

# 1 Aspects of a Theory of Memory

I want to present to you some considerations concerning a theory of social memories. They are far from being ready and in my view not coherent enough, but I hope taken together they give you at least a rough outline of my actual work in progress, at least that's the work I would like to do, if i'd have got more time and don't hang around at conferences.

1. Aspect: The problem: Memory research is an important topic in social and cultural sciences at least since the 80s of the last century. In the aftermath of 68 there were social movements concerning local histories, oral histories, the histories of the suppressed (see Popular Memory Group 1982). Memories became object of social and generational conflicts. A wealth of empirical memory studies has been done and published since then. And we have theories of memory. What is the relation between empirical research and theories?

On the one hand theory depends on empirical findings, and on the other, the way we can ask questions, pose problems depends on how we theoretically conceive our object of research and which concepts we use to describe it. And: Theory can open up a platform for integrating different empirical findings.

So, do we need *a* theory of Memory? Don't we have a lot of theories of memory? Yes, we have. We have Halbwachs, we have Jan and Aleida Assmann, we have Harald Welzer, we have the dynamics of memory approach, we have systems theory. And we have a lot of forms of memories on a social level: collective memory, communicative memory, cultural memory, popular memory, social memory, social forgetting, to name just a few. But these forms are more or less different, even and especially when they're using the same label. Jan Assmann, Harald

Welzer and Hubert Knoblauch use the term »Kommunikatives Gedächtnis«, but its a label for three quite different phenomena. There's muddle and confusion in creating and using concepts, categories and forms. That's no wonder, because we are moving on a field of »non-paradigmatic, transdisciplinary, centerless enterprise«, as Olick and Robbins (1998) diagnosed.

I think it would be very helpful especially for empirical research to have an integrating theoretical framework, which provides consistent general concepts integrating different terms and perspectives in one Theory of Memory.

That means to bridge or to tunnel the gaps between the different approaches. It seems to be quite easy to find the least common denominator for the afore mentioned term communicative memory. But there are much wider and deeper gaps. Jeffrey Olick (1999) has identified two distinct paradigmatic strains: »socially framed individual memories and collective commemorative representations« and traced them back to two radical different concepts of culture: culture as subjective meaning and culture as objectified symbolic order.

Jan Weyand and myself have found another difference: theories of social memory based on interaction, mostly conceiving interaction as face-to-face-relation and theories starting from processes of differentiation, mostly conceived as functional differentiation. This gap is founded in the conceptualization of social relations, with Durkheim it can be said either based on mechanic or organic solidarity.

Halbwachs himself isn't clear in both differences: he employs both concepts of culture and both concepts of social relations. But that's no way to integrate those paradigms. Instead I propose to dig deep into social theory in order to find concepts abstract enough to be used as tunnels.

So, what I'm trying to do is a little bit like the work of a stone-cutter. Of course, I'm not working with stones, but with concepts. Most of them I found lying around, so the main part is cutting edges, polishing and a grouping together in different ways. Particularly, I use stones&concepts already cut by Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schütz, Niklas Luhmann and Joachim Renn. There's a lot of trial and error involved in that work. So I like to propose a division of labour: I'll do the trials and you tell me the errors afterwards.

2. To start with: Memories are an integral part of every activity, every operation and every social fact, therefore a theory of social memories is a fundamental part of social theories.

When asked for the function of memories, most theories ranging from Halbwachs to Hobsbawm, from Assmann to Zerubavel would answer: Identity. That's right, but that's not enough. Memories also produce difference. Only against a horizon of former states, of former conditions the non-identical, the different, the new is visible.

Therefore, Niklas Luhmann has named forgetting as the primary function of memory, to free capacities for information processing. That's also a way to focus on identities, formulated in his usual ironic and provoking style.

But what does it mean to remember identities and to forget the non-identical? That enables, as Luhmann states, evolution and learning. To emphasize it differently: what memories actually produce is stability *and* change.

The or at least one of the basic problems of sociology is: how is social order possible? Or formulated from the other side of the distinction: How is social change possible? The answer to both questions then is: through social memories. Therefore, I would

name the basic function of social memories as the enabling of the social process itself, either emphasizing stability or change.

What becomes visible in change and what is reproduced in stabilities are the structures. Memories are structuring the social and society.

3. Does this mean then, that the past is structuring the present and the future? Again, yes and no.

To make the indifference more clear: The past is not structuring the present as itself, in the event-character it has had. It is a processed form of the past, that structures the present: to be even more precise; a generalized form, generalized in repeated processes. As Umberto Eco puts it: »One forgets not by cancellation but by superimposition, not by producing absence but by multiplying presences.« (Eco 1988: 460) So what memories do, is to remember the General and to forget the specific: they typify.

Typifications are the basic form of human experience, as the phenomenological tradition where I feel home at states.

For Edmund Husserl (and also for Alfred Schütz) experience is a passive and active operation of the consciousness. Experiences take place against a horizon of typified experiences made before. If a new experience is made, it is explicated with elements of that horizon. These types are used as explicats in a way of association when »something reminds of something« (Husserl 1948: § 16). It is association according to similarity.<sup>1</sup> The ground for any association between constituted objects is the common time within a stream of consciousness. On this ground of time is the different is unified, »Auseinanderliegendes geeinigt« (§42b)

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<sup>1</sup>Husserl mentions also »mittelbare Assoziation«, where the Zwischenglieder are left out.

What happens then is that some typified remnants of past experiences are connected to explicate a present and new experience. A specific relation between homogenous *or* heterogenous types is constituted.

This means that typification has two temporal flanks: one in which the actual experience is typified, processed with available types. What remains then is a generalized remnant of the passed present. Therefore, forgetting (the specific) is a constitutive element of all experience. On the other temporal flank there is the actual use of the types in a present situation. This new context demands a specification of the generalized type, its application to the actual circumstances. This may involve a more or less intensive change in the used types. These typifications in their cumulative *and* oblivional potential open up a horizontal structure for every new experience.

To be careful: there is the danger of equivocation: the processes of typification seem to be different depending on the materiality of the memory: there are at least three kinds 1) bodily types, habits, implicit knowledge 2) language types or semantics 3) technical types produced in and through media. Maybe we have to add a fourth one: pictures, and maybe even a fifth one: smell and a sixth one: taste. That's the point, where the theory of memory has to transgress the phenomenological theory of typification. These different forms of types cannot be transformed in each other without problems. Processes of translation are necessary, which in itself have oblivional and cumulative potentials.

Generalization and specification are the basic forms of memory, and enable the past to be in the present and the present to be in the past, as Michael Schudson put it once.

4. What is produced and constructed with these memory forms, these types? Certainly not the past, and certainly not the present.

Here we are at the core of every theory of memory (and of society). Produced and constructed is meaning, Sinn in German.

In starting from the assumption that meaning is the form in which all forms of sociality are happening, the temporal aspects of meaning are important: there is one first important aspect: presence. Meaning is always produced or constructed in presence. The present situation, the present context are constitutive elements for the actual meaning.

Meaning as the mode of every access to the world is temporal in two more ways: First meaning is temporal as it relies on the actually available stock of types, of generalized remnants of past processes of meaning constructions. Second, it is retroactive (*nachträglich*) in a specific way: it is actually never completely determined, but depends on the subsequent connections, the possible future actions, expectations, operations or events, connecting to the present construction.

To give an example: the meaning of my presentation to me, to all of us here and to memory research at large is very unstable. It is different now, in half an hour after the discussion, on Sunday evening, when being published and so on.

Then, meaning has two temporal horizons: the present past, sedimented in typified structures and the present future, the possible connections, expectations and so on. That means, meaning is genuinely unstable.

But to be careful again: The form Meaning has to be decoupled from its exclusive fixation to individuals, to subjects. Subjective generation of meaning is just one mode of meaning generation. Other modes occur on the intersubjective level and the trans-subjective level. Again processes of translation seem to play an important role here. In complexly differentiated societies meaning generation has to be taken into account in all three modes.

5. What is done, when meaning is processed? Experiences are selected, interpreted, and sorted. So selectivity is a important, maybe the most important feature in this process. Selectivity is a decisive element for most sociological theories of meaning, be it Weber, Schütz or Parsons. Niklas Luhmann even reduces the meaning just to selectivity. I would say, that is too much reduction of complexity.

Selectivity is the mechanism with which each unit of meaning generation is reducing complexity. In a certain situation something is marked as relevant out of wide horizons of possibilities. So selectivity is also a temporal process. It is an operation in the present. It refers to former selections and it depends on expectations.

I would propose to take Schutz's concept of relevance (Schütz 2004) as a starting point for catching selectivity. Relevance for him designates dynamic patterns of selections. They structure everyday actions and thinking *and* they adjust to new situations. They develop and change in the constant pragmatic interactions with the surrounding world.

Again, relevance has too to be decoupled from subjectivity. Schutz himself wroted of structures of relevances of groups, but even on an transsubjective level, like for example a discourse, there are patterns of selectivity, which can be reconstructed.

While relevances reduce complexity for the unit of meaning generation, it is a very complex phenomenon for research. There seems to be no way to get to the structures of relevance than reconstructing empirically the respective selections. That means: only a theory of the constitution of social memories is possible. The reconstruction of any single social memory can only be done in empirical research.

6. There remains one important problem for a theory of social memories: the level of social relations. Here I propose to distinguish between the subjective level, the intersubjective level and the transsubjective level.

That's why I tried to decouple typification, meaning, and relevance from the subjective. That doesn't mean, that there is no subjective typification, meaning and relevance. Au contraire: but that's only one of the possible modes of the constitution of meaning, types and relevances. And it needs processes of translation to switch to another mode e.g. the intersubjective. The concept of translation as Joachim Renn (2006) has developed it opens up much better chances of empirical verifying than a completely contingent structural coupling as proposed by Luhmann. And it breaks up those closed systems perspective, which denies cross-border-relations. And these relations are especially interesting for social memory research: how are discourses translated into family memories? How are media productions used for constructing individual pasts? If conceived as translation, the single process of interrelation or even interpenetration can be traced in the relations of forms, contents and actual use.

7. But what about the transsubjective level? First there are self-contained, independent and autogenetic forms of social memories on this level: nations, organisations, law, science etc. How do they interfere with social memories on other levels? Looking at the content, translation processes are at work and can be reconstructed. For example elements of national or antisemitic semantics in a family memory. But they interfere in a more important way: they confine and constrain selections through forms.

That's maybe one of the main ways to influence social memories on lower levels and to stabilize and reproduce societal structures. Here's not the place and the time to develop that more



profoundly. Instead let me just list some of these selective and therefore constitutive forms to come to a close:

- a) **Differentiation:** the processes of functional differentiation and cultural pluralisation produce a multitude of different positions and roles. In the difference between these positions and in the integration of different positions processes of selection are limited: Take for example the difference between generations. In a family this is an important gap for transmissions and therefore a selective factor for remembering and forgetting. On a societal level discourses, e.g. concerning the German national-socialist past, can be conceived as co-structured by generations.
- b) **Mediality:** Media are the primary way to the past in our societies. But they are not just neutral transmitters, but inform the content regarding temporalization, social range and possible practices of reception.
- c) **Authenticity:** We have no way to reach the past itself. But there's a form of validity (*Geltungsform*), which seems to offer something like an real grip at the past: authenticity. In being accepted as authentic, remnants of the past lose their constructive character. The construction of authenticity is therefore an important way to put own reconstructions of the past out of question.
- d) **Communicative genres:** Narrativity and Discursivity are valid forms of communications. They offer scripts and rules for presenting content and at the same time restrict selection processes.

These constitutive factors of social memories are just a few we found in our research and with theoretical considerations. I'm

quite sure, that it's not the complete list, but at least it is a beginning.

To summarize:

I tried to outline an integrative theory of social memories. In building on the three basic concepts of meaning, typicality and relevance, which are to be conceived as independent from subjectivity, we can distinguish between three levels of social memories: subjective, intersubjective and transsubjective. In highly differentiated modern societies, the restricting potential of transsubjective factors is constitutive for social memories.

Thank you. Now I would propose that you remind me of my errors.

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