

Collective Memory of Political Events

Social Psychological Perspectives

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On the Creation and Maintenance of Collective Memories: History as Social Psychology

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In 1973, Kenneth Gergen ushered the deconstruction movement into social psychology by arguing that the theories and findings within social psychology were dependent to a large degree on the prevailing culture. Further, because the field was generating culture- and time-dependent scientific results, these findings should be considered as historical data points or records. Social psychology, in his view, was a form of history. At the time, Gergen implied that history itself was an impartial truth with social psychological findings serving as archival reminders of the ways people thought and behaved at the time the studies were conducted. Although this chapter agrees with many of Gergen's assumptions, it is important to appreciate that history itself is highly contextual. Indeed, social psychological processes help to define history. The ways people talk and think about recent and distant events is determined by current needs and desires (see also Tetlock, Peterson, McGuire, Chang, & Feld, 1992). Just as the key to the future is the past, the key to the past is the present.

In the United States over the last half century, most adults would agree that a relatively small number of national events have profoundly affected Americans' collective memories: World War II, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the peace movement/anti-Vietnam/Woodstock period, Watergate, and, perhaps, the explosion of the Challenger space craft. This is not to say that other extremely important events did not occur—such as the Korean War, the Bay of Pigs in Cuba, the election of Ronald Reagan, and the Persian Gulf War. However, this second group simply did not have



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the same psychological impact as the first. Why does society tend to spontaneously recall the first set of events rather than the second? What distinguishes an event that yields a broad-based collective memory from one that does not? By the same token, in whom are these collective memories instilled and what maintains them over time?

The creation and maintenance of a collective or historical memory is a dynamic social and psychological process. It involves the ongoing talking and thinking about the event by the affected members of the society or culture. This interaction process is critical to the organization and assimilation of the event in the form of a collective narrative.

ELEMENTS OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY

The recent resurgence of the term *collective memory* can be traced back to the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) and the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Each questioned the assumption that memory resides in the individual. Halbwachs addressed the topic of collective memory, and Vygotsky presented a theory of the mind allowing others to theorize about it (Wertsch, 1985). Halbwachs asserted that all memories were formed and organized within a collective context. Virtually all events, experiences, and perceptions were shaped by individuals' interactions with others. Society, then, provided the framework for beliefs and behaviors and recollections of them. Vygotsky's assumptions were similar in noting that adult memory is dependent on society or community. The social mechanism guiding memories was language—the primary symbol system that defines the framework for individuals' memories (Bakhurst, 1990). By extension, people's ways of remembering the past should be dependent on their relationship to their community (Radley, 1990).

In stark contrast to the assumptions of collective memory, most traditional laboratory-based memory research has attempted to understand memory as a context-free, isolated psychological process. This laboratory-based strategy has yielded some important findings about what individuals can and do remember. For example, memories for events, objects, or facts (declarative memory) are most likely to be remembered if they are unique, provoke emotional reactions, are actively rehearsed, and are associated with subsequent changes in behaviors or beliefs (e.g., Craik & Lockhart, 1986). It is particularly important to appreciate that unique emotion-provoking events requiring no psychological adaptation are not necessarily memorable. Moreover, while individuals are psychologically adapting, they may be more likely to remember events that occur during that time (Pillemer, Rhinehart, & White, 1986).

One interesting subset of memories is the phenomenon of *flashbulb memories* (Brown & Kulik, 1977). Flashbulb memories are an example of a

mixture of personal circumstances and historical events in memory. When people hear the news about a shocking significant event, like the fall of the Berlin Wall, they not only remember details about the event, but also their personal circumstances when they heard about it. Therefore, almost everyone who was at least 12 years old at the time of the tearing down of the Wall can tell their story (their narrative) of what they were doing when they heard the news.

Strangely enough, these flashbulb memories, which are reported with confidence, are often inaccurate (e.g., Bohannon & Symons, 1992). This is understandable because all memories fade or are reconstructed. Neisser (1982) hypothesized that flashbulb memories are not established at the moment of the event, but after the event when the significance of the event to society or to the individual has been established, leaving more room for error. People have such a vivid, long-lasting recollection when it comes to flashbulb memories because they allow individuals to place themselves in the historical context, and when relaying their personal flashbulb memories to others, they are able to include themselves in the event.

These event features that are important for individual memories should, by definition, be necessary for collective memories as well. Specifically, a society should embrace and/or collectively remember those national or universal events that affected their lives the most. Interestingly, this suggests that massive national situations that ultimately did not affect the course of history should not be part of the national psyche to the same degree as events that signaled important institutional or historical changes.

Consider, for example, the four most recent wars fought by the United States: World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Persian Gulf War. Each provoked tremendous national discussions, and was associated with the loss of life and huge consumption of resources. Only two, however, appear to have had any long-term psychological consequences: World War II and Vietnam. Surprisingly, winning versus losing does not appear to affect collective memory. Rather, these two wars were important turning points for American self-views. With World War II, the United States emerged as a dominant military and economic force for much of the world. Vietnam changed this egocentric perspective, thereby producing a new generation who questioned the role of the United States in the world.

A critical initial step in understanding both individual and collective memories, then, is that the long-term impact of events themselves help to determine the memories. Studies on individual memories, for example, demonstrate that people tend not to recall common events or objects that have no personal impact or adaptive importance (e.g., Bruce, 1985). By the same token, a war may give the impression of changing the course of

history at the time. However, if no institutional and/or personal effects are apparent once the war is over, there will be very few collective memories. Citing the powerful social memory of the execution of Louis XVI in France in 1793, Connerton (1990) demonstrated that previous murders of French kings were ultimately unimportant because the basic dynastic succession remained. With the French revolution and the death of Louis XVI, however, the basic structure of government changed forever

RESHAPING COLLECTIVE MEMORIES FOR THE PRESENT

Significant historical events form stronger collective memories, and present circumstances affect what events are remembered as significant. Fentress and Wickham (1992) argued that memory plays an important social role. In their view, individuals invent or redefine the past to fit the present. Evidence that current events affect the ways a society remembers them can be seen in the commemorative symbols the society constructs (e.g., Connerton, 1990; Schwartz, 1991).

Schwartz (1982) documented the people and events commemorated in the paintings, statues, murals, frescoes, reliefs, and busts displayed in the U.S. Capitol. There are congressional procedures that commission artworks for the Capitol building that encourage diverse views of what should be commemorated. Schwartz noted that this effort to reflect the nation's diversity did not result in an evenhanded display of the important events in American history. Instead, he found that certain historical periods were disproportionately represented and people or events that were not deemed important to the people living in the time period depicted were often "picked up" by later generations. For example, the early colonists commemorated John Cabot as a major explorer. But with the rise of anti-British sentiment came an interest in Columbus, who subsequently became the most celebrated explorer in the United States.

Schwartz (1991) also observed a similar phenomenon with regard to Abraham Lincoln's reputation and how it changed after his death. Prior to his assassination, Lincoln was neither overwhelmingly popular nor a national hero. After his death, however, there was a 14-day funeral procession by rail passing through most of the largest cities in the country that was witnessed by millions of people. The combination of the funeral procession and the high emotions of the country surrounding the end of the Civil War started a trend in transforming Lincoln's popularity that eventually elevated him to a status akin to George Washington. According to Schwartz, Lincoln's image was further bolstered by a shifting national sentiment that believed in the common man rising to lead the people.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN AFFECTING COLLECTIVE MEMORIES

Translating events or images into language affects the ways they are thought about and recalled in multiple ways. Typically, if not always, language is a social act. When an event is discussed, its perception and understanding is likely to be affected by others in the conversation. On a more psychological level, talking about an event is a form of rehearsal. Further, the act of rehearsing the event through language can influence the way the event is organized in memory and, perhaps, recalled in the future.

Talking as a Memory Aid: Rehearsal

On an individual level, objects or events are most likely to be consolidated in memory if they are rehearsed (e.g., Baddeley, 1986). In laboratory settings, the most common ways by which events are rehearsed are that they are thought about in verbal form. Repeating a 9-digit number over and over again—either subvocally or out loud—helps the person to retain the number for seconds, minutes, or, on occasion, longer.

Most memories for events are quite different from phone numbers or lists of nonsense words in that they have a social component. As noted earlier, Halbwachs argued that virtually all memories are collective—in large part because they are discussed with others. Indeed, for societies to exist at all, the societal members must share a very high percentage of their experiences to increase the cohesiveness of their memories. Indeed, Shils (1981) claimed that for a society to exist over time, its communications must be said, said again, and reenacted repeatedly.

When a large-scale event affects an entire region or society, a common response is for people to openly talk about it. In two related studies on a natural disaster (the San Francisco Bay Area earthquake of 1989) and responses to the Persian Gulf War, the degree of self-reported talking and thinking about these events was startling (Pennebaker & Harber, 1993). In both of these studies, weekly or semiweekly samples of residents of San Francisco (for the earthquake project) and of Dallas, Texas (for the war project), were interviewed using random-digit dialing sampling methods immediately after the war or quake through at least 3 months later. Among the questions that both groups of samples were asked was "How many times in the last 24 hours have you talked with someone about the quake (or war)?" Similar questions asked the number of times subjects thought and heard about the quake or war.

As can be seen in Fig. 1.1, the degree of social sharing and ruminating about these events was remarkably high during the first 2 weeks following the quake and the onset of the war. Clearly, the raw ingredients for shared

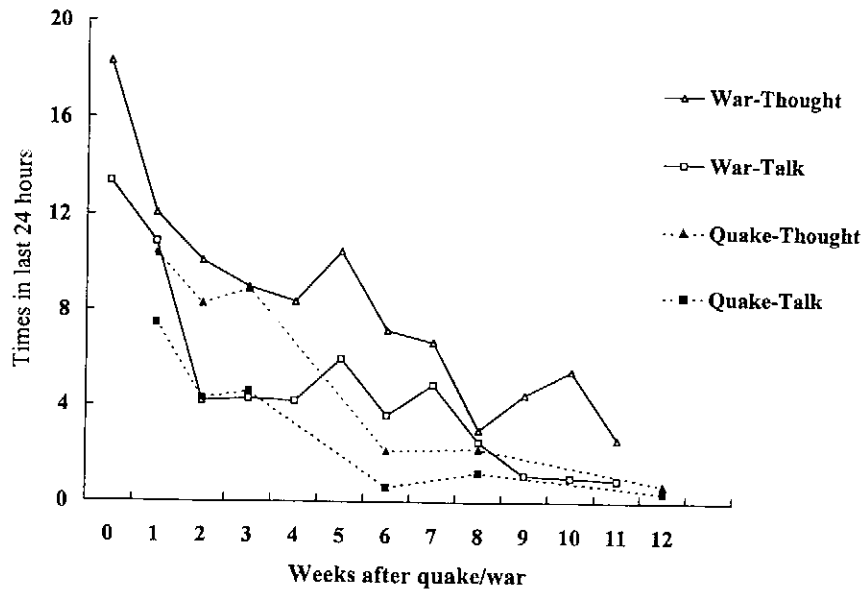


FIG. 1.1. Thoughts and conversations about war/quake.

experiences and memories were being laid down. Not only were people discussing these events to a high degree, but they were bombarded with features of the events via the media. In other words, most residents received similar information from television and newspapers, which in turn was talked and thought about. Given these basic ingredients, it would be difficult for people not to have similar memories of the experience, that is, collective memories.

Talking as a Forgetting Aid: Cognitive Organization

Just as talking about an event is a form of rehearsal that may aid memory, talking or translating an experience into language can help to organize and assimilate the event in people's minds (cf. Horowitz, 1976). An emotional experience, by definition, provokes talking because those who are affected by it are attempting to understand and learn more about it (Rimé, 1995). Language, then, is the vehicle for important cognitive and learning processes following an emotional upheaval. Talking about an event may successfully organize and assimilate it, which will allow the person to move past the upheaval. Ironically, once an event is cognitively assimilated, individuals no longer need to ruminate about it and, once it is out of their minds, they may actually forget about it.

An intriguing example of how cultures forget important events can be seen in the case of the Persian Gulf War. As noted earlier, the degree to

which people talked about the Persian Gulf War in the United States in the first weeks after its beginning was remarkable. Extrapolating from these numbers, it seems that Americans would have a clear memory for the major features of it. However, if talking about an event helps individuals to organize and forget about it, those who talked most about the war would be the ones with the poorest memories in the years following the war.

As a test of this theory, 76 university students who completed weekly questionnaires in classrooms about the degree to which they talked about the war during the time the war was ongoing were contacted 2½ years later (Crow & Pennebaker, 1996). In the 2½-year follow-up, the participants were asked a series of factual questions about the war, including: Who did we fight? [Iraq] Who was the leader of the opposing force? [Saddam Hussein] How many United States soldiers were killed? [148]. Astonishingly, most people's memories for the war were extremely poor. It is interesting to note that two factors predicted poor long-term historical memory for the war: degree of talking and negative emotions surrounding the war. Basically, those who talked the most and for those who the war aroused the most negative emotions were the ones whose memories were the worst 2½ years later.

CORRELATES OF COLLECTIVE MEMORIES

An intriguing feature of a large-scale event that evokes collective memories is that it can also bring about collective behavioral responses to the event. For example, in the mid-1970s, the wife of the president of the United States, Betty Ford, was diagnosed with breast cancer. Within days of this announcement, clinics around the country reported a large surge in the number of women seeking breast exams.

Particularly revealing from a psychological perspective are cases where large groups of people respond to an event in similar ways that, on the surface, do not appear to be related to the collective memory-related event. This phenomenon was first discovered when studying the psychological and health effects of the assassination of John F. Kennedy in Dallas. By way of background, Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, on November 22, 1963. Two days later, his assassin was murdered by an angered nightclub owner. At the time, the entire country was thrown into shock. Kennedy was viewed as young and vigorous, and no other president had been assassinated since the turn of the century.

Oddly, many Americans immediately blamed the city of Dallas for the assassination. Dallas residents were discriminated against when they traveled and became the victims of harsh media criticism. As a city, Dallas responded by pretending nothing had happened. It became the city of

the future and, at the same time, the city without a past. Dallas residents quickly embraced this new image. Compared to other cities with equivalent economic bases, Dallas experienced a tremendous growth in the 3 years after the assassination; dozens of dramatically large buildings and skyscrapers were built. A disproportionate amount of city funds, as compared to other Texas cities, was directed toward making the city cleaner after the assassination. Similarly, Dallas residents themselves donated more money to worthy causes, such as the United Way. All of these positive effects were most apparent between 1964 and 1968. In fact, in 1968, attention was shifted away from Dallas because of the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy. In an odd way, most collective behaviors that distinguished Dallas ceased at this time (Pennebaker, 1990).

Beneath these positive features of the assassination on Dallas were a number of consequences indicating that the city experienced a great deal of stress during this time. For example, deaths due to heart disease (the major cause of death at the time) increased 4% over the 4 years after the assassination, as compared with an overall 2% decline in the rest of the United States and other Texas cities. Murder and suicide rates increased significantly in Dallas in the 2 years following the assassination compared to control cities as well. In short, health and crime statistics indicated that the failure to admit to the psychological effects of the assassination was ultimately unhealthy.

THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF SILENT EVENTS

A silent event is one where people actively avoid talking about a major shared upheaval. This failure to talk can be imposed by a repressive government following a coup or other authoritarian institution such as a religion. By the same token, an event can be considered so guilt worthy or shameful that most affected people refuse to talk about it, as in the case of Dallas residents following Kennedy's assassination. In many ways, silent events may be the most potent in the development of collective memories for several reasons.

Recent studies indicate that when people attempt to suppress unwanted thoughts, they typically fail. Wegner (1989), for example, found that when people were told to avoid thinking of an object, they subsequently thought about it at rates comparable to control conditions where people were explicitly told to think about the object. In short, when people are told to avoid talking or even thinking about an important event, that event becomes more deeply ingrained in memory.

Even in studies of the Persian Gulf War and the San Francisco Bay Area earthquake, evidence was found to suggest that people quickly develop

norms to not talk about the relevant events beginning 2 to 3 weeks after the war/earthquake began. It was at this precise time that individuals were most likely to dream about the war or earthquake. In other words, when people are blocked from talking about an important psychological event for whatever reason, they continue to process it in their sleep. Indeed, in both studies, over 30% of those people who were randomly selected to be interviewed reported dreams about the quake or war in the 3 to 6 weeks after the beginning of the event—a number much higher than the 10% who had comparable dreams in the first 2 weeks after the quake or war or in the periods following the 6-week interview period.

Just as the diminution of talking about an event is correlated with increased dreaming, it is also associated with tension, hostility, and violent crimes. In the 2 to 6 weeks after the earthquake, aggravated assault rates increased 10% over the previous year in San Francisco (Pennebaker, 1992). A comparable jump in assaults was apparent in Dallas 2 to 6 weeks after the war started. More startling is what happened approximately 2 weeks after the war ended. Recall that the Persian Gulf War was declared to be a striking victory 6 weeks after it started. However, within a week of its conclusion, it became quite apparent to most Americans that the Iraq government was essentially unchanged and the brutal treatment of Kurdish residents was, if anything, intensified. The surveys indicated that people simply no longer wanted to hear or think about the war. It was at this time that aggravated assaults jumped 70% above the previous year (Pennebaker & Harber, 1993).

When people do not want to or cannot openly talk about an important event, they continue to think and even dream about it. They are also more likely to display aggression and initiate fights with friends and acquaintances. Ironically, then, actively trying not to think about an event can contribute to a collective memory in ways that may be as powerful if not more so than events that are openly discussed.

THE LIFE OF COLLECTIVE MEMORIES: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LOOKING BACK

Ultimately, the importance and interest of collective memories is that they persist for years or even generations. What fuels these memories? This question may be addressed by looking at various indicators of popular culture within the United States. Much of this work was the outgrowth of the Kennedy assassination project. In the years following the assassination, there was very little open acknowledgment that Kennedy's death took place within Dallas itself. Virtually no landmarks were erected. Unlike most other cities in the United States, there were no schools, streets, or buildings

named after Kennedy. Oddly, a similar phenomenon occurred in Memphis, Tennessee, the city where Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968. In Memphis, there were no schools, buildings, or streets named after King. (But Dallas has several buildings or streets named after King and Memphis has schools or streets named after Kennedy.)

Approximately 25 years after the assassination, Dallas opened an elaborate museum/exhibit acknowledging Kennedy's murder in the downtown area. Earlier attempts to open exhibits in the city had been met with tremendous opposition. Likewise, approximately 25 years after the assassination of King, Memphis opened a large exhibit commemorating the death of the famous civil rights leader. Also, the Vietnam Memorial Wall, commemorating people who fought in Vietnam, was opened in 1982, almost 25 years after the first Americans died in the war. Moreover, in the late 1970s, the Vietnam War was not an acceptable theme for mainstream movies, yet by 1986, *Platoon* and approximately 12 other Vietnam-themed motion pictures were released (Adams, 1989).

Is this 25-year lapse between a traumatic experience and the building of a monument real or coincidental? To test this idea, a study sought to find monuments that had been erected within the previous 100 years in the United States commemorating a single discreet event (e.g., disaster, battle, or similar event—either positive or negative). The time between the event and the erection of the monument was then computed. As can be seen in Fig. 1.2, monuments tend to be erected either immediately after an event, or in 20- to 30-year cycles thereafter. Interestingly, whether the event

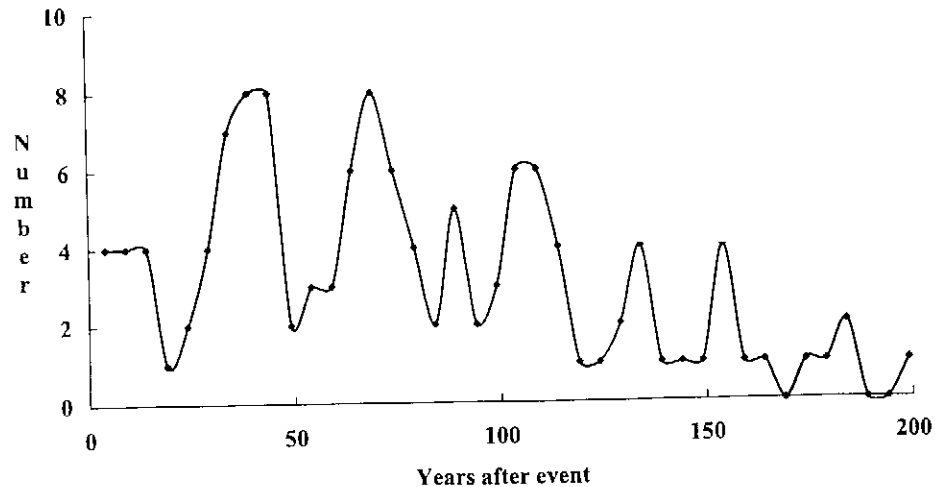


FIG. 1.2. Number of monuments built as a function of the number of years after the commemorating event (5-year rolling average).

that is commemorated is positive or negative does not make a tremendous difference.

Two related questions arise in examining Fig. 1.2. The first concerns why it takes 20 to 30 years to build a monument in the first place. Similarly, why does monument building appear to go in 20- to 30-year cycles? On a certain level, the erection of monuments is a complex coordinated social activity. For example, there usually must be some consensus and very little overt opposition among residents to build a monument in the first place. Typically, numerous committees must be coordinated to acquire funding for an artist and the land on which the monument is to be built. Whether the building of a monument reflects the enthusiasm of the builders or the lack of opposition to the monument is unknown.

One way by which to establish the generality of this looking-back phenomenon is to consider other forms of expression that could reflect a society's interest or need to collectively remember an earlier event. The second project was to study when movies depicting historical events were made and released. In the study, a random sample of 1,400 popular movies from a pool of over 20,000 made from 1920 to 1990 were coded for date of release and the era that the movie depicted. Not surprisingly, the majority of movies depict the present (i.e., the time period when the movie was released). However, as can be seen in Fig. 1.3, movies not depicting the present tend to take place about 20 to 25 years earlier. This pattern

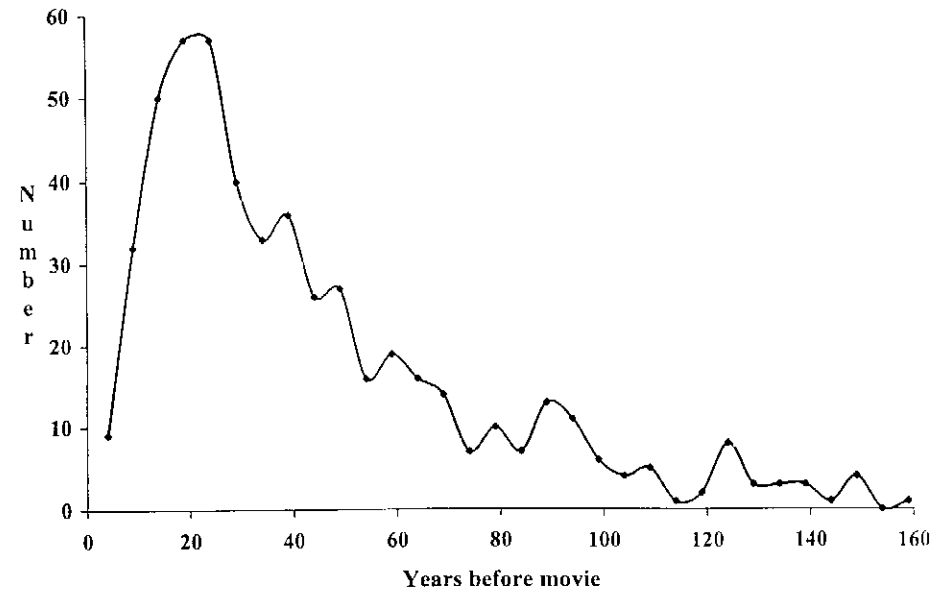


FIG. 1.3. Time that movies depict.

is actually stronger for top grossing movies (in terms of ticket sales) than movies in general. U.S. film watchers, and probably those elsewhere around the world, seek to remember what was happening 22 years earlier.

Groups of individuals and entire societies collectively look back at specific times. During these times of looking back, people openly talk about and acknowledge the relevance of these events to their own personal development. What accounts for the emergence of the 20- to 30-year cycle in looking back? There are probably at least three interrelated processes at work. The first concerns the idea that people have a critical period in life in which national events are most likely to affect their identity. The second, which overlaps with the first, concerns a generation argument; specifically, monuments are built and movies are made when one has the power to create them. The third explanation concerns the role of time gradually removing the pain of recalling negative events. Each of these hypotheses is briefly examined.

The Critical Period Hypothesis

Certain national events are more impactful for people at certain ages than others. Events that occur between ages 12 and 25 should be some of the most long lasting and significant of a person's life. This hunch is based on personal experience and theoretical speculation. In this relatively short time span, most people fall in love, form and leave very tight social bonds (e.g., secondary school, gangs, college), marry, and have children. For at least the last two generations in the United States, most people seem to like listening to music that was popular when they themselves were 12 to 25 years old. Movies depicting this time period are also held in special reverence. This is a highly social time, then, in which collective memories have the potential to be formed.

Other researchers have also pointed to the importance of this general life period. According to Erikson (1950), for example, the task of people between the ages of 12 and 19 is to work toward and adopt an integrated, single identity. Beginning around age 20, the next task is to develop close friendships and establish intimate relationships with others. Afterward in Erikson's view (as well as in the thinking of Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978), most life transitions are more individualistic and, perhaps, subtle (see also Conway's chap. 2).

Research dealing with autobiographical memories suggests that people tend to spontaneously recall memories that were formed between the ages of 12 and 25. In a fascinating review of his and other studies, Rubin and his colleagues (Rubin, Wetzler, & Nebes, 1986) described the results of memory experiments with individuals who were between the ages of 50 and 70 years old. In the studies, participants were asked to recall a series

of memories in response to various cued words. Although subjects were likely to be reported that had occurred between the ages of 11 and 20, and second most likely to be recalled if they had originated between ages 21 and 30 (note that the ages were aggregated by decade so that more refined evaluations of ages were not possible).

This has also been born out for memories of national and world events. Schuman and Scott (1989) found that when people of varying ages were asked what historical changes or events seemed especially important to them, they disproportionately refer to events that occurred in their late teens and early twenties. So, national events are most likely to create profound social/collective memories on a cohort of society rather than on all members of society.

The reasons why this age period is most likely to result in salient long-term memories are still under debate. In addition to the forming of one's identity and first intimate relationships, it is also a time of tremendous emotional and physiological variability—all dimensions independently related to memory formation and recall. (For a cogent discussion of these issues, see Conway, 1990.) Moreover, memories of large-scale events may be stronger for those who experienced them in their late teens and early twenties because they are more disruptive to those who are experiencing the significance of major events for the first time, or as Mannheim (1968) put it, these events constitute a "fresh" experience.

Obviously, the fact that events affect young people more than those who have more established views probably would not apply to a situation wherein an entire society was completely devastated. It would also suggest that any writers, biographers, historians, or even psychologist studying collective memory would overemphasize the impact of events that occurred during the times that they were between the ages of 12 and 25. It should be noted that when the first author was between the ages of 12 and 25, Kennedy was assassinated, Vietnam started and ended, Watergate occurred, and the Beatles and the Rolling Stones sang some of the best songs in history.

The Generational Resource Hypothesis

Allied with the critical period hypothesis is that events are commemorated when people have the economic resources and social or political power to do so. Immediately after an upheaval, for example, people often devote their energies and finances to dealing with the upheaval itself. If a war starts, a natural disaster hits, or a leader is assassinated, members of society must immediately cope with the event rather than worry about building a monument. Months or years might elapse before people are able to stand back and commemorate the event.

If the critical period hypothesis is true, the people who are most invested in ultimately building monuments and looking back in general are the

younger members of the society. Soon after a potentially memorable event, this group does not have the economic or political clout to establish monuments. Around 25 years later, when the affected cohort is, on average, over 40 years of age, they are now in the position to openly acknowledge their own past by building monuments, investing in movies, or writing and publishing books. Note also that when individuals pass the 40-year mark, they become progressively interested in looking back and validating their own lives (cf. Erikson, 1975).

The Psychological Distance Hypothesis

It is well established that immediately after a traumatic experience, individuals tend to distance themselves from it. Any reminders of the trauma can arouse anxiety and distress (e.g., Horowitz, 1976). This phenomenon helps explain why people often avoid building monuments soon after an emotional upheaval. The monument simply prolongs the pain of the event itself.

This problem is exacerbated when looking at a group of people rather than separate individuals. In coping with a trauma, people tend to employ different defense mechanisms. In Dallas after the assassination of Kennedy, for example, some individuals sought to openly discuss the event. Others increased their donations to worthy causes (perhaps a form of sublimation). Yet others murdered, committed suicide, or died quietly from heart disease. Statistically, then, a community or culture can show a number of seemingly inconsistent patterns following an unwanted tragedy.

Based on the Dallas example, a sizable minority of a society will support the building of a monument and a separate group will vehemently oppose it. One group seeks to remember, the other to forget. Interestingly, the impact of these two forces changes over time in very different ways. The desire to look back slowly increases as people begin to acknowledge the event's effects on their own lives and on that of their society. The members of society who initially oppose the building of a monument do so because the event arouses too much anxiety and distress. These negative emotions, however, tend to dissipate over time. The driving emotional force of the opposition to any monument, then, quietly diminishes. The net effect is that society builds a consensus for the erection of a monument and an acknowledgment of the importance of the given collective memory.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING COLLECTIVE MEMORIES

Very few empirical studies have attempted to understand when and why cultures develop collective memories. This chapter has pointed to some of the dynamics that can contribute to the building and maintenance of these memories. The basic findings can be summarized as follows:

- Collective memories are most likely to be formed and maintained about events that represent significant long-term changes to people's lives. A massive political upheaval (e.g., the 1848 revolutions in Europe, the Korean War, the Persian Gulf War) that results in virtually no major institutional alterations are much less likely to become part of a society's collective memory.

- Memories are most likely to be formed if people actively talk and think about events to a high degree. The social sharing of the events also helps in shaping people's perceptions of the events such that a consensus narrative emerges. If, however, an event does not change the course of history, talking about it should help people to organize, assimilate, and ultimately forget the event.

- Emotionally charged events about which people actively avoid talking will continue to affect individuals by increasing their rate of thinking and dreaming about the events. Political repression of speech about an occurrence, then, will have the unintended consequence of consolidating collective memories associated with the repressed event.

- Events that have a collective psychological impact will result in collective individual behaviors. Following significant cultural events, changes in crime, suicide, physical health, and even prosocial behaviors can be expected to change.

- Major national events will affect people of different ages in significantly different ways. In general, those between the ages of 12 and 25 will be most affected. The national events occurring during this age bracket will typically have the greatest impact on this cohort's self-views and collective memories.

- Over time, people tend to look back and commemorate the past in cyclic patterns occurring every 20 to 30 years. Monuments are erected, movies made, and books are written about national events for a number of reasons.

This chapter has addressed a small number of issues surrounding collective memories. However, some of the findings make clear predictions about how countries such as Chile will deal with the turbulent upheavals it experienced between 1973 and the present. Similarly, the ongoing changes in Russia and the countries that were once part of the Soviet Union should create collective memories that we will likely see for generations. Indeed, it will be quite revealing to learn more about the mass destruction of monuments that have taken place in several parts of the former Soviet Union. How, if at all, will the 75 years of communism be commemorated in future generations? Shils (1981) and Connerton (1989) argued that social or collective memories and, indeed societies themselves, are maintained by rites and tradition. With the elimination of monuments

and traditions, social memories should be profoundly altered. On the other hand, the present findings dealing with the time course of collective memories hint that a resurgence of positive collective memories will begin to surface no earlier than two decades from now.

Finally, collective memories are powerful meaning-making tools both for the community and the individuals in the community. Individuals partly define themselves by their own traits, but also by those groups to which they belong, as well as by their historical circumstances. Collective memories provide a backdrop or a context for much of people's identity (cf. Baumeister, 1986). History defines us just as we define history. As our identities and cultures evolve over time, we tacitly reconstruct our histories. By the same token, these new collectively defined historical memories help to provide identities for succeeding generations.

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