elaborate meaning, orient her action, and develop an adequate and sustainable sense of identity. Of course, these three aspects are deeply interdependent. Every rupture and micro-rupture entails a change in action, meaning and identity. The meaning of the war (is it a war to end all wars?) feeds into the actions taken (supporting the war effort of working in the land army and reading about gardening) which in turn entails an identity reposition (moving away from an identity position as critical observer to active participant as a land girl). Equally, the identity repositioning could be said to contribute to her enthusiasm to work on the land and read about gardening on the one hand while also contributing to her belief that this is a war to end all wars.

Yet our analysis also highlights a second distinction between collective history and the life of an individual: a collective rupture, such as war, is diffracted into a wide range of individual ruptures in a person's life. In June's life, the collective rupture of war is actually translated into the preparation of an air-shelter and the rationing of petrol. It leads to ruptures of moving to another county and becoming a land girl, discovering the joys of alcohol, cigarettes and dating soldiers, changing her moral standards, and becoming an actress and receptionist at her hostel.

In other words, starting with a first theoretical displacement – from social representation to the *use of social knowledge as resource*, we finish by proposing a second one: the move from a unit of analysis given by societal rupture, toward a unit of analysis given by an actual *use of a resource in a perceived rupture by an individual*. The unit of analysis would thus be constituted by the following sequence: a rupture, as perceived by a person, requires her to actually mobilize and use social knowledge, with some intention, with the result of engaging in new practices, changing her identity or generating new meaning. While at a collective level, the war was obviously a catastrophe, at the level of June's own life, it entailed some liberation and freedom, as is evident in the quotation at the start of this chapter. June experienced hardships and losses, but her life was also affected by the war in positive ways – she met new friends, was given new responsibilities, developed skills, broadened her understanding of her world and her capacity to act upon it. Yet while June's experience of the rupture of World War II may have been peculiar, the social knowledge that she engaged with in order to navigate her rupture was not. She had access to and used the same collectively produced knowledge as everyone else, but she used it to cope with her own peculiar ruptures.

By creating a double distinction between collective social knowledge and individual use of resources, and collective rupture and personally experienced ruptures, we come to characterize June as an able, social knowledge-competent person, with a history and an agenda. June's uses of knowledge can be seen to



entail a variety of degrees of reflection. In some instances, social knowledge seems to influence her beyond her will, as when she starts to enact the “digging for victory” motto, becoming an enthusiastic land girl, despite her previous resistance to what she would have called propaganda. In other cases, she simply observes herself using social knowledge, as when she describes her combined use of formal and informal knowledge during the air-raids. In other cases, June deliberately seeks out social knowledge, as when she looks for books on agriculture in order to carry out her new practices as head-gardener. Even more, she develops a reflective technique for uses of resources. Bauer and Gaskell (1999) suggest that reflection arises at the intersection between social representations. June utilizes such an idea in managing her relation to social knowledge. She seeks out social knowledge from competing sources in order to gain reflective leverage (such as confronting ARP leaflets and rumors; Lord Haw-Haw and BBC radio; or news and personal experience). Thus, social knowledge can be mobilized with various degrees of awareness. What enables such a critical distancing from social knowledge? Moscovici (1973) identified privileged modes of communicating in different social groups, some enabling more distance than others. More cognitive approaches to psychology would focus on people’s meta-cognitive skills to resist the influence of media. However, our reading suggests that a person is faced with social knowledge which is inherently multivoiced and contradictory (Bakhtin 1981; Marková 2006). If one accepts the richness and dialogical nature of social knowledge, then one can use it as resource for distancing. In other words, it is not the individuals who by some heroic feat of intelligence manage to separate themselves from social knowledge, but that distance is itself a product of the heterogeneity of social knowledge within symbolic streams.

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