

# Commentary on Brockmeier's remapping memory: The relation between past, present and future as a metaphor of memory

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## Abstract

A commentary of Jens Brockmeier's paper "Remapping memory" (2010) is presented. Also, a number of relations to previous commentaries about the same paper are presented. First, we agree with Brockmeier and Haye with respect to the artificial and useless separation of memory and other psychological functions. On the other hand, five implicit assumptions of the archive model, criticized by Brockmeier, are presented. These assumptions are considered to raise the issue of the need to incorporate a more complex relation of past, present and future, in order to have a better understanding of memory phenomena. The importance of this relation is developed in relation to both collective memory and history teaching, and also in relation to autobiographical memory.

## Keywords

autobiographical memory, collective memory, history teaching, memory transmission, models of memory

Metaphors of memory have been an important part of memory research since its very first developments in psychology. This is to say since the end of the 19th century and even much before, when memory was theoretically studied by

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philosophers and theoreticians (Draaisma, 2000). These models and metaphors have been very influential, precisely because they have greatly determined not only what kind of theoretical ideas could be used in this research area, but also what kind of results could be expected. Among these models and metaphors, the model of a fixed and objective archive, containing an enormous amount of reliable information and knowledge, has without doubt been a very powerful one. It is well known that this idea stemmed from a rather empiricist and positivistic view of science, intimately connected to the idea of memory as an individual and isolated psychological process.

As Brockmeier's (2010) contribution shows, this powerful metaphor's influence is decaying, due to a number of reasons. In his paper, he analyses new trends in current research in different fields, in order to show how the aforementioned conception of memory, as a fixed and individual archive, is really losing its relevance nowadays. To this purpose, Brockmeier presents an extensive review of research on memory in different fields, such as collective memory, literature and art, neuropsychology and others. This initiative of trying to go beyond psychological cognitive memory studies is, in our opinion, an interesting and fruitful approach, as it has been also indicated by the comments of Wertsch (2011) and Echterhoff (2011).

Nevertheless, it is also true that this strong criticism about the archive as the fundamental model of memory is not really new in psychology, as Wertsch (2011) and Echterhoff (2011) have also indicated. Particularly, this last author raises the issue about how Brockmeier's contribution has not included in his review important conceptual developments in the field. In our opinion, an important distinction notably absent in Brockmeier's paper is the distinction between different types of memory systems, as working, procedural, episodic and others, as Echterhoff (2011) indicates. Beyond the different criticisms that could be applied to these conceptual distinctions in the field of memory research, it is very difficult to maintain that the notion of archive plays the same role in any of them.

## **There is no knowledge without forgetting**

There is no doubt that if we follow Bruner's (2010) advice about how fruitful it is to look for meaningful relations between cognitive processes and liberal arts, a confirmation of Brockmeier's idea can be found in Borges (1962/1999), particularly in his story about Funes the memorious. In this rather well-known story, Borges plays with a character who has such a prodigious memory that he is able to remember everything is presented to him, even though very briefly. Thus, he can remember for example, a whole dictionary just looking at its pages. In this way, Borges analyses in a very insightful way the contradiction this prodigious memory implies in terms of the relation of "memory" and "other cognitive functions". Thus, finally Borges writes, "In effect, Funes not only remembered every leaf on every tree of every wood, but even one the times he had perceived or imagined . . . Without effort, he had learned English, French, Portuguese, Latin. I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize,

to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details, almost contiguous details” (Borges, 1962/1999, p. 137). As we will see below, in this story Borges raises two essential issues on the nature of human memory that should be taken into consideration by empirical psychological studies. On one hand, the complex relation between memory and knowledge, and in the other, the need to understand memory having always an also very complex relation with forgetting. From the Borges perspective, then, to forget is not a failure of memory, but an ability, which implies, among other things, to select and to categorize. In this way, Borges is suggesting a whole functioning of the memory system close to the suggestion of *Acts of Memory*, which Hays (2012) is indicating in his commentary to Brockmeier’s paper. In other words, to forget, at least partially, is not to lose information but to establish the necessary conditions to form a complex representation of the reality and in this way to improve prior knowledge. Of course, as it can easily be noticed, this suggestion is very much related to the Brockmeier criticism about “archive” as the main model of memory, because, this idea of knowledge as something much more sophisticated than a set of archives is precisely what Borges is criticizing.

### Different meanings for different words about memory

We coincide with Brockmeier in that today a new and more dynamic model than the archive model is necessary to study the phenomena of memory. One of the reasons is that in the last decades, studies on memory have been increasingly focusing on “hot” aspects of memory. In this sense, Brockmeier’s paper mentions that different cultures refer to memory in peculiar ways, and that some of them don’t even have a word that alludes specifically to this capacity. This led us to think, precisely, about words. Thus, there are cases in which the mind—not the heart—monopolizes the action of remembrance in the lexical domain. For example, think of the English verbs “to remind”, “to remember”, in which the semantic reference falls on the mind, the exclusive bearer of the evocative function. Or the case of “to bring to mind”, which coexists with “to know by heart” in such a way that in English mind and heart easily substitute each other when it comes to expressing the faithful reproduction of the contents of the memory. But in other cases, for example in Spanish, “recorder” is a verb of mental reference with particular characteristics. “Recordar” comes from the Latin “re-cordis”, where “re” has a temporal connotation of something that happens again in time, and “cordis” means “heart”. Thus, according to its original meaning, recordar is “to pass once more through the heart”. The ancients believed that memory was housed in the heart. Different languages reflect this notion through expressions about knowing something “by memory”, as in French “par coeur”, in English “by heart”, or in Portuguese “de cor”. The semantics of the verb “recorder” in French also recall the affective dimension of memory and its actions. Thus, “se souvenir” means “revenir sur le Coeur”, that is: “something comes again to the heart”. In Italian, the verb “ricordare” keeps the same root, which is no less than the key to episodic memory.

In these expressions the heart, which is the culturally privileged seat of affection, looms in the linguistic root of remembrance.

Indeed, we intend to expound our comments related with two hot aspects of memory, which have developed notoriously in the last decades. We refer to autobiographical memory and to collective memory, this one particularly related to history teaching at school and out of school environments as museums, exhibitions and history TV shows. The previous linguistic comments serve to reflect on how the study of both autobiographical memory and collective memory, needs to approach cognitive processes deemed “hot”, without despising “cold” processes. Another reason to consider these two areas of inquiry has to do with the fact that, in a sense, they maintain similarities and relations because the way history is told at school and out of the school, has a lot to do with the way a nation or society remembers its autobiography. Thus, our commentary will be based on two main ideas. First, in both research areas, the notion of a fixed archive has been seriously criticized, and secondly, in both cases it would be important to consider the complex relation among past, present and future, in order to really understand how memory processes work. This is to say, in both areas of study, it would not be appropriate nowadays to consider memory processes as simply to retrieving representations from the past. Let us unpack these ideas.

### **Past, present and future in the context of collective memory**

This paper’s core idea is based on a critique of the concept of archive as a fundamental metaphor of memory. In our opinion, it is important to clarify what kind of archive the author refers to. Even though Brockmeier (2010) does not explicitly express this, such archive would display the following properties:

- a. The type of knowledge contained in this archive is basically a copy of past events.
- b. This knowledge does not suffer any transformation during the process of being stored. This is to say that no matter how long knowledge of the past stays in archive, it remains basically the same.
- c. This implies a complete separation of memory capacity from other human faculties. In other words, to remember has nothing to do with thinking, categorizing or other cognitive and affective processes. The classical positivist version of psychological functions has traditionally maintained this separation between different psychological functions. To this respect, the story of Borges presented above could be considered a counterintuitive prediction of the negative effects of having such a rich memory.
- d. Stored knowledge is certainly true and is not an object of interpretation; in social terms, if this knowledge were to be socially transmitted, it would certainly imply transmitting the truth.

- e. Consequently, the traditional model of memory as archive asserts this store contains precisely information and knowledge that pertains only to the past. Recovery is a process which takes place in the present and always with the intention of some possible action to be performed in the future.

In both collective memory and history teaching and learning research, it is almost commonplace to compare Orwell's famous novel *1984* with some social or political issue. Nevertheless, in this case we think it offers an interesting starting point, in order to share some reflections about Brockmeier's paper. As was creatively raised by Orwell, past, present and future are not perfectly separated, and memories are often full of content with a very dynamic and complex relation among these three terms. In Orwell's novel, historical and social contents are stored in the Ministry of Truth, where Winston Smith, the main character, works as a bureaucrat in charge of selecting and distorting newspapers from different periods, according to instructions given by the Party State. His work consists of transforming those archives about the past and modifying pictures, news, comments and conclusions of all kinds, in order to make them coherent with the present and future, as established by the Party State. Interestingly enough, current research, such as the pictures obtained by King and Cohen (1997) through decades of secret work in the former Soviet Union, has been valuable to show that, as a matter of fact, *1984* was in many ways a very realistic chronicle, besides its symbolic and theoretical power. We think this possibility of comparing present approaches to memory theories and metaphors with the Orwellian *1984* could be really fruitful because in this case, two memories—the official and the unofficial—can be compared, the former being false and intentionally distorted, while the latter is true and precise. There is no doubt most of the official historical accounts provided by Soviet Union officers for years do not withstand any critical assessment nowadays. This would imply that the truth-value of official and unofficial memories would be vice versa, that is, the unofficial being true and the official being false. However, if we consider the relation between official and unofficial memories, we need to admit the mechanisms that affect memory contents are much more complex than just a confrontation between the official and the unofficial. This is to say, on many occasions, both nations and human beings modify their remembrances in order to make their past contents coherent with our present and future. Thus, *Big Brother* would not be merely an external agent making decisions about what could and what could not be remembered; instead, he would be an internal agent to any of us, an essential part our cognitive functioning. At least, this is a serious possibility to be considered if we take into account two areas of study. On one hand, the research mentioned by Brockmeier (2010) about *False Syndrome* and also the way collective memories are transmitted through history teaching in and out of school (Carretero, 2011; Carretero & Kriger, 2011).

It is also important to say that the archive model, including the five features mentioned above, is the very idea in which school history was created. This is to say, school history was created as an essential cultural device at the end

of the 19th century. This school history was basically a national one, and it was created, as school content, precisely to be a kind of school archive of national memories (Boyd, 1997). This is to say, school history has maintained for many years this basic metaphor of archive the past. The same can be said of the school informal devices, such as museums, monuments, historical commemorations, and similar artifacts. As indicated by Hobsbawm (1992), all these invented traditions were created in order to be a basic support of the nation. One interesting example of this type of historical memory transmission is patriotic rituals. They were created almost at the same time of national public schools. They convey not only historic information, but also social, cultural and moral formation and regulations, and also, they are presented to students from very early ages, in such a way that they constitute a kind of national imprinting to the national heroic figures, who are always close to family figures, mostly father and mother. Patriotic rituals are a very interesting case of memory transmission, which works as a symbolic archive, which contains actions, rules and moral categorizations and obligations. Thus, it is interesting to note that schools have suffered many transformations, particularly after Second World War, but the patriotic rituals have remained basically the same. In our opinion one of the features, which have been maintained, is precisely these positivist conception of the transmission of national memories as archive, in the sense Brockmeier is analyzing in his paper (Carretero, 2011; Chomsky & Macedo, 2000). One very important issue in relation to this, from both applied and theoretical point of view, has to do with difficulty of these national archives of collective memories to be transformed through a necessary dialog among past, present and future, as Hassoun (2002) has indicated. This is probably one the essential problems of memory transmission in both individuals and societies. And it is so also because, as stated by Brockmeier, and we agree with his position, past, present and future are not real but creations of meaning.

### **Autobiographical memory and ontogenesis**

As it is well known, autobiographic memory plays a fundamental role in memory transmission, because probably nothing is more important to be remembered than our own lives. In this sense, autobiographic memory is another of the new branches that escape from the hegemony of past in the study of memory. Three conceptual axes articulate the notion of autobiographic memory *strictu sensu*: self, autothetic consciousness and subjective sense of time (Tulving, 2002, 2005). Work coming from different areas of psychology coincides in that a single temporal dimension, the past, can hardly account for the concept's complexity. The following are the pillars of autothetic consciousness, which is key to episodic memory: the capacity to reflect one's own past, to produce introspection into present thoughts and to actively anticipate the future. Particularly, current work on the ontogenesis of autobiographic memory composes the image of a self that constitutes itself as the three temporal dimensions—past, present and future—are deployed (Hoerl, 2007). When we place ourselves on the ontogenetic plane, the very notion of

autobiographic memory demands that we consider a broader temporal perspective: one that is not reduced to the past. The child's competency for biographical remembrance do not appear isolated from capacities related to her understanding and representation of the future in a context of human actions. The present stops dominating the developmental scene of the first two years, insofar as the child advances—between age three and four—in cognitive competencies related both to retrospective and prospective displacement. Such displacement (Tulving's "mental travel time", 2002) takes place in an increasingly "biographic" time, in the framework of shared acts of remembrance. It is in the context of human actions that the self is gradually constituted as a permanent object in time. Somehow, autobiographic memory converts the physical self into an episodic self, whose experiences do occur "within" time. The qualitative leap between the subject that remains in space and the subject that remains in time is a considerably long distance, from the developmental point of view. This is the distance the pre-episodic child shall have to traverse, like the caterpillar that becomes a butterfly, to convert his terrestrial mind into a winged mind, once the moorings of physical time are untied.

When autobiographic memory emerges in the midst of development, it transforms the child's mental world forever, endowing it with one of the highest manifestations of human cognition: the capacity to remember her life. Yet this acquisition is not reduced to the solitary mental recovery of experienced past. He who remembers is able to halt, recoil, advance or project the events he has lived, heeding a chronology that is alien to the attachments of physical time. He who remembers wields the power to re-experiment what he has lived, and to be simultaneously another and the same. He who remembers may travel across time in any direction. Autobiographic memory, auto-noetic competencies, the capacity to mentally travel in time imply a type of subjectivity whose functioning cannot be apprehended through the metaphors of archive and its versions.

In our view, the study of both historical and collective memory and autobiographical memory presently reflects, in a privileged manner, the crisis of the notion of memory as a prerogative of the past. Moreover, a vision that differs from classical paradigms entails not only an abandonment of the exclusivity of past, but also, as we have pointed out, a necessary dialog of the past with the present and the future, from both individual and social point of view.

## **The future of memory**

Finally, in *The hedgehog, the Fox and the Magister's Pox*, one of his recent pieces of work, (Gould, 2003) describes the early images of these two animals, drawn by Gesner in 1551 in the first great compendium of *Animal History*. From these enigmatic drawings onward, the fox embodies slyness and the hedgehog perseverance. Gould refers to the phrase by Erasmus of Rotterdam: "The fox devises many strategies; the hedgehog knows a single, great and effective strategy" (2003, p. 2). The hedgehog seems to always tread the same paradigmatic path of invariance, whereas the fox stages versatility, wile, flexibility and its capacity for reinvention and change.

Brockmeier's stance led us to this metaphor. Perhaps we might think that psychology has deployed different ways of studying the complex phenomena of human memory. One of these, great and effective, finds a powerful tool for survival in the hedgehog's strategy. Let us observe that this peculiar animal, always using the same resource it has used for thousands of years, manages no less than to survive on sheer perseverance, which is by no means an insignificant achievement. The archive metaphor accounts for this capacity for permanence and invariance. A different way to approach the phenomenon is the fox's: a plural and changing, creative and versatile one. Seeking diverse and untrodden paths, alternative approaches, it has always, for as long as one can remember, developed diverse strategies—some of them more effective than others. Some become metaphors, while others have a less fortunate fate. At any rate, in the Animal Kingdom, both animals are tokens for what Gould calls “the initial discord” and the “potential concord”. Both strategies coexist and may generate equally good achievements, which are often complementary and not necessarily contrary. Gould stresses: “What could be more powerful than to combine the virtue of a clear goal that is sought hurriedly, inexorably... (the hedgehog's way), and the flexibility of a wide range of different and skillful strategies, to arrive at the chosen place... (the fox's way)” (2003, p. 262). Perhaps the new map of memory shall find a place for foxes and hedgehogs. At least, this is a possible way to interpret some of the above-mentioned criticisms by Echterhoff (2011) about this very stimulating and creative paper by Brockmeier.

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