

Reconstructing Collective Memory in Online Groups

Gergely Juhász, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary

Abstract

This paper is the first important step of a long-term research. The final goal is to determine if it is possible – and if yes, with what efficiency – to reconstruct families' collective memories on online scenes. The relevance of this research question is given by the recognition that more and more families live with its members being separated in different countries, continents, and this leads to online communication being the dominant form of communications between the family members. If direct interpersonal communication is lost, if we sacrifice huge part of nonverbality, which are all crucial parts of reconstructing collective family memories, what happens to the shared memories, rituals and stories of a family?

Keywords: collective memory, participation theory of communication, online groups, reconstructing memories

Introduction

This review is the first stage of a future doctoral dissertation. The main question of the dissertation is whether it is possible – and if yes, with what efficiency – to reconstruct groups' collective memories on online scenes. The goal of this review is to put this question into the context of communication theories and to start to elaborate it piece by piece. We will deal with the most relevant communication theories and try to establish connection between them. The topic is from one side based on collective memory studies as part of sociology of knowledge, and from the other side on parts of group dynamics studies which are focused on the functioning of online groups. From the territory of sociology of knowledge we will examine the works of Maurice Halbwachs who was the first one to study collective memory, and from group dynamics studies we are interested in the processes which help the families during the reconstruction of shared memories. As the third “pillar” serves the participation theory of communication developed by Özséb Horányi, which is the most suited amongst theories of communication to bridge the terminological difficulties caused by the interdisciplinarity of the research.

When the members a given group (for example a family or a group of friends) are recalling events from their past they are using their collective memory. This shared recalling is done through communication and as such can be examined with the participation theory of communication, hereafter: PTC (Béres–Horányi, 1999). If the same group does this recalling online using chat, video chat, voice chat or the mixture of these, differences will occur in the method and efficiency of reconstructing the memories. From this we can see the main question of this review: can we regard the reconstruction of collective memories as communication? What is collective memory in terms of PTC?

1. Collective memory

The first notable researcher of collective memory was the German durkheimist sociologist-philosopher, Maurice Halbwachs, who published his ideas first in the 1925 *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*. Bergson and Durkheim had great influence on his work. It was translated to English in 1992 with the title *On collective memory*.

According to Halbwachs, remembering cannot be imagined without social frames. Everything that happens to us happens inside the frames of society and remembering, as the reconstruction of the past too can only happen inside these frames. Memory and the ability to remember are acquired during socialization. We reconstruct our memories within the frames of the present, thus giving them a new meaning based on the context they are reconstructed in. We can call this the social-constructivist approach to the past. Although collectives do not literally have memories, but they determine the memories of its members. We could briefly say: “One may say that the individual remembers by placing himself in the perspective of the group, but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories.” (Halbwachs, 1992: 40) This is basically the two sides of the same coin. When dealing with collective memory one mustn’t think of some magical collective consciousness. Halbwachs describes that although the collective memory drains its power from the group, always the individuals as members of the group are the ones who actually remember, and when life is gone from the collective memory, when there is no one else left to remember, than we can talk about history.

It has happened to most of us that for example when talking with our family an old story comes up and the family members help out each other, put together their individual memories to reconstruct the past event. “Most of the time, when I remember, it is others who spur me on; their memory comes to the aid of mine and mine relies on theirs (...) There is no point in seeking where they are preserved in my brain or in some nook of my mind to which I alone have access: for they are recalled to me externally, and the groups of which I am a part at any given time give me the means to reconstruct them, upon condition, to be sure, that I turn toward them and adopt, at least for the moment, their way of thinking.” (Halbwachs, 1992: 38) The idea that we always reconstruct our memories in the frame of the present can have a great impact on the collective remembering. The given context, setting, actual relation

between family members all can influence how a memory of the past is recalled. “Our memories remain collective even if we participated on an event alone, or only we saw a certain case. The truth is that we are never truly alone. Others don’t have to be physically present as we always carry with ourselves a given number of different persons.” (Halbwachs, 1980: 23) The author describes this with an example of him taking a tour in London. As walking by Westminster the words of one of his historian friends come to his mind, crossing a bridge he remembers the thoughts of a painter friend of his. Was he taking that tour truly alone? All of his memories are presented in a collective frame. These friends help him remember, he takes their point of view for a moment, reenters their groups to better remember. He feels the impact of the group, remembers different ways of thinking and ideas which are not originated from himself but maintains the link between him and the group.

Halbwachs made countless interesting point for example about how only when dreaming can we secede from society and also examines the possible differences between collective memory, historical memory and autobiographical memory, but as these are not closely related to our topic, this essay will not present them any further.

2. The Participation Theory of Communication

Founding the base of the participation approach to communication can be thanked to Özséb Horányi. He first published his ideas in 1999 within the collection of essays *Social communication* (Béres–Horányi, 1999), closely in the essay *About communication*.

Thanks to Horányi we can look at communication from a completely new point of view. “The understanding of communication presented here – let’s call it the participation understanding of communication – is based on that communication is actually the accessibility of relevant preparedness for a (problem solving) agent (ágens) needed to recognize and solve a certain problem. This is a state: one possible stage of the agent’s world.” (Béres–Horányi, 1999: 22) At this point we will only examine from this definition in more detail the preparedness, and also institution which is connected to it in many aspects.

2. 1. The preparedness

“We call preparedness those abilities and other capacities that can be used for problem solving, more specifically those which an agent can use for problem solving. (...) From the fact that an *a* agent solves a p_1 problem (so it does not solve on its own) comes, that *a* can solve p_1 , therefore it possesses the preparedness to solve p_1 .” (Horányi, 2007: 117) With a simple example taken from everyday life, if I wish to withdraw money from an ATM I need several preparednesses. I need to be able to read as instructions are presented in written form on the display. I also need to know my PIN code (or I need to know where I wrote it down), be familiar with the language the instructions are written in, etc. If any of these preparednesses would be missing then, until I acquire the missing preparedness or find a way to bypass it (with other preparednesses), I would not be able to solve the problem.

“Agents always possess original preparednesses and some of them also have extra-preparednesses at their disposal.” (Horányi, 2007: 118) When returning to the previous ATM example this means that the problem of me having to enter my PIN code can be solved with one of my original preparednesses, namely by the fact that I have hands. But *what* I have to enter (I know my code, or I know where to acquire it from) is an extra-preparedness as it is the result of my own learning and it is not originally available for every member of my species. “For some types the preparedness is entirely equal to those given originally. In case of other types of agents the preparednesses made available as a result of the agent’s own sedulity, namely (exogenous) *learning* can be greater and more significant than those originally available. This way among the type-preparedness given to agents by their type their individual preparedness can also vary from each other.” (Béres–Horányi, 1999: 28)

As a first step it would be beneficial to transplant the process of reconstructing memories into the terminology of PTC. It is necessary to accurately substitute every step into the terminology of the used communication theory, because only this way can we obtain valid and defensible results at the end. At this point of the research it is unnecessary to make a distinction between interpersonal communication and online communication, as so far the statements are equally valid in both environments.

Let’s bring a simple example. A family of four is sitting around a table recalling old shared memories. Remembering is the problem itself and the family members are the problem solving agents. This collective recalling, when every member helps the reconstruction with his/her part, is happening on the level of verbal communication. The memories kept by this

family are learnt (as they were not born with this knowledge) so we have to treat them as extra-preparednesses and not original ones. But if this collective memory fulfills some more criteria it can manifest itself as an institution for the agents. It is important to make this distinction in order to clearly see what impact certain elements can have on the agents and the problem solving.

2. 2. The institution

The definition of institution by Horányi is: “Within the frames of PTC, institution is defined as extra-preparedness from the point of view of the problem solving, which is available for every member of the group. (...) So institution can be regarded as a thematic field which can be more or less well marked out within the extra-preparedness shared by the group. (...) Like a horizon in which the world is represented similarly for the agents composing the group, like they were looking at it from a similar or identical perspective. (...) This discussion handles institution like a code. The terminus »code« (...) categorizes the whole of how-type knowledges used in regular communication solutions.” (Horányi, 2007: 42-44) From the nature of collective memory it is given that it is available for the members of the group and it is also beyond question that it is an extra-preparedness as the group members are not born with it but acquire it through learning. We can also say that certain segments of the collective memory are at least partially similar for the agents of the same group, which means that through this similar segment of the collective memory a segment of the world is also represented similarly for the agents. This shows an interesting similarity with one of Halbwachs’ thoughts about a person, when reconstructing past collective memories in the present, puts himself/herself in the perspective of the other group members. (Halbwachs, 1992) But to unambiguously call collective memory an institute we have to examine if it can work as code and to be represented as *the whole of how-type knowledges* used in some communication situations. Could the fact that a group shares certain memories also mean that the group members would react similarly in certain communication situations?

To further examine this question let’s take a family tradition as an example. In the tradition of a certain family as a group there is that on rainy Saturdays the family members always do one specific thing, for example play board games. As this tradition is the “product” of this family, we can say that it is part of its collective memory. This tradition not only prescribes a certain action in a certain situation, it represents a certain segment of the world differently for those

agents who participate in this tradition. For the members of XY family the rainy Saturday *mean* something different than for those who are not members of the family. In this aspect the collective memory can be described as institution with the terminology of PTC and we now see that we can *talk* about reconstructing collective memories with the *language* of PTC.

Although the example was taken from the field of interpersonal communication, online reconstruction of collective memories can too be regarded as communication according to PTC. The only aspect that changes is the scene, which will have a highlighted role in the next stages of the research. The aim is to synthesize a form of communication “script” which is present in the majority of cases of reconstruction, and we have to examine whether the unaware following of this script is present on online scenes as well. It could be further interesting to examine that from the varying online scenes which ones are more effective, more suited to make collective reconstruction happen. Could it be possible to reconstruct collective memories on a solely text-based online scene like a chat room, or the total lack of nonverbality is catastrophic for the process? Is it enough for the family members to hear each other’s voice in a conference call, or does image has to accompany the process like for example in a videoconference call?

3. Discussion

From the previous pages we know that the reconstruction of collective memories can be described as problem recognizing and problem solving according to the participation theory of communication and thus can be examined as communication. It also became clear that the collective memories of a family can be defined as institution, as certain segments of the world are represented similarly for the family members and in certain situations it prescribes certain activities which are only characteristic for the agents sharing the said collective memory (rainy day = board games).

Based on this foundation we can explore the specific questions regarding the online scene. Now we see that this reconstruction process can be described as communication, so we can examine what would happen if we would change one key element of PTC, the scene. But this would require empirical research. In the next phase of the research small guided focus group surveys will be conducted with families. The goal is to make these families recall one of their collective memories, like a family trip. We will examine how they aid each other to

reconstruct the said collective memory and we will try to synthesize the elements of this process. At the same time similar focus group surveys will be conducted with families on online scene with three possible settings: text-based, voice-based and voice and video-based scenes. The three settings are important to find out what are the minimum requirements for the reconstruction process to start (for example a certain level of nonverbality available). Also we would be able to determine the effectiveness of these scenes compared to each other.

These are the future plans and it can be seen that the focus will shift to online scenes and empirical research. Besides this the further widening and deeper understanding of the theoretical background is also needed.

Summary

This essay is fully aware of its limits. While setting the theoretical basis we managed to put the participation theory of communication and the theory of collective memories according to Halbwachs on the same page, but this is not even close to finding the answer to the final hypothesis. We still can't tell whether the collective memories of a family can be reconstructed with different efficiency on online scenes than during direct interpersonal communication.

But this wasn't even the goal of this essay. This short paper took it upon itself to collect what is needed for this whole study and begin to process it with scientific methods, put it on a scientific foundation. We saw that we can transplant Halbwachs' ideas about reconstructing collective memories into the field of communication studies, more closely into Horányi's participation theory of communication, which theory is valid for both direct interpersonal and online scenes. From now on we can discuss the topic of this study as a communication problem which is needed in order to operationalize it and get defendable results.

The further way of this study also became visible. At the same time as we widen the theoretical basis, the focus shifts to empirical researches. A series of family focus group surveys are ahead both on interpersonal and CMC (computer mediated communication) scenes. If it turns out that on CMC scenes the collective memories can be reconstructed with similar efficiency, then our attention will turn to finding out how the participating agents adapted to the characteristics of the changed scene. If it turns out that the same efficiency can't be maintained, then we need to determine the consequences of this. If the scene of communication is fundamentally changed, with what preparednesses can the agents solve the same problem? Are they capable to solve it at all?

References

- Béres, István – Horányi, Özséb (edit.), 1999., *Társadalmi kommunikáció*, Budapest, Osiris
- Demeter, Márton (edit.), 2014., *Konstruált világok. A jelenségek kommunikatív leírása*, Budapest, Typotex
- Halbwachs, Maurice, 1925., *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris, Librairie Félix Alcan
- Halbwachs, Maurice, 1980., *The Collective Memory*, New York, Harper & Row Colophon Books
- Halbwachs, Maurice, 1992., *On Collective Memory*, LA. Coser ford./szerk., Chicago, University of Chicago Press
- Horányi, Özséb (edit.), 2007., *A kommunikáció mint participáció*, Budapest, AKTI - Typotex