



Uses of the Past: History as a Resource for the Present

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Abstract

Collective memory has become an increasingly important topic in social and human sciences over the past thirty years. Beyond the interest for how we understand history, collective memory research has explored how the past has been used to defend certain understandings of the world (for instance nationalist ideologies), political actions (as in the case of intractable conflicts), or collective identities (particularly when they are seen as reflecting the historical ‘essence’ of a national group). That is, how the history is used as a resource for the present. However, theoretical conceptualisations have more directly focused on how collective memory is produced, and less so on how it is mobilised for the present. In this paper, we propose to review the main conceptualisation of collective memory in psychology – as social thinking, as social identity, and as sense-making – and how they more or less implicitly understand the relations between past and present. In a final section, we argue that representations of history have mainly been seen, in collective memory research, as a source of meaning for the present or as a way to position oneself in the current social field. In conclusion, we propose a third way of understanding the relations between past and present, considering collective memory to be both transformative of the present and prospective for the future.

Keywords Collective memory · Social thinking · Social identity · Meaning-making · Prospective memory

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Introduction

Research on collective memory – exploring the lay representations of history – has been booming in the past decades, particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In this context, the past has started to be seen as not only interesting in itself, but as especially relevant to understand the present, as it *shapes* our relations with other groups by *defining* who we are, to use terms common in collective memory research. The past is thus given authority over the present (and often the future), by assuming that its transformations and deformations play a determining role in the way we understand ourselves and act with others, as members of social groups.

Indeed, the power of history, as a resource for the present, has been illustrated time and time again both rather explicitly and in more subtle ways. At one end of the spectrum feature the words of many politicians, who have spoken about their countries links to the past, their fears of letting history repeat itself, or their promises of bringing a glorious past back again. The current rise of nationalist discourses, both in Europe and in the United States, has often been supported by calls to revive idealised national pasts or to protect cultural identities rooted in national myths. At the other end of the spectrum, one can find a plethora of institutionalized historical narratives and symbols, which tell us something not only about what happened in the past, but how we should remember it, and what has been conveniently forgotten (Bresco de Luna 2019). In this special issue, we propose to look, on the contrary, at how the past is transformed and mobilised *for* the present. That is, we would like to explore how it is mobilised and brought to the present, as a resource to give meaning to present actions and groups as well as to imagine collective futures. The contributions to this special issue thus focus on how history serves as a powerful resource shaping not only collective memory, but also disciplinary developments, national politics and resistance to legitimized narratives of the past.

While there has been much research on the links between collective memory, representations of history and the present, there have been less attempts to provide a theoretical perspective on *how* history becomes a resource – simply assuming that it is one. A few important points can perhaps explain the lack of theoretical development in comparison to the empirical output. Firstly, it has for a long time been popular wisdom that the past shapes the present, epitomized in the popular words of philosopher George Santayana; “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” In other words, there is something powerful to be learned from the past, and it is significant for making sense of, and shaping action within, the present. This common-sensical knowledge has no doubt shaped scholarly thinking as well, becoming an important assumption influencing research on collective memory or representations of history (see Tomicic and Berardi 2018; Leone 2019), leading to a less carefully unpacking of its theoretical elements.

This is not to say that research on the collective memory has not theorised the links between past and present, but rather that researchers have not always been very explicit about the processes by which history is used as a resource for the present. Yet, the various conceptions of collective memory that can be found in the literature are not devoid of theoretical implications in this regard – and it perhaps explains why many researchers have not found it necessary to dwell on the issue. In this paper, we thus propose to review three key ways in which collective memory has been understood in

psychology, and what are their consequences for how we understand the relation between past and present. After looking at collective memory as social thinking, as social identity and as a process of sense-making, we propose a more general framework for understanding how history is used as a resource for the present, arguing that collective memory transforms and is transformed by the present, and that it is, ultimately, prospective.

History as Social Thinking

One important way in which collective memory has been conceptualised in psychology is as a form of social thinking, that is a way to understand the social world in which we live. Indeed, collective memory participates to how we represent the social groups we belong to and the ones of others, as well as how we think about social relations in general – by providing examples of how these have taken place in the past. While it is a vast field of research, most of the scholarship that has conceptualised collective memory as a form of social thinking has done so by using two different approaches: social representation theory and discursive psychology.

History as a Social Representation

Social representation theory explores how we make sense of the world through both constructing it and existing within it. It is a theory of meaning-making, power and social change (Elcheroth et al. 2011; Howarth 2006; Moscovici 2000) that asks the question of how the unfamiliar becomes familiar. The interest in understanding how novel ideas, objects and events become familiarized and integrated into our common sense knowledge is at the heart of the theory. It highlights the shared, dynamic, and at times contradictory nature of social knowledge by defining social representations as systems of shared values, ideas and practices that enable people to orient themselves in their material and social world (Moscovici 2000).

In recent years, the study of social representations has turned to explore social representations of history and their role in shaping public discourse on change, in-group identities and attitudes towards intergroup relations, and intergroup conflicts (Liu & Hilton, 2005; Obradović, 2019). This research has focused on exploring the more collaborative ways in which history is remembered, or forgotten, and the consequences it has for the present, while also drawing on the theoretical distinction made between reified and lay knowledge, and applying it to how we remember history. In essence, the contrast between reified and lay knowledge emphasizes the difference between institutionally produced accounts of history, often rooted in political agendas or ideological camps, and knowledge which interlinks personal experience with common-sense ideas produced through social interactions (Andreouli and Howarth 2013). In addition, while the former might have the power to develop what is known as hegemonic, or dominant, representations of history, the latter often provide contexts in which these are discussed and contested. As Augoustinos and Penny (2005) illustrate, for example, the top-down framing of certain socio-political agendas and the bottom-up contestation or acceptance of these representations often become inextricably related to

larger discourses around how the past is remembered and the meaning of an in-group identity, such as that of a national identity.

Research on social representations of history has explored issues ranging from whether there is a hegemonic representation of world history (Liu et al. 2005) to how historical representations can be used to construct coherent narratives about communities that inhibit seemingly incompatible characteristics (Jovchelovitch 2012). A key insight from this field of study is that history, or representations of history, are utilized to make sense of new events and ideas in society, by either linking them to the past, or distinguishing them from it (see Obradović 2019). In other words, the concept of anchoring, proposed by Moscovici, becomes useful in understanding how new events in the present, which are unfamiliar or strange, are made sense of by being ‘anchored’ or paralleled to events of the past. Nicholson’s (2016) study on the historical narratives of Israelis and Palestinians living in the UK illustrates the creative ways in which representations of the past continue to be relevant in the present, and provide support for political views in the present, through the process of anchoring and objectification. Nicholson (2016, p.10) argues that these narratives of the past “take their cue from the social representations that are anchored and communicated within the informal and social narratives of the individual, as well as by formal discourse through the media, education, and social/political institutions.” Consequently, as a type of social representation, history becomes a resource in the present by allowing us to make sense of novelty but also in strategically aligning chosen representations of the past with political agendas. Thus, a key feature of this theory is an emphasis on communication in creating, disseminating and challenging representations of the past. As Klein and Licata (2003) illustrate, mobilizing actors such as political leaders can flexibly communicate the past in different ways depending on the audience listening, and thus represent their agendas as aligned with the historical narrative of different groups.

History as Discourse

Another important way in which collective memory has been understood as social thinking has been to conceptualise it as a form of discourse. Actually, social representation theory and discursive psychology have often been seen by their tenants as opposing theories: While the idea of social representation implies that there is something mental (a representation) that is shared between people (it’s ‘social’ part), discursive approaches have argued that collective memory is a social construction done in discourses. On the one hand, discursive psychologists have opposed social representation theory on the ground that it is a cognitive theory, which assumes that people have mental representations ‘stocked’ in their head and that these can be transmitted almost identically between people (e.g., Potter and Litton 1985; Potter and Edwards 1999). From a discursive perspective, on the contrary, there is no pre-existing common representation, but a series of socially and culturally shared practices around how to talk about past, and through which it is constructed in present interactions (e.g., Middleton and Brown 2005). On the other hand, some tenants of social representation theory – in particular the authors mentioned in the section above – have argued that this is a misreading of the notion of representation: it is not a ‘static thing in the head’, but meanings given to social objects through interactions and dialogical co-constructions (Marková 2000). Furthermore, as Jovchelovitch (2007) discussed, doing completely

away with the ‘mental’ runs the risk of letting “behaviourism [in] by the back door” (p.128) by refusing to consider anything beyond behaviour itself – may it be in the form of physical actions or discourses. Yet, in spite of these disagreements, approaches to collective memory grounded in discursive psychology and social representation theory can constitute complementary theories offering a rich picture of social thinking processes, as we will see below.

Discursive psychology has its foundations in two main theories. First, in Austin’s idea of Speech Act (Austin 1975), that proposed to consider speech as a form of action: saying something is neither describing reality or a mental state, but performing a social action. In the case of collective memory, talking about history is not a reflexion of an internal representation or the reproduction of what actually happened, but an action performed in discourse to achieve something, such as convincing the other (for instance that one’s country is superior) or creating a sense of shared reality (by restating what one assumes to be shared). For this reason, discursive psychologists who study collective memory have preferred the term of ‘collective remembering’ (e.g., Middleton and Edwards 1990), in order to reflect the fact that the psychological processes they are interested in are the discourses in themselves and how they are acted, and not the assumed underlying mental representations or schemas. Second, discursive psychology has its roots the works of Berger and Luckmann (1966) on the social construction of reality, who were interested in the social construction of knowledge and how it builds social reality. From this perspective discourses are not a reflection of reality but are how it is constructed. Discourses on history, then, follow social and cultural norms of practice – defining what can ‘count’ as memory – to construct the past in specific ways.

Thus, from a discursive perspective discourses on history are social performances enacted to achieve specific aims. The very *raison d’être* of collective memory is its links with the present, where it is used to argue, convince, or share with others certain ideas about the past and their consequences for the present. It also entails “approaching remembering and forgetting as public, social activities where individual experience is necessarily mediated by collective experience” (Middleton & Brown, 2007, p.661). Because of this, it has been particularly sensitive to issues of power – who has the right to impose certain discourses and practices – and to the tension between discourses. Indeed, it is because others can and do defend versions of the past that are different from ours that it is worth discussing it: without alternatives, there would be no need to perform the past.

Interestingly, this an idea common to both social representation theory and discursive psychology. Indeed, in ideological dilemmas, (Billig 1987; Billig et al. 1988), a prominent discursive psychologist, argued that conflicting beliefs and tensions in thinking enable, rather than inhibit, dialogue and social action. Echoing this, Marková (2000, 2003) – advocate of a dialogical understanding of social representation theory – considers thinking as characterized by antinomies, or opposites, which shape how we make sense of the world. The common antinomy of ‘us/them’ allows us to structure the social world into categories of those who are part of our in-groups, and thus share a history with us, and those who are not, and thus are seen to be different. In other words, key to this area of research is a conceptualization of human thinking, and knowledge, as inherently built on, and structured around, contrasts and opposites (Nicholson 2019).

History as a form of social thinking – may it be from a discursive or social representation perspective – also emphasizes the extent to which, for most parts of human history, the past has been narrated through communicative acts, through story telling and myths (e.g., Nicholson 2019). This is an idea shared by many approaches to collective memory. The development of modern societies and the written record, Liu and Hilton (2005) argue, created the possibility for more hegemonic discourses on history to emerge, as written accounts allowed for inconsistencies between stories to be addressed, and potentially challenged. The institutionalization of an ‘approved version’ of history also conferred a newfound power on those able to construct the past in a way that either supported, or legitimized, their goals. As Wilmer (2002) argues, “historical narratives, as a consequence of publicizing education, have become instruments of political agency [...] [they] are routinely appropriated to legitimate political acts” (p.80–81; Alonso 1988). As a consequence, examples of historical revisionism, of the re-telling of history, as exemplified in Da Silva and Ferreira (2019), leads us to ask, as Berkhofer (1997, p.8) did, “[m]ust a history ultimately support or oppose the existing social, economic, and political order?” In attempting to answer this question we must move from considering how history functions as a discourse about the past, and the present, to how it functions to construct and uphold certain social realities, identities and intergroup relations.

History as Identity

Another area of research where history has been explored as an important resource is within the literature on social, or collective identities. A key theoretical framework within which much of this research has been conducted is the social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel and Turner 1979). According to Tajfel and Turner, we derive part of our sense of self from the social categories (or groups) that we belong to. Through the dual processes of social comparison and social categorization we are able to both divide the world into categories, position ourselves within them and maintain a sense of positive distinctiveness from those we consider not part of ‘us’. Thus, inherent within the theory is an understanding that relevant ‘others’, and the construction of social boundaries, play a crucial role in constructing an in-group identity. As Elcheroth et al. (2011) argue, “you can’t answer ‘which side are you on’ without first knowing what the sides are” (p. 735). Theorists within the social identity literature, particularly those focused on national identities, have explored how history gives meaning to group identities, providing the vital function of creating not only a sharedness between the individual and the group in the present, but extending this sense of continuity by rooting it in a seemingly stable and essential identity passed on over time and space.

Considering history as a resource for social and collective identities entails understanding how history functions to inform the meaning of a group’s identity and to root this meaning in the past, linking it to the present and projecting it onto the future. Scholars interested in how history informs social identities have explored the importance of perceived collective continuity (PCC; Sani et al. 2007) or social representations of history provide individuals, as group members, with a sense of positive social esteem and in-group attachment. The concept of perceived collective continuity has further been divided into two sub-dimensions: essentialism and narrativism. The former

is a version of continuity achieved through an emphasis on the stability of an in-groups 'essence', core features such as values, norms and other cultural markers that define and identity, while the latter is a version of continuity achieved through interlinking historical events to create a consistent narrative of a group's history. Considering the role of continuity in maintaining a sense of positive attachment to the in-group, perceptions of discontinuity have been found to cause collective angst over the potential loss of a group's values, norms and traditions (Jetten and Wohl 2012). Yet a recent strand of research has criticized this distinction between continuity as positive and discontinuity as negative by arguing that the importance of continuity to the past depends on the valence of the past (Roth et al. 2017). Namely, if the history of an in-group is seen as negative, then historical continuity becomes increasingly threatening to an in-group's identity and historical discontinuity becomes preferred in order to relieve people in the present from the burden of a negative past. In other words, depending on how the past is remembered, whether positively or negatively, perceived continuity could either become a source of positive identification or a threat to the seemingly positive in-group identity of the present. This more critical perspective on historical continuity echoes the distinction made between essentialist and narrativist continuity, where the former has been found to be more likely to satisfy an individual's need for self-continuity and therefore more likely to enhance in-group identification, or protect it when threatened (Smeekes & Verkuyten, 2015).

If history is such a powerful resource for giving meaning and continuity to an in-group identity then we must also acknowledge that those who can shape and re-write history will be in a position of power to not only shape who 'we' are, but also what we should remember of the past and the consequences this has for how we relate to others in the present. Research on how political leaders and activists draw on the past to legitimize their political goals has been crucial in giving us insights into the mobilizing power of historical claims and narratives (Jetten and Wohl 2012; Klein and Licata 2003; Obradović and Howarth 2018; Reicher and Hopkins 2001). The importance of understanding how history is both malleable and powerful leads us to the third and final conceptualization of history, namely as a process of sense making, intimately linked with the ideas and tools available to us in the present.

History as Sense Making

The third main conceptualisation of collective memory and its uses that has marked psychological research has considered discourses on the past to be the product of sense-making processes. This idea stems from the works of Frederic Bartlett on memory (1932), who proposed to understand memory as a form of action, rather than as a static account of the past. In particular, Bartlett believed that the aim of memory is not to accurately reproduce the past, but to adaptively act – or react – to the present. One important aspect of this process, for Bartlett, is that accounts of the past are created in an 'effort after meaning' – they are an attempt at making sense of the past – through the use of cultural means, such as narratives.

While much of memory research has claimed to follow the footsteps of Bartlett, it has often overlooked its semiotic aspects (Wagoner 2017). One of the exceptions to this case is represented by the narrative approaches to collective memory, which have a

double origin. First, they are the result of the translation to collective memory research of the works of cultural psychologists such as Bruner, who has argued for the importance of narrative reasoning as a form of thinking and as a way to give sense to the world in which we live (Bruner 1987, 1991). Second, they are the product of the emerging interest for narratives in autobiographical memory research (e.g., McAdams 1988; Nelson 2006), where the ‘narratisation’ of one’s past came to be seen as the trademark of autobiographical processes, allowing one to develop both a sense of continuity over time and a sense of identity by giving meaning to one’s past.

To a certain extent, then, narrative approaches to collective memory consider that discourses on the national past constitute the autobiography of a nation, and play a similar role as autobiographical memory does, at the collective level. Many of their tenants have also argued that individual and collective memory are one and only one psychological phenomena, and that memory doesn’t just take the form of narratives, it *is* narratives (e.g., Brockmeier 2002).

More generally, from a narrative perspective, collective memory is a construction – and thus often described as ‘collective remembering’, for reasons similar to discursive psychology – mediated by the use of social and cultural tools, that allow us to tell stories about the past and give it meaning (e.g., Wertsch 2002). In other words, social and cultural contexts provide us with tools to construct stories, in the form of narrative templates (Wertsch 2008) – broad story lines shared within a given context, such as the used and abused stories in many Hollywood action movies or romantic comedies – but also of symbols and concepts, that is general meanings and ideas that be applied to the past, such as freedom, victimhood, or even the idea of a past ‘Golden Age’.

While narrative approaches have insisted on the importance of narrative constructions – unsurprisingly – others have argued that this is only one of the ways in which the past is accounted for and given meaning (e.g., de Saint-Laurent 2018a). Narratives allow us to organise the past into a (more or less) chronological, logical, and meaningful discourse, indeed, but it is not the only way we use the past and construct it: Analogies (e.g., Spellman and Holyoak 1992), imagination (e.g., Zittoun 2017), and argumentation (e.g., Pontecorvo and Girardet 1993) are some of the many processes one may use to understand, account for, and mobilise the past (de Saint-Laurent 2018a). In other words, collective memory can be conceived, in a more general manner, as a process of semiotisation of the past, relying on a myriad of cultural tools and psychological processes (de Saint-Laurent 2018a), in a way similar to what Bartlett originally proposed (Wagoner 2017).

Common to both narrative and more broadly semiotic approaches to collective memory, however, is the idea that if the past is always given meaning from the perspective of the present, may it be to help one chose a course of action, to position oneself within the social field, or to imagine what may come next. Moreover, it is reconstructed by using the tools and resources one has available in the present. In a sense, then, talking about the past always involves a form of forecasting or foreshadowing: the present is anticipated in the past because it is its aim to explain and give meaning to the present. More fundamentally, semiotic resources are flexible tools that can adapt to a plethora of issues (Zittoun 2006) and that are transformed by their uses (de Saint-Laurent 2014). Thus, it is not just the past that gives meaning to the present, but also the present that gives meaning to the past, by defining which resources can be used, how, and for what purposes.

History as Prospective and Transformative

In the previous three sections, we have offered a brief overview of the main ways in which collective memory has been conceptualised in psychology, and what it implies for how the past is used for the present. While the different theories presented provide at times a contrasted, at others a complementary picture of these processes, two main relations between past and present can be said to be found in the literature. On the one hand, social representation theory and semiotic approaches conceptualise the past as a source of meanings for the present, in which current issues can be anchored to be better grasped. On the other hand, discursive approaches and social identity theory tend to understand discourses on the past as a way to position oneself within the social field, as member of certain social group or as defending a certain vision of history.

These two conceptualisations are certainly not incompatible, and our aim in this last section is certainly not to pick a side of the debate or propose an alternative. On the contrary, we consider that these are only two of the ways in which the past is used as a resource for the present, and would like to propose a third understanding of the relation between past and present, which considers collective memory to be both prospective and transformative.

The prospective function of memory – its ability to help us imagine what may come next – has long been recognised as the most important purpose of autobiographical memory (e.g., Dudai and Carruthers 2005), but collective memory research has yet to catch up (Merck et al. 2016). There has been, however, a few exceptions: Brescò de Luna (2018), for instance, has used the concept of prolepsis to argue that historical narratives are structured to anticipate what will come in the future, and we have argued elsewhere (de Saint-Laurent 2018b) that collective memory is characterised by ‘temporal heteroglossia’ – the simultaneous presence of multiple periods of time – and that it is by considering together past, present, and future that representations of history are constituted. From these perspectives, the past is used not just to give meaning to the present, but also to the future. By using narrative continuity (in the case of prolepsis) or by contrasting or comparing different periods of time (in the case of temporal heteroglossia), we become able to understand the present not just in light of the past, but also of the future. While past events can give meaning to the present situation, anticipating the future can give it significance, by allowing us to imagine what may or may not matter down the line (de Saint-Laurent et al. 2018). And because our imagination of the future is based on our representations of the past (Vygotsky 2004), this is an indirect use of collective memory for the present.

Being able to imagine what may come next does not just matter for the significance it gives to the present, however. At a very pragmatic level, anticipation allows us to act in present: by imagining what may be the consequences of what is currently going on, we can adapt our behaviours, in an attempt to prepare for what we believe the future has in store. More importantly, when anticipating an undesirable future, we can act to try to prevent it from happening (Glăveanu 2018). An example of this has been the reaction of many American activists to the election of Donald Trump, who in anticipation of a future where their rights and those of minorities would be limited tried to mobilise themselves from the very start of his presidency. This anticipation was fuelled by references to World War II: because many in the 1930’s did not foresee what the election of Hitler would lead to, they remained passive until it was too late, a mistake

that decidedly should be avoided in the present. In that sense, then, collective memory can be used to transform the present, encouraging people to try to alter what they perceive to be the course of history (de Saint-Laurent 2018b).

Conclusion

What are the links between the past, present and future, and why does this matter for psychology? As we have argued in this article, history can serve as a powerful resource to provide meaning, contexts and belonging in diverse social and political settings. The purpose of this introduction has been to bring together some of the vast literatures which draw on history as a resource for the present through emphasizing the role of history in shaping how we think about the world, position ourselves within it, and creatively re-negotiate the meanings of both the past, present and future. The present article has attempted to outline how, why and with what results history functions as a resource in the present, and the important ways in which history is both prospective and transformative. The articles featured in this special issue address these issues in their own unique ways, highlighting the pervasiveness of the links between history and psychology across social, national and even disciplinary contexts.

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