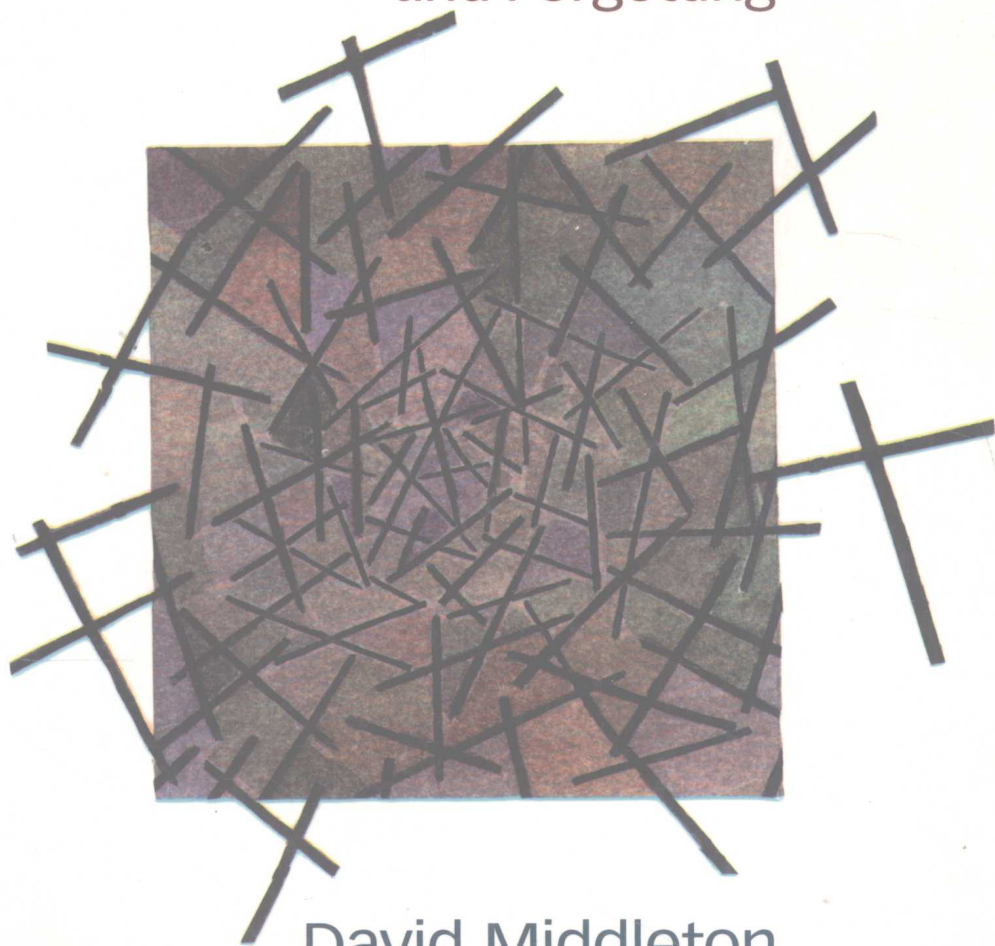# The Social Psychology of Experience

## Studies in Remembering and Forgetting
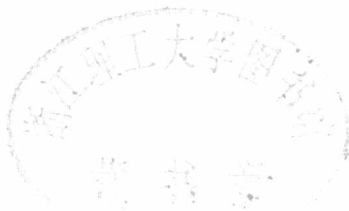
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# The Social Psychology of Experience

## Studies in Remembering and Forgetting

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and
Steven D. Brown

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# Preface

In our modern understanding of memory there is an overwhelming tension between preservation and loss. Memory itself often seems to hang by a thread, to be balanced on the cusp between recovery and dissolution. In contrast, we address robust practices of remembering and forgetting at home and work, in public and commercial organisations, involving language and text-based communication, objects and place. Our aim is to overcome the spatial bias at work in both psychological and sociological studies of memory. To achieve this we argue that it is necessary to reconsider some of the basic conceptual tools of memory research and the manner in which they have imposed themselves on the way we relate to the past. Our overall aim is to provide a basis for social psychological enquiry where experience matters.

We ground the matters of remembering and forgetting in the classic works of Frederick Bartlett (on psychological schema as 'socially organised settings'), Maurice Halbwachs (on the sociology of 'collective frameworks' in memory) and Henri Bergson (on the philosophical discussion of 'durations' in experience). We illustrate the significance of their ideas for our arguments concerned with examples drawn from a range of situations where remembering and forgetting are matters of concern. We extend the argument beyond spatial metaphors concerning the passage of time and the consequences this has for the content of experience as finite. We argue that the actualization of experience in spatial terms is never complete and always maintains a relationship to continuous and indivisible experience, what Bergson termed 'the virtual'. This moves us away from experience as lived in some linear unfolding of time where memory is taken as the vehicle for linking past, present and future, whether individual or collective.

However, we still place memory at the centre of lived experience – not as the storehouse of that experience, but, instead, as a relational process at the intersection of different durations of living. As we endure in time, our rhythm of living is slowed or quickened in relation to the durations of others. To approach remembering and forgetting in this way is to deliberately blur the boundaries between the individual and the collective, between what is held in common and what is most intensely personal. If remembering and forgetting are to matter for a psychology of experience, we conclude

that we must view selfhood not as a 'thing', but as a movement that is continuously refracted back through the stabilities it creates. In other words, we seek to demonstrate selfhood as the shifting intersection of experiences of which our present consciousness is only the leading edge. This also leads us to a view of remembering and forgetting as interdependent ways of actualising and virtualising experience rather than its presence or absence. We aim to arrive back at an account of a psychology of experience that encompasses the issues raised in contemporary discussions of social memory while accommodating experience that is not tied to spatialised views of time. We therefore offer an approach to the psychology of experience that is neither individually nor socially determined and where the dynamics of remembering and forgetting do not limit experience.

This work represents the intersection of our shared and individual interests in memory. We both have academic backgrounds in psychology – one in developmental and sociocultural psychology, the other in social psychology and social theory. We also share interests in the analysis of communicative action and the discursive turn in psychological studies. Our preference is for gathering data from within contexts of human practice. In other words, from within settings where the stake and interests of those involved is self-evidently theirs rather than an arbitrary or simulated concern of the psychologist. However, neither of us would claim that this work is thoroughly ethnographically informed, although we do hope that it will be of interest to those who pursue detailed anthropologies, geographies and sociologies of remembering and forgetting. While we have forsaken the tools of the psychological laboratory, we have aimed to make the work and ideas discussed here informative for those with interests in the experimental psychology of memory.

# Acknowledgements

# Transcript conventions

The following conventions are used in the presentation of conversational data. They are derived from those developed by Gail Jefferson for the purposes of conversation analysis (see Sacks, 1992). They are used as a way of presenting the talk as a social activity rather than, for example, as an expression of ideas, phonetics, or grammar (Edwards, 1997). We have kept their use to the minimum required for the purposes of the discussions presented here.

| | |
|---|---|
| [yes] | short simultaneous talk of another speaker |
| soun- | cut off of preceding sound |
| start of [simultaneous talk [simultaneous talk | simultaneous talk |
| remember= it seems to me | 'equals' marks the immediate 'latching' of successive talk with no interval |
| (&) speaker | talk continues across the talk of another |
| (…) | unclear |
| (….) | talk omitted form the transcript at this point |
| (memory) | sound like |
| ((laughs)) | additional comment |
| ? | rising intonation |
| HELP | louder than preceding talk |
| >quieter< | quieter than preceding talk |
| (.) | micro pause |
| (1) | pause in seconds |
| *Oi ko* | (*italicised*) Japanese words |
| <u>do</u> | emphasis |
| par:k | elongation of prior sounds |

# Contents

# ONE

# Introducing remembering and forgetting in the social psychology of experience

**Figure 1.1 Cornelia Parker's 'Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View'**
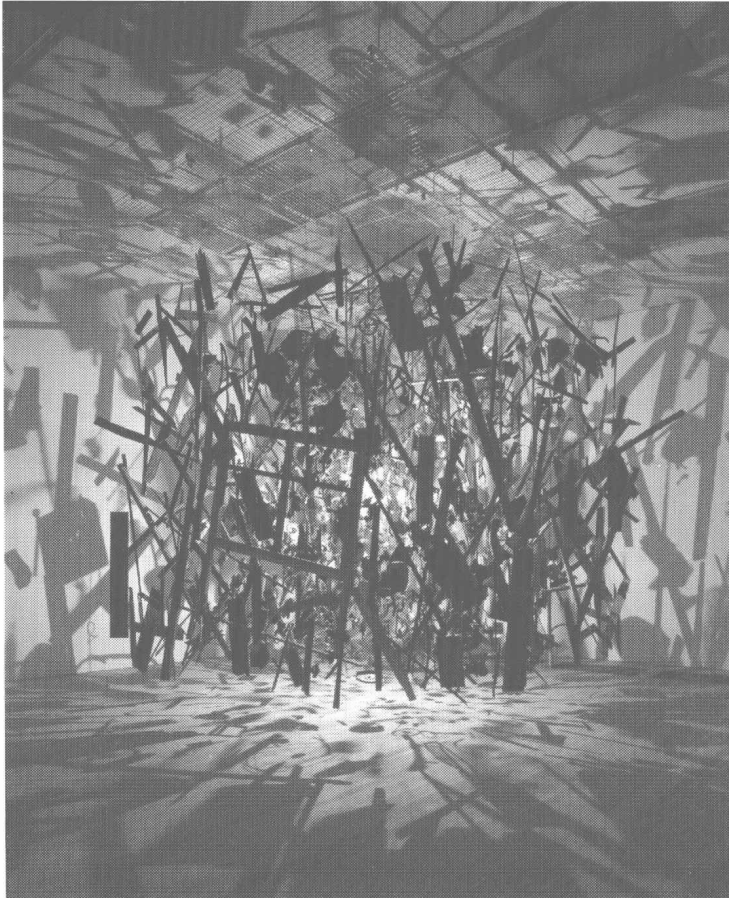
In 1991 the British artist Cornelia Parker arranged for a small garden shed to be blown up with high explosives in a field in Warwickshire. The 'garden shed' – a small outhouse structure commonly found outside many British homes – is rich in symbolism. It is traditionally the place where residents will store a curious selection of objects, including tools, broken electrical items, knick-knacks and other oddments that currently serve no great purpose but may 'one day' prove to be useful (see Thorburn, 2002, for further illustration). Parker had filled this particular shed with a heterogeneous range of objects, including household items such as cutlery, garden tools, an old briefcase, a hardback copy of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* and a small plastic model of a dinosaur. Prior to its destruction, the shed – including the objects – had been displayed as an installation piece in a London gallery. After the explosion, Parker collected the remaining pieces and placed them in the same gallery space, suspended on near invisible wires. A light bulb was hung in the middle of the fragments, creating a dramatic play of shadows on the gallery walls. A similar light bulb had previously illuminated the intact shed; the plastic explosive used to destroy the structure had been moulded into an identical shape and suspended in the same position. Parker named her installation 'Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View'.

Viewing 'Cold Dark Matter' in its current home at the Tate Modern gallery in London, one is struck by the fragility of the piece. The objects appear to hang precariously in mid-air, at any moment threatening to collapse in a heap on one another. The fragmented wood of the shed exterior dominates and bears the marks of the explosion, as do a half-burnt satchel and innumerable bent spoons and forks. However, other objects appear intact and curiously untouched, looking for all the world like the contents of a lost luggage office.

The changes to the piece brought about by the explosion are then ambiguous. On the one hand, everything has changed – the shed has been literally destroyed and reduced to fragments, many objects damaged beyond all hope of recovery – but, on the other, many elements survive more or less in their entirety. The viewer is then required to make some sense of this juxtaposition beyond what appears to be preserved intact and what has been irrevocably altered or perhaps permanently lost.

Parker's work serves as a good metaphor for our modern understanding of memory. Here, too, the overwhelming tension is between preservation and loss, the reduction of the everyday flow of our lives to a series of fragments. Brief passing moments and images remain completely intact, unaltered, we feel, despite the passage of time, but the overall framework appears destined to disappear, to be worn away by ageing, the passage of time that levels all, or else by some sudden and fateful intervention.

We tend then to think of memory as a form of conflict, where the desire to retain the past as it was runs up against the inevitability of change or, worse still, a set of counter desires that seek to erase memory, to irrevocably have done with some aspect of the past. Here, Parker's work is fully resonant as memory itself often seems to hang by a thread, to be balanced on the cusp between recovery and dissolution.

To approach memory in this way is to deliberately blur the boundaries between the individual and the collective, between what is held in common and what is most intensely personal. If we do so, that is because in recent years there has been a shift in terms. 'Memory' has come to stand alongside 'history' in both popular and scholarly discourse. As Klein (2000) points out, this supplementing of the traditional vocabulary of historiography and historical consciousness often borders on outright replacement. We speak less of the power of historical processes and change and more of the fragile resistance of memory and its attempts to preserve what is no longer. Indeed, in the classic statement of this position, Pierre Nora (1989) mournfully states that 'we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left'.

So little of what, though? What is the nature of this thing 'memory' that Nora claims is so threatened? Here we must work through a process of negative definition. Nora cannot be referring to the individual's powers and capacities to recall their own experiences. The memory that is disappearing is something that is shared between people. Yet, this sharing or common orientation to the past is different to 'history'. Typically viewed, history is singular. There is a privileged overview of the past that is granted to the historian by virtue of unrivalled access to documents, evidence and matters of record. Nora's point, which is by no means unfamiliar, is that, beneath the singularity of 'official' history, there is pluralism in our relationships to the past. That is, there is a variety of ways in which the past might be understood and made relevant in the present. This pluralism is threatened by historical discourse, giving rise to a contested field of interpretations that struggle to defend themselves and the forms of collectivity with which they become associated. It is this contestation that Nora calls 'memory'.

The roots of Nora's claims lie with the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs. It is within his two texts – translated in to English as *The Collective Memory* (1950/1980) and *On Collective Memory* (1925/1992) – that we see a full account of memory as a social process, in which groups collectively participate in order to create frameworks for the preservation of their common identity. Halbwachs viewed memory as an intrinsically social process. Not only is the form remembering takes shaped by the collective, but the very content of any given memory is also, Halbwachs argued, a social product. We may then see that Halbwachs' texts mark a

point at which the question of 'memory' becomes thoroughly entangled with other kinds of cognate issues, such as the preservation of tradition (Shils, 1981), the shaping of mind by culture (Cole, 1991; 1996) and the tension between historical consciousness and group identity (Tschuggnall & Welzer, 2002). Klein (2000) sees this entanglement as problematic and, ultimately, as leading to a situation where memory becomes treated in quasi-mystical terms. More moderate positions, such as James Wertsch (2002), also consider Halbwachs' apparent conflation of the cultural and the social with the individual and the personal to stand in need of some clarification.

That clarification might be provided, in part, by looking towards what Halbwachs is writing against – namely, the emergence of distinctive modern representation of the past, where tradition is superseded by rationalisation and a drive to systematise and standardise. Matsuda (1996) argues that this gives rise to a form of memory that is peculiar to modernity. One might say that its chief characteristic is its 'forensic' nature. Memory is seen as an activity that involves the bringing together of fragmentary pieces of information into a whole from which technical decisions can be made. Thus, Matsuda points to a range of cognate practices that emerge at the end of the nineteenth century – from the centralisation of criminal data and 'profiling' to the mapping of clinical findings on to the brain and the embedding of colonial histories in anthropological studies. However, arguably the most important practice is that of modern cinematography. Here, the past is literally captured as a series of fragments – the still images rapidly shot by the cinecamera – that are then rapidly reassembled to create the eerie illusion of a past come back to life.

Henri Bergson (1908/1991; 1911/1998), whose philosophical work spanned the turn of the nineteenth century, is perhaps the thinker who has done most to understand the nature of this 'illusion'. Bergson saw these kinds of practices – where the past is treated as a set of discrete images that are drawn together to create the impression of 'life' – as corrosive of a proper appreciation of not only memory, but also the very nature of time. For Bergson, time is not divisible in this way without substantial loss of what is particular to our human experience of existing as living, acting beings. Nevertheless, he was also able to diagnose precisely why such 'pulverised' views of time and memory had arisen. Modernity fosters and elaborates a form of thought – the 'cinematographical mechanism' – that is essentially spatial and orientated entirely towards the immediate demands of the present moment. It is this spatial thought that gives rise to both the forensic approach to memory (where memory consists of a spatially organised set of traces or data) and the overall rationalisation of social affairs that dominates modernity.

It is within this historical context that psychology takes hold of and claims expertise over the scientific study of 'memory'. As Danziger (2002) has shown, the experimental psychology of memory that developed in the late nineteenth century inherited a rich stock of metaphors for thinking about its subject matter. However, it chose from these spatial terms – mostly based on container metaphors – that are entirely of a piece with Bergson's 'cinematographical mechanism'. The result is that the subsequent psychology of memory that came to full fruition in early 1970s, following the 'cognitive revolution', not merely tends towards, but is in some cases entirely infused by, a spatial understanding of time. To take a recent example, Martin Conway's well-known work on autobiographical memory (see, for example, Conway, 1997; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), has recently been the subject of an artistic interpretation by Shona Illingworth. One aspect of that work is a set of beautifully drawn sketches of Conway's formal theories. These sketches depict the key terms and relationships of Conway's modelling of autobiographical memory, which is transformed into a set of abstract forms and lines, along with handwritten labels and brief explication in spidery penmanship. The viewer is struck by the spatial form of the work – everything is given at once, distributed across the elegantly mounted series of drawings. One can see what autobiographical memory consists of in a glance (or two).

One might then argue that the psychology of memory is so profoundly shaped by the spatialised, rational impulse of modern thought that it is unable to allow its subject matter to exceed that framework. That point has been made at length in a number of critiques, which have focused in particular on the tendency to refer all processes involved in remembering back to the inner workings of the individual, more or less rational, psychological subject (see, for example, Casey, 1987; Shotter, 1990; Wittgenstein, 1953). Worse still, this is a 'subject' who is, in order to fulfil the technical demands of psychological experimentation, systematically cut off from the everyday social ecology in which remembering occurs (Neisser, 1976, 1982; Neisser & Winograd, 1988). These are telling critiques, which bear some repeating. However, at the same time, we should not ignore the push from within the psychology of memory to reach beyond its own conceptual limits. For example, Neisser's own work in recent years has attempted to contextualise a cognitive approach to information retrieval in a broader account of the environment as a system in which selfhood emerges (Neisser & Fivush, 1996). Similarly, Hirst and Manier (1996) have treated the information retrieval aspects of memory as one part of a communicative process between conversational partners. Finally, Conway (1997, 2003) himself has made clear a dissatisfaction with purely spatial accounts of memory.

The psychology of memory, then, is by no means untouched by the concerns arising from the broader social sciences, but how might it reach out to meet those concerns without subsuming them within its pre-existing 'spatialised' framework? It is our argument in this book that simply turning towards the social – while a necessary first step – does not solve the problem. For example, it is possible to make the case, following Halbwachs, that all occasions of remembering are essentially social matters. From this it follows that the collective rather than the individual is the most appropriate level of analysis. However, in making this gesture, we depart from one form of hypothesised spatial configuration – that of cognitive architecture – to that of another, such as, say, intergroup dynamics (see, for example, Bangerter, 2000, 2002). In so doing, we transpose all that was problematic about the former to the latter. Admittedly this 'higher-level' spatial configuration is initially somewhat easier to approach, as here memory can only be a public matter – something that is accomplished socially. However, then we encounter the equally intractable problem of understanding how members of a group commit themselves to or invest in this process. We end up back where we started, except with all of the terms inverted.

Our project is to work towards a social psychology of experience that overcomes the spatial bias at work in both experimental approaches and more sociologically orientated approaches to memory. What we seek is a way of addressing remembering and forgetting as social practices yet also as an intensely personal committing of oneself to the past as recalled. We argue that, in order to reach that understanding, it is necessary to reconsider some of the basic conceptual tools – the very 'grammar' – of memory research and the manner in which they have imposed themselves on how we relate to the past. As Ian Hacking (1995) argues, psychology, as the principal 'science of memory', has a profound effect on our personal abilities to understand ourselves. The categories of psychological research – 'storage', 'retrieval', 'processing' – shape the ways in which we think about remembering, such that we can find it difficult to think in any other way. We must find a way of overcoming this tendency.

We think that reintroducing the term 'experience' to mark the ambiguous and potentially indeterminate relationship we maintain with our own pasts is one way forward, but, already, we are in danger of running ahead of ourselves. As we will see later on, Bergson argues that, if we take the idea of change seriously, what becomes apparent is that not everything can be given at once. Indeed, the attempt to fully systematise – to lock down all the possible options in advance – is usually a doomed attempt to 'tame' change. In this book, by contrast, we want to avoid that error by thinking and working through the problems slowly. Our starting point is with collective