

## **Contextualising Autobiographical Remembering: An expanded view of memory**

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### **Introduction**

The emergence of the interdisciplinary field of ‘cultural memory studies’ (cf. Erll, 2012) or more simply ‘memory studies’ (see Brown, 2008) has signaled the sheer diversity of the range of disciplines who take ‘memory’ to be meaningful conceptual and empirical object for themselves. Many of the contributing disciplines are located within the humanities and the social sciences –the recent *Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies* is edited by a philosopher, *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* by literary scholars, and the voluminous *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies* is overseen by sociologists. Interestingly out of the 92 chapters across these books, only 9 are written by psychologists. Whilst psychology feels, from within the discipline, to be the ‘natural home’ for the study of memory, in purely numerical terms there is an enormous amount of research and theorizing going on outside of psychology departments.

How ought we to respond to this proliferation of memory-oriented work? One strategy is to clearly delineate the taxonomy of core concepts that define a psychological approach to memory, as Roediger & Wertsch (2008) do in their significant early statement in launch issue of the journal *Memory Studies*. The desire to formalize in this context just what ‘memory’ is for psychologists (and more importantly what it is *not*) along with detailing how it can be legitimately studied, is understandable. The forms of reasoning and types of evidence used to make claims about memory across the humanities can seem quite alien to psychologists. They typically involve weighty philosophical speculation coupled with either linguistic data (e.g. archival material, oral history testimony, media reports) or analysis of material artifacts and practices (e.g. museum objects, urban landscapes, monuments). For some psychologists this difference in the construction of arguments and standards of evidence may lead to the conclusion that what is being talked about is unrecognizable as being about ‘memory’ at all.

There is, however, a significant risk in prematurely demarcating the psychological from the non-psychological when we approach the topic of collaborative remembering. The terms of engagement with other disciplines can become fixed in advance, making it difficult to recognize the potential gains in engaging with alternative conceptualizations of core concepts. For example, the failure to see the manner in which the work of the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1980; 1992) actually offers a rigorous account of how socially derived categories restructure episodic memories through group processes (see Middleton & Brown, 2005), rather than, as sometimes claimed, offering a mystical notion of ‘collective mind’, has arguably set the dialogue between psychology and sociology back by a great many decades. Similarly, the emergence of approaches within the discipline that offer significant reformulations of the nature of the psychological can also be overlooked. In the context of collaborative memory, two of the most significant have been the rise of a distinctive Sociocultural approach to remembering (e.g. Brockmeier, 2015;

Wertsch, 2002) and the contribution of Discursive Psychology (e.g. Edwards & Potter, 1992; Middleton & Edwards, 1990). Both these approaches prioritise the status of discursive and interactional processes and reformulate notions of 'mind' in ways that situate the psychological in a broader cultural and historical landscape.

An alternative strategy is to set aside epistemic or methodological differences to look instead at convergence on key issues. Such convergence might not initially be apparent, since it can be buried beneath fraught debate over technical language or types of data, which distracts from the recognition of shared problematics. If we provisionally suspend questioning of what exactly falls within the domain of the psychological, it may be possible to see something of a common agenda. In this chapter we will describe what this agenda might be and how it can be apprehended through a discussion of work in Autobiographical Memory and in Discursive Psychology. We will organize our discussion around four themes – *function*, *accessibility*, *accuracy* and *life story*. In each case we will begin by pointing to a core concept within the psychology of memory, then describing how this concept is reformulated through an attention to discourse. The relationship between the two approaches will then be treated as creating a productive tension that opens out onto a common ground. This quasi-dialectical method of considering differences in perspective is not intended as a call for grand synthesis, but rather as a way of attempting to move towards a mutual recognition that as memory researchers we are all in *search of the psychological* rather than driven by absolute categorical clarity of where exactly it is to be found and what precisely it constitutes (see Brown & Stenner, 2009). Finally we conclude with some remarks on what such recognition might imply for what Martin Conway (2012) calls a 'modern view', or what we would term an 'expanded view' of memory.

## **Function**

A concern with the functions of memory, or the uses that remembering serves to individuals, can be traced as a kind of subterranean current that flows through the psychology of memory. High water marks would include part II of Bartlett's (1932) *Remembering* and Neisser's (1978) well-known admonishments to the experimental psychology community. Bartlett offered an account of the sociocultural basis and functions of memory that continues to inspire and inform contemporary work (see Wagoner, 2016), whilst Neisser famously claimed that a lack of concern for what memory actually does in 'everyday' contexts seriously undermined experimental studies (see Brown & Reavey, 2016). It is unsurprising that a concern with function should have recently surfaced again within the study of Autobiographical Memory, given the way in which this area has explicitly engaged with social and cultural issues (e.g. Berntsen & Rubin, 2012). Identifying the uses that individuals make of their autobiographical memories goes a long way towards contextualizing processes of remembering (or, as it was originally formulated, 'everyday memory' – see Gruenberg et al, 1978).

Susan Bluck's work points towards three general classes of functions – *directive* (i.e. making use of the past to inform current and future actions); *self* (i.e.

supporting a sense of continuity of self over time) and *social* (i.e. facilitating social interaction and building social bonds) (see Alea & Bluck, 2003; Bluck et al, 2005). These three sets of functions make intuitive sense. Were they to be translated into a philosophical discourse, they would correspond roughly to the axiomatic dimensions of time, identity and space, which have been essential to the majority of modern Kantian philosophies of mind. But as constructs that are capable of recruiting empirical support, they prove slightly more problematic. Harris et al (2014) note that each construct is destabilized to some extent when the valence of what is remembered is taken into account. For example, memories of loss and negative events do not fit easily into the tripartite scheme, since they tend to make our relationships with ourselves and one another more complicated, rather than simply more or less continuous or cohesive. Drawing on the reminiscence literature (e.g. Webster, 1993), Harris et al suggest instead a four factor model of functions, including *reflective* (i.e. self-focused attention), *social* (i.e. generally positive memories used as social/conversational lubricants), *ruminative* (i.e. self-focused attention concerned with losses and threats) and *generative* (i.e. thinking and talking of the past to project oneself into the future, potentially under the shadow of mortality). Whilst this seems to give a more rounded account of range of ways we may relate to the past, Harris et al acknowledge that it still fails to adequately address the complex relationship between remembering and emotional regulation.

From a discursive perspective, these kinds of shortcomings speak to the misguided attempt to impose abstract *a priori* categories on the situated nature of remembering. Inevitably these categories will fail to capture the texture and subtleties of what people do with their memories, because they are logically rather empirically derived. In their well-known broadside to the everyday memory tradition, Edwards & Potter (1992b) argue that the functions of remembering are indexed completely to the interactional contexts in which 'the past' becomes a shared matter of concern. For example, whilst Ulric Neisser (1981) famously interpreted John Dean's Watergate testimony as preserving his own self-image, Edwards & Potter read his statements as situated acts that manage his own accountability by providing sometimes contradictory accounts of events, depending on the line of questioning adopted by the senate committee. The category of 'social' functions is then massively expanded to cover the fine-grained and often highly nuanced interactions that make up the everyday (see Potter, 2012). Or put slightly differently, there is nothing other than social functions, enacted through discursive means: 'what is required is not merely an extension of traditional cognitive concerns into real-world settings, but a re-focusing of attention upon the dynamics of social action, and in particular, of discourse' (Edwards & Potter, 1992b: 188).

This re-focusing shifts attention to specific and, ideally, naturally occurring interactions as the unit of analysis. Whilst this offers the enormous gain of studying, as the Conversation Analyst Harvey Sacks once put it, 'the kinds of things that actually occur' (1992: 419) rather than speculative processes, it comes at the cost of foreclosing on how it is that persons come to find themselves in these 'actually occurring' interactions, and what the implications are of having remembered this or that for their future conduct. For example, a

person who calls an emergency number threatening to commit suicide and who tells of a range of awful things that have happened to them in their past, is following a particular life trajectory in which their relation to memory is highly significant. There is clearly much to be learned by concentrating on how they offer accounts of the past within the immediate telephone interaction, but there is probably a great deal more to be learned by cautiously expanding the analysis to consider how the collaborative management of difficult memories works during times of crisis.

In a project exploring conflicts in how the July 7<sup>th</sup> 2005 Bombings of London transport sites were remembered (see Allen, 2015; Allen & Brown, 2011; Brown, Allen & Reavey, 2016), we had the opportunity to hear from a range of people who either survived the explosions, or had a close connection to the events. One of the major issues was that, from almost the moment when they emerged from the train tunnels, the survivors recognized that their stories they had to tell were not entirely their own, but had become public property. Part of the process of recovering a life after the bombings was recognizing that what they remembered had to be presented cautiously and sensitively to a range of audiences – the media, police, relatives of victims, government – who felt they had a legitimate claim to construct a narrative around the events. As John Tulloch, who survived the Edgware Road blast, puts it ‘I’m faced with Rupert Murdoch’s mob and others, er, just using me, constructing me, reconstructing me, at the very same time I’m trying to reconstruct myself’ (see Brown et al, 2016: 434). For the survivors, creating a sense of self-continuity – i.e. building a relationship between who they were before and after 7/7 – became a collective, rather than a purely personal project, since it involved continuous engagement with the needs and agendas of a host of other people and institutions.

In fact, many survivors had only fragmentary memories of the events for some time after. They had been plunged suddenly and unexpectedly into the confusion and darkness of underground train wreckage, some with significant physical injuries. The process of reconstructing what exactly had happened was accomplished through a range of collaborative means. Some survivors formed an association – Kings Cross United – where they met to exchange stories and drew diagrams of the train carriage so they place themselves in relation to one another at the time of the explosion (see Brown et al, 2016). Others drew on media reports and photographs as scaffolding to reconstruct the elements they did recall. In a few cases, their recollections were contradicted at a later date through testimony from others or chance encounters with other survivors, which caused obvious distress. The gap between the personal and the public was thoroughly fluid. In a strong sense, what the survivors remembered was not the gradual self-accumulation of incomplete episodic memories, but the product of a genuinely collective activity.

What we do with our memory – the various functions served by remembering – does need to be indexed to the specific ‘kinds of things that actually occur’. Starting anywhere else runs the risk of constructing categories that are, to borrow the words of the philosopher Henri Bergson, akin to ‘badly fitting clothes’ hung on the actuality of social life. But we cannot be limited to a form of empiricism that can only speak of this or that particular interaction. In *Vital*

*Memory and Affect*, we argue that our lives have both felt continuities and discontinuities that extend beyond immediate occurrences and which are continuously being refracted through our collaboratively accomplished acts of remembering. Thus memories of the same event may take on a very different significance, and accomplish different things, depending on the setting where they are enacted. This is particularly the case with difficult or distressing memories – a subset of autobiographical memory that we refer to as ‘vital memory’ since it concerns events that cannot be forgotten and tend to be of ongoing concern (see Brown & Reavey, 2015a). Understanding how persons make sense of this variability in life trajectories that encompass significant ‘negative events’ leads us in the same direction as Harris et al (2014) towards requiring a conceptualization of the affective dimensions of social remembering.

### **Accessibility**

Tulving & Pearlstone’s (1966) distinction between the *availability* of a given memory (i.e. whether a memory is within the system) and its *accessibility* at a specific point (i.e. whether or not it can be retrieved), is central to an understanding of how autobiographical memories are invoked. Whilst much of our past experiences are available to us, those that are congruent with current mood and with the operant goals of the working self are more accessible, and hence are more likely to be recalled (see Conway 2005). In Conway & Pleydell-Pearce’s (2000) description of the Self-Memory System (SMS) model of Autobiographical Memory, the working self is broken down into enduring self-images, life stories and beliefs/values which intersect with a continuous fluctuating goal system, which orders immediate short-term goals in relation to broader projects and aspirations. The interaction between these two components cues patterns of activation in autobiographical memory, such that episodic memories which are relevant to the current state of the working self (i.e. how we feel about ourselves and the manner in which this disposes us to act) have a higher degree of accessibility.

Recent formulations have also pointed to the link between memory and imagination (see Conway & Loveday, 2015). Imagination is here narrowly interpreted as the capacity to envisage or anticipate future events. Given the significance of goals and projects to the SMS model – i.e. a desired relationship between past, present and future – it makes intuitive sense to say that remembering is intertwined with imagining. We recollect as part of the same process of imagining some anticipated state of affairs or desired relation to ourselves and others. The Remembering-Imagining System (RIS) proposed by Conway, Loveday & Cole (2016) posits that the degree of accessibility of past events and the specificity of imagined futures follows a quasi-normal distribution around the present moment, such that the further we mentally travel forwards or backwards, the less clearly defined either remembered or anticipated events become.

As with any application of an abstract general function to a specific process, there are some issues here. The description of the RIS as a narrow ‘fish-eye lens’ on past and future (Conway & Loveday, 2015) fails to account for the significance of what Pillemer (2000) calls ‘vivid memories’ of ‘momentous events’, which

have a clear directive function on imagined futures, irrespective of the distance between the two. Moreover, the current meaning of what is anticipated may lead to it being imagined with a level of specificity that is contrary to its temporal remoteness. For example, a partner who feels trapped in an unhappy relationship may be able to imagine to a fine degree of detail exactly how their new home will look and their everyday life will feel when they are finally able to break away from their present situation. It may perhaps be that rather than speak of remembering and imagining, we should follow Bergson (1991) in exploring how attention may be expanded and contracted to include aspects of the recalled past and anticipated future, depending on how we are engaged with present circumstances.

Bergson (1992) also famously called for a re-orientation to the value placed on memory, claiming that the real issue was not 'to explain the preservation of the past, but rather its apparent abolition' such that we 'shall no longer have to account for remembering, but for forgetting' (p.153). The image of a mind 'drowning' in its own memories and therefore paralysed in its current actions is an echo of the critique that Nietzsche made some decades before of a dogmatic and nostalgic orientation to history (Nietzsche, 1997). The SMS/RIS model shares this concern with being caught up in the past, albeit translated into the language of system states:

One of the problems with a memory system that has highly labile patterns of activation continuously arising in response to changing cues is that memories could, potentially, swamp consciousness. Thus, control process must modulate what memories become instantiated in consciousness at the same time as monitoring the cue-driven changing patterns of activation in long-term memory for information relevant to current goals. (Conway & Loveday, 2015: 580)

There is a convergence here on the idea that something needs to be routinely performed in order re-organise and manage our relationship to our pasts in the light of current events. For Bergson this is an ontological matter, for Nietzsche an historical issue, for experimental psychologists, a cognitive-neural problem. There is a missing level of articulation here, namely the social processes that organize memorial accessibility. In Derek Edwards' work on the interactional construction of past events, this process can be illuminated through looking at specific occasions that involve or require the giving of accounts (i.e. a description of persons or events which is organized to manage questions of intentionality, responsibility, blame etc). For example, in relationship counseling sessions, couples are invited to offer narratives of their personal history and draw inferences that support their version of 'the problems' that they current experience. Edwards (1995) shows in precise detail how particular rhetorical devices, such as using modal formulations (e.g. 'would', 'will'), adverbial phrases (e.g. 'always', 'sometimes', 'usually') and idioms (e.g. 'it takes two to tango') are key to the reciprocal manner in which each partner will draw together descriptions to formulate an account that attends to potential counter-accusations from the other. These accounts also then become the working material for what Edwards calls the 'solution-oriented discourse' provided by the counselor. Similarly, in Police-Suspect interrogations, accounts of past events

are solicited as part of a clear legal agenda of establishing intention and culpability. Edwards (2008) shows how this is accomplished by police officers through a technique of shifting between different kinds of question formats, such that suspects are asked to reformulate their accounts in terms that specify the link between action, effect and intention (e.g. by referring to intentional 'punching' of a window rather than neutral 'smashing'). In both cases, Edwards demonstrates that accounts of the past are never neutral, but are systematically organized (and contested) within the practice where they are solicited.

An obvious objection here is that this work merely concerns how events, once recollected, are given some additional linguistic gloss in the course of their expression. Taking the stance intrinsic to Discursive Psychology, Edwards (2006) offers the retort whilst it is certainly not the case that all aspects of human existence are linguistic, discourse permeates how the psychological is enacted in everyday practice to the extent that there is 'no realm of subjectivity, unconscious feelings, or objective reality, that language does not reach' (Edwards, 2006: 42). Remembering takes place as part of a specific discursive practice. Each practice has its own procedures for identifying and accounting for psychological matters, whether that be avoiding blame for a failing relationship, managing accusations of intentionality from police officers, or perhaps demonstrating our competence in a psychological experiment (see also Potter, 2012). This renders the psychological as empirically tractable in interesting ways. There is no need to look for anything 'beneath' discourse, since what we are trying to explain is enacted within discursive practice, and is explicable to those who participate in the practices in terms of the local procedures therein. For example, within counselling, how one talks about episodic memories and the kinds of memories that are taken to relevant and meaningful, is managed by a variety of specific procedures (e.g. choosing significant events, discussing feelings, offering interpretations). Discursive procedures are then the actual 'control process' at work in the performance of autobiographical memory.

However, whilst the focus on practice usefully extends the psychological out of a narrow 'under the skull' definition of the cognitive system (see Middleton & Brown, 2005), it ends up partitioning it anew within discursive practices. In this way, the ontological, the historical, the cognitive-neural and the social all lose something of their specificity as they become blended, for empirical purposes, into the universal solvent of discourse. We would instead treat the various processes in play as to some extent distinct, yet becoming enmeshed together in the particular circumstances under consideration. The psychological is, precisely, this 'meshwork' of different interacting processes. To give an extended example, current social welfare practice in the UK mandates the use of Life Story work with children placed for adoption. Life Story work involves the construction of a working document (i.e. a book) telling the life history of the adopted child, normally beginning from birth, in a way that is meaningful and understandable to them. Carers, foster parents and adopted parents share responsibility for ensuring that the life story book is routinely updated, given the transitions the child makes between different care settings. One of the challenges of this practice is that children who are placed for adoption, especially at a young age, typically have experienced either neglect or abuse from biological parents. Carers need to find a way to address these issues within the life story in a way that is non-

judgmental, since representing biological parents as highly at fault is unlikely to lead to psychological well-being for the child. They also must present the story in a way that is nuanced and non-threatening to the child's sense of their origins and current identity.

In a study with adoptive parents (see Brookfield, Brown & Reavey, 2008; Brown, Reavey & Brookfield, 2013), we explored how various forms of memory – the organizational memory of social work practice, the family memories of the adoptive family and the memories of children themselves – were tied together in life story work. One of the major themes was around the difficulty of managing the absence of information about the past (e.g. in cases of international adoption), or of working with limited or problematic material (e.g. when the only existing photographs of early childhood are police images). Adoptive parents were intensely aware that whatever they placed in the book would become part of what one parent described as the 'fantasy life of the adopted child' (Brookfield et al, 2008: 486). They saw themselves as cautiously engaged in the task of trying to create a narrative and corresponding set of images to scaffold both what children could remember and their imaginative reconstructions of their early life. In some cases this involved active collaboration in the work of imagination, such as a couple who, at the request of their adopted child, posed for a photograph with a baby doll outside the hospital where the child had been born. In all these cases there was no question of passing these materials as authentic – they were deliberate and acknowledged efforts at providing some anchors for life narratives when memory was simply unavailable.

We see what these adoptive parents do as a form of collaborative 'managed accessibility'. They are not only the legal guardians of their adopted children, but also the guardians of their autobiographical memory, which is here understood as composed not only of directly experienced episodic memories, but also vicarious memories arising from stories from carers and siblings, images and imaginative reconstructions. One parent described how she managed her adopted daughter's emergent interests in fire (see Brown & Reavey, 2015a: 125-127). The child had been placed for adoption, along with older siblings, following a house fire started by a biological parent. This created a dilemma. If the adoptive parent tried to steer the child away from their interest in fire, she would run the risk of being accused at some later point of not having been honest, which might compromise the success of the adoption. But telling the child at an age where they would be unlikely to grasp the full dimensions of the event was judged to be a greater risk. The compromise was for the parents to entertain this interest by buying age-appropriate firefighters play costumes, whilst deferring telling the child of the event until a later day. In this way they can be said to have scaffolded the child's autobiographical memory whilst keeping the events themselves temporarily inaccessible.

Remembering in collaboration with others does not simply enhance memory, it can also render events as inaccessible. As Fagin et al (2015) show, drawing upon the Social Shared Retrieval-Induced Forgetting (SS-RIF) model, conversations with others can make episodic memories that are unrelated to the discussion in hand less accessible, with particular pronounced effects in the shorter term. If we situate this in everyday contexts, such as those that occur between adults and



children, within families and in personal relationships, we can start to see the accessibility of memory as itself a collaborative accomplishment. Not only are 'control process' not entirely cognitive (in the manner suggested by the SMS/RIS model), but there is now an implied double meaning. Where there are asymmetries in power and authority, collaborative remembering can involve a 'taking charge' or 'custodianship' of the memories of others. Whilst much of this may be enacted in discursive practices, it also ties together very different kinds of memory, forms of evidence and imaginative work. We might ask not only how autobiographical memory is shaped through conversation, but also how it is shaped by living through particular political and economic times. Particular modes of governance (e.g. disability assessment, unemployment benefit monitoring, psychiatric care) can act as collective Remembering-Imagining systems, shaping what is speakable and hearable about the pasts of those within them (on the latter example, see Brown & Reavey, 2017a).

### **Accuracy**

The criterion of 'accuracy' seems, at first glance, to be fairly fundamental to the psychology of memory. Certainly the vast majority of experimental paradigms that have been developed throughout the past hundred years or so of laboratory based research depend, in one way or another, on establishing the extent to which a given recollection maps onto prior stimulus or event. This has the result of constructing accuracy as the default state to which the cognitive system ought to tend. It makes intuitive sense to say that remembering things as they actually happened has some function and/or adaptive value (see Tulving, 1985), since it serves as the basis for applying knowledge to current circumstances. But this intuitive support for the criterion of accuracy becomes less straightforward when we move from semantic memory – where getting it right matters a great deal – to autobiographical memory. As we have already seen, taking a functional approach to these latter suggests that having a more flexible orientation to the events that make up our life experiences is probably more adaptive. For example, the capacity to reconstruct unfortunate autobiographical memories in ways that elaborate and expand upon their current significance in terms of 'lessons learned' or their place within a broader arc of personal development has far greater adaptive value than the ability to accurately recall the underpinning details.

So the step towards understanding the everyday contexts in which episodic memory is enacted is, as Ulric Neisser (1978) declaimed, to be greatly welcomed. Here Elizabeth Loftus' hugely significant body of work is exemplary (e.g. Loftus & Ketcham, 1992, 1995; Loftus & Pickrell, 1995). Although the vast majority of her work is done within the laboratory, rather than in natural contexts themselves, the questions her work poses are relevant and meaningful in those contexts. For instance, her early work on errors and biases in eyewitness testimony (e.g. Loftus, 1996), engages with the problem of the gap between the event itself and the multiple occasions on which testimony is given during the legal process. As Motzkau's (2009; 2010) work with legal professionals who work with child witnesses has shown, a crucial issue is with the preservation of the evidence provided through oral testimony, given the undisputed tendency for recollection to become less precise over time. Moreover, given that eyewitnesses are typically asked to recall the event on multiple occasions, at some points under the highly

suggestive conditions of preparing for trial, and at others under the highly adversarial conditions of being examined in court, there are numerous occasions where potential errors and confabulations might occur.

Much as the focus on bias and error provides a way to link experimental work to real-world concerns, it also raises some difficult questions regarding precisely what it is that laboratory findings deliver to public debate in this particular case. Loftus' contributions to the so-called 'memory wars' are well documented and discussed (see Loftus & Ketcham, 1992; Pope, 1996; Campbell, 2003). Her most significant accomplishment was to argue that if it can be shown under laboratory conditions that participants will apparently willingly recall false information about non-occurring events this significantly undermines the credibility of 'recovered memories' (i.e. memories of traumatic events that had been previously inaccessible) (Loftus & Pickrell, 1995; Loftus, 1997). There are numerous objections to this claim, on epistemic, methodological, moral and political grounds (see Ashmore et al, 2005; Crook & Dean, 1999). But we want to merely point to the asymmetrical basis on which this argument is grounded. The possibility of producing 'false' memories in the laboratory does not necessarily bring into question whether recovered memories are 'true' since the verification of falsity is not equivalent to the refutation of claims to truth, especially when it involves comparing across different contexts, settings and practices. Maintaining the analogue between laboratory and courtroom would require instead the experimental demonstration that recovered memory was a falsifiable phenomenon.

Clearly it is important to separate out within the broad research area that is sometimes referred to as 'false memory studies' (see Wade et al, 2002; 2009), work that is primarily concerned with deconstructing 'recovered memory' from that which investigates specific 'false memory' processes, despite it being the case that the term 'false memory' itself arose as a political rather than a scientific concept (see Campbell, 2003). However the framing of memory in terms of 'truth' and 'falsity' is somewhat of an obstacle here. When Loftus claims that 'in essence all memory is false to some degree' (Bernstein & Loftus, 2009: 373), then the very idea of being able to disambiguate recollections that can be verified from those which cannot is rendered problematic. And if this distinction does not hold, then why label some processes in terms of their relation to supposed 'falseness' at all, since they are likely to be the same processes that attract the external judgment of 'truth'? Elsewhere we have suggested that psychologists who are in the business of working with a false/true distinction would be better off adopting the terms 'relatively falsified' and 'as-yet-unfalsified' memories when referring to how given recollections survive specific tests of accuracy and veridicality (Brown & Reavey, 2017b).

We think this distinction is important because it shifts the debate away from the 'false positive' – the person who remembers a significant event, such as child sexual abuse, which is subsequently falsified – towards a broader concern with the way in which memory intersects with professional practices. For example, take 100 women who feel they are able to make an accusation of childhood sexual abuse. Based on typical reporting rates in the UK and USA, only 32 will be reported to the police. Of this number, only 7 cases will lead to an arrest, and

only 3 cases are likely to be referred to prosecutors. At trial, just 2 cases (of the overall 100) will end in successful prosecution. So the question of whether or not a given recollection stands in need of formal falsification applies to only 3% of cases – since these are the only ones that come to court - and in only 2% of cases is there a potential issue of a ‘false positive’ that might require deconstruction through the application of psychological research. That leaves 97% of cases as ‘relatively falsified’ – that is to say, as not having at some point met the evidential bar for proceeding to the next level in the legal process.

At first glance this does indeed seem to suggest that ‘false memory processes’ are a relevant issue to be explained given the numbers involved. However, using a reference class of 100 women, we can estimate that 68 women who do not formally report their accusation are likely to do because issues such as fear of the abuser, distrust of the police, a desire to move on with their lives and so on. Of those who do make a report, the 25 cases that are not pursued are likely to be because the police investigation is unable to secure other forms of evidence, or inconsistencies in testimony, or because the victim withdraws the claim. The 4 out of 7 cases that are passed to prosecutors but do not proceed to court are almost always cases where prosecutors are concerned that the witness will not make a good impression on a jury, because they are inarticulate, angry or do not conform to the normative conduct of a ‘victim’ (see Motzkau, 2010). At the end of this process, there are the 3 cases where there is a legal outcome, and hence a meaningful question to be asked about the effect of ‘false memory processes’. However, in the 97 other cases, ‘false memory’ issues around ‘imagination inflation’, ‘social contagion’, ‘suggestibility’, ‘guided imagery’ and so on are beside the point because the reasons these cases do not proceed further is explained by factors such as engagement with social-welfare services, social and economic conditions, the co-presence of other forms of emotional abuse, or capacity for self-presentation. So the vast majority of ‘relatively falsified memories’ – i.e. what are treated as ‘false memories’ within the experimental tradition – are explained by exploring social rather than narrowly psychological factors.

Here the value becomes clear of the methodological focus of discursive psychology on naturalistic data – i.e. tape recordings of everyday events – rather than on laboratory analogues. Discursive work prefers to show how accounts of past events are evaluated ‘live’ within the practices where they are offered and evaluated, rather than speculate on *in principle* criterion which might differentiate between true and false memories. For example, Clare MacMartin and Linda Wood’s work analyses actual judicial sentencing judgments in trials of child sexual abuse to explore how attributions of intentions and consent are discursively constructed. They demonstrate, based on analysis of 74 Canadian judicial decisions in cases of child sexual assault, how judges drew upon a language of sexual motivation to construct the crimes committed as warranting very particular and stringent legal sentences (MacMartin & Wood, 2005). Judges also did considerable work to re-describe the behaviour and testimony of the convicted offenders in terms of whether or not some form of ‘remorse’ (an important legal consideration) could have been shown (Wood & MacMartin, 2007). What this illustrates is that legal judgments in cases of child sexual abuse depend not solely on establishing the fundamental ‘facts’ of the case,

but on a complex work of attributing motives, turning around on matters of consent (even where consent is legally not possible), mitigation and remorse. Motzkau (2010) shows that this process is also at work in the way child witnesses are treated during investigations and in the deliberations legal professionals make about whether to proceed with a prosecution. For example, police officers conducting video interviews with children worry a great deal about how the precise conduct of the interview may or may not lead to future accusation of collusion or 'tainted evidence' depending on the particular line of questioning they adopt in dealing with a vulnerable young person who they need to have describe in great detail events which are highly distressing to them.

In short, a concern with legal 'false positives' fails to attend to the particular practices through which memory and testimony is handled in legal processes. Investigators and judges are well aware of the frailties of memory, and that what is remembered, especially in cases with vulnerable witnesses, is co-produced by the victim and professionals who work with them throughout the legal process (see also MacMartin, 1999; 2002). Courts of law systematically re-describe the testimony they are offered to make attributions around intention, consent, self-knowledge and so on. Equally, these same matters are at issue in other settings, such as therapy, where they are treated in very different ways in line with the intended outcomes of the practice. For example, whilst a demonstration of the irreparably negative impact of an event may be critical to securing a conviction against an abuser, in therapy the idea of victimhood may be rejected to some degree in the pursuit of the more adaptive status of 'survivor' (Reavey & Warner, 2003). And in the course of everyday adult life, a person who has suffered childhood sexual abuse, may shift their focus across a range of details of the experience, which they may actively seek to frame in different ways, depending on its relevance to their current life circumstance.

We have found that exploring these differences in how the same experiences are recalled across occasions reveals the value of *ambiguity* and *ambivalence* rather than accuracy (see Reavey & Brown, 2006; 2009). Survivors of child sexual abuse typically remember events with high levels of detail. But they also remember how those details were experienced at the time as a child, and the ways in which they subsequently come to reflect upon them as an adult. For example, one woman recalled how her abuser would remove the drawers from a piece of furniture in her childhood bedroom. At the time, this had the effect of making the chest of drawers look monstrous and frightening, but subsequently this became a recollection of a betrayal by a father who removed the most basic domestic comforts from their child (see Brown & Reavey, 2015a). Another participant talked at length of how her brother had removed the handle from the door in the room in which he then proceeded to sexually abuse her. She described how she had struggled for some time in her interpretation of this particular act. If the brother had deliberately intended to lock the door, as his actions would suggest, then this would render his actions as a deliberate choice. However 'part of her', wished this was not the case, that she could believe instead that his actions were a matter of immature 'curiosity' (see Brown & Reavey, 2015a: 94-97). This interpretive dilemma was further compounded by elements of pleasure within the memory, which had been a profound source of guilt to her. Not settling upon a clear interpretation, allowing for an ambiguity around her brother's actions,

seemed to allow this woman to maintain a functional ambivalence around the unsettled range of feelings bound up in the memory.

Whilst the law maintains proper criterion around the extent to which children can be seen as able to exercise choice generally, and particularly around consent to sexual activity, this does not stop survivors from ruminating on the question of the extent to which they made some kind of choice at the time. This is complicated by the fact that childhood sexual abuse rarely happens outside of a set of contexts – e.g. family relationships, socio-economic factors etc – where abuse is facilitated. In one case, a survivor described how life in her childhood family home was so disordered and without any sense of privacy, that she actively chose to stay at a relative's house to gain some space, which unfortunately and unknowingly placed her at risk of abuse (Brown & Reavey, 2015a: 100-102). To say that she had no choice as a child in all matters would be to negate how she did actively have agency in relation to some aspects of events that seem to have forced her to make adult-like decisions. Sifting through this complex prism of agency and victimhood through which she recalls these events is crucial to the ways she currently thinks of her current agency.

Some discursive psychological approaches to remembering have, at times, seemed to suggest that a concern with accuracy is unimportant (for instance, Middleton & Brown, 2005 – *mea culpa*). We would without hesitation say to the contrary that accuracy is *always* important. However, the criterion and procedures through which accuracy is established vary considerably across practices. What the law requires from memory is different to the demands placed on it by therapy, which is different again from what family and personal relationships seek from it, and so on. Not only is there is no superordinate criterion that we as psychologists can draw upon to make definitive judgments – since the laboratory is one more practice amongst others with its own specific procedures – there is also no individual capacity that we could advise persons to draw upon. If remembering always happens in context, and usually collaboratively, then we should start by studying the *setting-specificity* of those contextual acts and the manner in which the uses we make of our memory are fitted to the matters-in-hand.

## **Life Story**

The motif that runs throughout this chapter is of the importance of context for understanding the uses that persons make of their autobiographical memory. Function, accessibility and accuracy are established and managed within interactional contexts, formal settings and associated practices. But there is one other important contextual dimension: namely, the overall sense of a 'life' which both emerges from and serves as the frame for our remembering past experiences. Conway (2005) uses the notion of 'coherency' to denote the relative fit of 'complex episodic memories' with an ongoing sense of self, with 'correspondence' being the literal fit with the previous experienced event. In this way, accuracy can be reformulated as the placing of a recollection within the two dimensions of life-history and events at the time. However, coherency is relatively determined within the SMS model as the need to assimilate past events into a current sense of self (see Conway, Singer & Tagini, 2004). As Habermas &

Köber (2015) observe, this raises the question of what happens when what is remembered differs considerably from the current version of self.

An alternative is to conceptualise an underpinning sense of self-continuity that subsists whatever life-stories we might currently be engaged in telling (see Alea & Bluck, 2003). This pre-reflective, felt sense of continuity has considerable philosophical appeal. It would suggest that, as Heidegger (1962), once put it, we are the sort of being which has a concern for what and who it is, and is thus continuously reflecting on its own past and anticipating its future. This kind of concern to fit past experience into an ongoing 'perspective' or life trajectory seems to be present from adolescence onwards (see Bauer et al, 2016). A further advantage of distinguishing between self-continuity and life history is that it allows for the possibility that at different historical moments, and across cultural contexts, there are different ways of constituting 'self' and its relative importance, whilst nevertheless retaining the idea of there being an necessary self-continuity that is taken to be common to all these versions of 'self-ing' (see Nelson, 2003).

The question then shifts towards understanding how autobiographical remembering intersects with self-continuity. Habermas & de Silveira (2008) conceptualise this in terms of the coherence that emerges developmentally in life narratives – that is, the progressive constitution of an overarching 'life story' – through the operation of autobiographical memory. Yet many people also experience life events that prove disruptive of their life narratives, such as failures at work or study, shortcomings as a parent or a partner, of abrupt shifts in direction as a consequence of unexpected events. Here, recalling episodic events that support the prior life narrative, or attempting to otherwise assimilate the present in the grand sweep of a 'life' may not in itself be sufficient. Habermas & Köber (2015) suggest that specific forms of 'autobiographical reasoning' may be required, such as using the idea of 'turning points' in life or 'lessons learned'. These forms of reasoning may help to repair disruptive events within the life narrative, and hence maintain felt self-continuity.

From a discursive perspective, it makes sense to understand these forms of reasoning as narrative devices. There is a rich body of work here to draw upon, including Bruner's (1992) notions of 'storytelling', Gergen's (1995) conceptualization of narrative accounts, and most pertinently, Harré's description of narrative 'positioning' (see Davis & Harré, 1990). The common message here is that the skills through which we recognize our 'selves' are fundamentally literary ones. The self is 'authored' into being through the stories that we tell (Bruner, 2004). We know who we are through the fashioning of narratives about our life experiences, which draw on the broader cultural tropes and modes of storytelling that exist in the cultural milieus into which we are socialised. So what Conway or Habermas regard as nascent cognitive skills become for Mark Freeman (1993) the learned authorial abilities to put 'rewrite the self' in narrative terms.

Discursive work has been able to demonstrate how these kinds of skills are developed through interaction. In Edwards & Middleton's (1986; 1988) studies of parents and children jointly recollecting the past, they observe the way in which parents instruct children in making inferences on the basis of photographs,

along with techniques for constructing accounts of past events that are relevant to present circumstances. For Edwards and Middleton, remembering is a learned, interactional achievement. However, unlike Robyn Fivush's similar work on parent-child interactions around memory (Fivush 2011; Fivush et al. 2011), Edwards and Middleton are not interested in speculating as to the relationship between discursive processes and cognitive processes. Discursive Psychologists tend to see experience as an interactional accomplishment that requires neither a notion of 'cognitive' nor 'narrative' coherence (see Potter 2012). As Strawson (2004) puts it, there are many people who live 'non-episodic lives', where their past is of only limited interest:

I have a perfectly good grasp of myself as having a certain personality, but I'm completely uninterested in the answer to the question 'What has GS made of his life?', or 'What have I made of my life?'. I'm living it, and this sort of thinking about it is no part of it. This does not mean that I am in any way irresponsible. It is just that what I care about, in so far as I care about myself and my life, is how I am now. The way I am now is profoundly shaped by my past, but it is only the present shaping consequences of the past that matter, not the past as such. (Strawson, 2004: 438)

Although we do not share the broader ethical and epistemological concerns that Strawson goes on to articulate, his point that that we should not place immediate value on the idea of finding continuity in life, beyond the basic sense of being more-or-less the same person over time is well put. We should perhaps treat autobiographical memory as the *sufficient* rather than the *necessary* conditions of personhood. Indeed, we can imagine instances where a person is able to access a great many autobiographical memories without a corresponding singular sense of continuity. For example, persons who have a multiple sense of belonging to different and perhaps conflicting communities. A lack of coherency is typically treated within the AM literature as indicative of some form and cognitive and/or neurological dysfunction. Conway uses the term 'broken memories' to refer to instances where 'personal beliefs and meanings are no longer grounded in and constrained by specific autobiographical memories' (Conway & Loveday, 2015: 6). But this pathologising of non-continuity in memory is not helpful, since it disattends to the variety of 'non-episodic' ways in which we might relate to our own pasts.

In work with forensic psychiatric service-users currently detained in secure hospital environments (see Brown & Reavey, 2016b; Brown et al, 2014), we have found that there are many aspects of how psychiatric services are delivered in these settings that shape the uses that patients can make of their past. Detention under a section of the mental health act (i.e. being sectioned) is a significant life experience. Forensic mental health service users have in addition either been convicted or accused of a criminal offence (or an 'index offence'). The major concern on secure units is with managing the risk that a patient poses to themselves and others. Evaluating this risk requires that staff are aware of the index offence along with the recent prison and/or hospital career of the patient, but it is not seen to require detailed knowledge of their prior life. In fact, one of the most common initial responses from patients during research interviews

was of surprise at being asked about their life before admission. As one patient put it, she had in effect left her past life 'at the door' when she arrived, and lived in hope of picking it back up again on release (Brown et al, 2014). These patients were then living 'non-episodic lives' not out of choice or because of their current mental health, but because of the way that the care regime operates on the unit. This was further compounded for patients by uncertainty over their rehabilitation (many 'sections' are open-ended and depend upon medical judgment) and the repetitive nature of life on a closed ward.

As we saw in the last section, distressing life experiences tend to occur in particular contexts. Many forensic mental health service users have been victims of childhood neglect or sexual abuse, and have experiences of precarious living in difficult socioeconomic conditions. There is much in the autobiographical memories of these patients that they would like to not dwell upon. But at the same time, their connection to the past, in the form of personal relationships, family relationships and a relationship to place can be critical. One of the most robust findings with the literature on the social contexts of mental health is on the importance of these kinds of relationships to achieving some sense of well-being (see Cromby, Harper & Reavey, 2014). However, these relationships are complicated by the past behaviour of the patient, and the possibilities for their resumption following release may be low. Patients often speak in highly idealized ways about their future life, which draw heavily on autobiographical memories. For example, one patient spoke of his desire to see his children again, to hear their voices, but as they were in the past rather than at their current chronological age. Rather than see this a deployment of some form of 'broken memory', we can instead approach this in terms of the complexity of holding together a range of discontinuous life narratives under circumstances that facilitate a 'non-episodic' relation to self.

Remembering the past and anticipating the future are clearly activities that are deeply intertwined. For some people, this can take the form of richly elaborated narratives in which they are the author of their own destinies. Disruptions to the stories they tell can be neatly assimilated into the twists and turns of the narrative arc they are continuously weaving. Doubtless in the other direction, there are people who have very little interest in the significance of the past either because they have sufficient cultural and material capital for it not to become an issue, or, alternatively, because they are living lives of extreme precarity which are predominantly focused by daily struggle. Living a non-episodic life is rarely a choice – it is a mode of existence that is facilitated by socioeconomic conditions. Telling who one is through discontinuous life narratives is not a marker of pathology. It is what can happen to people who have to live with distressing life experiences and are denied the status of self-author.

## **Conclusion**

At repeated points in its history, the psychology of memory has broadened its concerns and investigations beyond that of studying individual recall to explore the place of remembering in the broader sweep of personal lives. Martin Conway and colleagues refer to the most recent phase of this movement as 'the modern



view of memory' (see Conway, 2012). They authoritatively state that at the core of this are the key tents that memories are constructions rather than reproductions of past experience, that they involve a work of inference and time-compression, that they are a source of personal meanings and serve a broad range of social functions, and that their value comes from both correspondence with past events and coherence with life narratives (Conway et al 2004). Whilst there are philosophical and methodological debates to be had about the operationalization of the approach, for those that wish to direct their efforts in this direction, there is, for us, very little here that separates cognitive and discursive approaches. The two approaches converge on the shared problems of making sense of how questions around function, accessibility, accuracy and life story can be studied in the actual contexts where persons make use of their memories.

We see an 'expanded view of memory' as one that is primarily concerned with the situated, contextual and functional aspects of remembering (see Brown & Reavey, 2015a; 2015b). It treats remembering as the joint work of a number of processes that occur within distinct settings (e.g. legal settings, therapeutic settings, educational settings, family settings etc). Each of these has its own procedures and criterion for establishing matters of accuracy and relevancy. Thus we would see all episodic or autobiographical remembering as to some extent collaborative – in that it occurs in the course of routine interaction with actual or anticipated others – and as shaped by the specificity of the setting through which it is accomplished. The overarching problem is with conceptualizing how each of us nevertheless manages to maintain some measure of personal continuity – a sense of a 'life' – despite much of our autobiographical remembering being inextricably bound up with the specificities of the settings and practices that constitute daily existence.

The processes at work in every instance of autobiographical remembering include, of course, some that are 'under the skull' and which are related to neurological function. But the greater part of the processes fall within the domain that is variously called 'extended', 'distributed' or 'transactional' cognition (see Sutton et al, 2010), which includes social practices and discursive procedures along with formal organizational processes, such as archiving, record keeping and data management. This broader view of the cognitive, where remembering involves the recruitment of diverse ranges of materials in joint projects of sense-making, sets some significant conceptual and empirical challenges. One way forward, we suggest, is to see that notions such 'control process' can be made to work just as well 'outwith' as well as 'under' the skull. As we discussed in the case of the management of the memories of adopted children by family members, there is a great deal to be gained by exploring how memorial accessibility is practically accomplished by families through the situated use of artefacts. The 'control process' may be seen as itself extended and distributed in nature.

We recognize that expanding the domain of the psychological in this way makes the need for solid conceptual innovation ever greater. An interesting way of envisaging this is through the notion of a 'meshwork' suggested by the anthropologist Tim Ingold (2013). Consider, for example, a kite being flown. A

reasonable question to ask would be what distinguishes 'good' and 'bad' kite-flying. Clearly this has something to do with the skills and experiences of the person holding the string. But just as importantly it is a function of the material design and structure of the kite that is at the other end. And, equally, it depends upon the meteorological conditions – the varying patterns of wind gust that occur given the particular landscape and broader climatic atmosphere. Kite-flying is an accomplishment of the conjoining of these 'flows' of skill, varying material propensities, and environmental fluctuations into a contingent process. Ingold uses the phrase 'transduction' to understand the exchanges that occur here. The flyer translates their experience into an ongoing kinesthetic awareness and responsiveness to the movements of the kite, which arises from its shifting material adaptation to the wind. Wind, kite, string and hand together produce flight.

Something similar is at work, we would argue, in remembering. If epigeneticists can legitimately take the view that what we previously saw as narrowly biological outcomes are actually made possible through the transduction of environmental conditions into processes of DNA methylation or histone modification, then, by comparison, psychologists of memory might feel themselves similarly secure in arguing that what we remember involves the transduction of neural, interactional, material and environmental processes into an extended notion of the cognitive. Brains, voices, objects and settings together form a meshwork out of which episodic memories are constructed and put to work to some purpose. What we need to do is to understand the transductions that occur in these contexts, to follow the movements back and forth, in the contingent constitution of the past within the present.

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