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The Role of Memory in Shaping National Identity

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intricate relationship between memory and national identity through the lens of cultural psychology, sociology, and education. It posits that national identity is not a static essence but an evolving construct shaped by collective memory practices, both remembering and forgetting, mediated through institutions, discourses, and cultural artifacts. The study draws on theories of collective memory, national narratives, and symbolic representation to argue that nations use selective recollection to solidify shared belonging while omitting divisive or traumatic histories. Institutions such as schools, museums, monuments, and the media function as memory regulators, shaping public consciousness and identity. Through comparative case studies including Israeli Arab textbooks and Indian history curricula, the paper reveals how dominant narratives are maintained, contested, or revised to reinforce or reshape national identity. In an era of globalization, the negotiation of memory becomes even more complex, offering opportunities for hybrid identities but also for intensified memory conflicts. Ultimately, the paper underscores that memory is both a tool of nation-building and a terrain of struggle over who belongs and whose past matters.

Keywords: National Identity, Collective Memory, Cultural Psychology, Historical Narratives, Monuments, Education, Media.

INTRODUCTION

The theory of cultural psychology posits that people perform individual and collective remembering and forgetting across repeated occasions. This means that memories and national identities are not simply 'stored' in the mind of individuals; rather, they are actively constructed in collaboration with influential others in ways that are sociocultural significant. Cultural remembrance is crucial for the performance of contemporary collective identities and for how people act in the present and imagine a future. Individual recollections of collective memory are based on borrowing cultural knowledge from shared discourses, which become recollected versions of collective memory. Collective memory is not mediated by the external working of memory but is internalized and performed. Though there is a shared representation of a nation's past, a heterogeneous national identity is constructed through dialogic processes through which dominant discourses, counter-discourses, and individual perspectives interact with each other. Given that some historical events are significant for national solidarity and identity, there are processes for bringing the past into the present and for engaging in collective remembering and forgetting. Because people often do not have direct access to historical events, their knowledge of these historical events is mediated through engagement with representations of history such as school textbooks, museums, memorials, and commemorative practices. Everyone, therefore, learns to remember certain events in a national past as well as to learn not to remember certain events [1, 2].

The Concept of National Identity

The concept of national identity is prevalent in social and political discourse, particularly during national or international crises. It represents a collective identity and a common self-representation, shaped by citizens' perceptions of territoriality, history, culture, economy, and institutions. National identity conveys a sense of belonging to a broader group than local or individual connections, encompassing various in-group referents from family to the nation-state. Emotional attachments towards one's nation

can evoke feelings of love, pride, or even hate, similar to attachments to smaller groups like families or political parties. These movements of national identity can create emotional contagion effects across the population. How national identity is cognitively represented influences and is influenced by the behaviors of the nation-state and its citizens. Defining national identity presents conceptual challenges, particularly in distinguishing it from terms like "nation" and "national dimensions." A nation-state reflects shared social, legal, cultural, political, and historical elements. National identity pertains to how individuals identify with this collective and encompasses cognitive, emotional, and evaluative aspects. National memory includes collective recollections of history, capturing shared memories and values. For instance, memories of World War II shape contemporary British identity, while civil rights impact African American identity today. Recently, research on national memory has expanded, exploring its framework, contents, and implications. National history often leads to contentious debates, revealing diverse and conflicting interpretations across societies [3, 4].

Understanding Memory

In collective memory studies, memory is examined as a construct reflecting identities, presenting challenges related to "taking to forget." Memory selection influences identities through practices prioritizing memories that align with current identity needs while disregarding others. This impacts grand traditions, collective traumas, and acts of oblivion. Personal and collective identities—local, ethnic, national, or global—develop through this memory and forgetting processes. Individuals may suppress past beliefs that conflict with their self-image; parents might hide certain past events from children for educational purposes. Forgetting is crucial for identity formation, with national identity often relying on a constructed sense of unity achieved by erasing divisive events. For example, the U.S. Civil War is framed as a two-sided clash, and William the Conqueror in Britain is celebrated rather than deemed an invader. National unity in both cases is maintained by overlooking disruptive histories. Collective memory over hundreds or thousands of years shapes community identity, where immigrants to a familiar culture may experience quicker identity changes. This paper explores how national identity, as collective memory, is shaped in museums, focusing on how conflicting memories are negotiated in postcolonial contexts. Collective memory is relevant across sociology, psychology, archaeology, and history. Museums, seen as repositories of collective memories, engage in an ironic exercise in amnesia, using post-colonial exhibition samples to investigate the representation of collective memories. These samples highlight contentions over identity-related memories and raise questions about the poetics and ethics of memory collection. Community identity emerges through collective memory; memory processes are crucial in shaping this identity. Factors include homogeneity among sub-groups, the blending of populations, and the perceived relevance of pasts as community markers. Historical discourse influences this process under strict legitimization rules, where choices and representations can trigger existential anxieties. Some collective memories may be less concerned about their validity, fostering a community narrative without inviting challenges to their truth, resulting in the formation of communities around shared 'off-scapes' [5, 6].

Historical Narratives

People often do not have direct access to historical events; their knowledge is mediated through representations of history, including textbooks, museums, memorials, and commemorative practices. The act of remembering, or forgetting, past events can be a collaborative process where a social group agrees on what to remember and allows others to influence the construction of memory. The events that are collectively remembered can, in many ways, shape collective identity by carving out the knowable territory of 'us' and 'them'. Within the national context, representations of national history are critical for shaping beliefs about the nation, like when, where, and by whom it was founded; how large it is; and who belongs to it. These beliefs, or narratives of national history, are constructed based on facts about a nation's past and reflect selective remembering and forgetting of events and people considered significant in the context of the formation of the nation and its current status. Representations of a nation's past events may be implicit or explicit, mediated or experienced firsthand. Mediated representations of history, like textbooks, films, and museums, draw on the past and influence beliefs about groups' distinctiveness, thereby shaping collective identity. A nation's shared past can also serve as a repository of common ideational resources of information, hence as a frame of reference for the public life of the nation. This approach highlights the role of a culture in the construction of collective identities but pays less attention to the implications of mediated representations of groups' past for collective identity and responses to past events or present-day issues of injustice. In terms of responses, representations of one's history as a

victim or a victimizer may provide justification or rationale for present-day issues of grievances or injustices. Counter-narratives of victimization may stem from and reproduce the relevance of private painful memories. Representations of victimization at a collective or communal level may subsequently influence group members' responses to past grievances as a social group, including the development and enforcement of collective action frames [7, 8].

Cultural Memory

The literature on memory has established a significant position across various scientific fields, focusing on individual and collective memory. Recent decades have seen sociologists and historical epistemologists clarify two key aspects: memory resources and their uses. The "what" aspect considers what can be remembered collectively, framing a social theory of memory. The "how" aspect involves memory policy—the techniques and strategies of utilizing memory resources. In monumental memorialization, this signifies a broad memory sociology. However, the importance of memory also reveals problems, as the collective memory phenomenon presents general, often vague insights, and the emergence of social forms of memory is complex. Two primary literatures address this: one examines the agents or institutions of collective memory, and the other explores collective representations, such as collective images. While these literatures emphasize the shared knowledge aspect of memory, this shared knowledge alone does not equate to collective or cultural memory. Without a common recursively of social practice, representations remain personal, as illustrated by Nietzsche's example. Historical epistemologists stress the necessity of socially constructing common representations to foster recursively in social practice. However, their analysis often overlooks how this construction occurs. Kelly illustrates this by gathering knowledge on NT literals from diverse sources, reflecting essential differences in knowledge agency and perspectives, thus highlighting discrepancies in understanding both synchronically and diachronically [9, 10].

Memory in Education

In his National Revolutionary Psychology, Althusser set out "a theory of today" to explain how to undertake the pedagogical task of socialisation in the reproduction of heterogeneity (cognitive, national, State), inequality. For Althusser, it is a mechanical system dominated by necessary relationships between given ideologies that the consciousness-regulated memories effectively constructed by State Apparatuses will, including "auto-impositions" such as the pedagogical devices for producing diffused "Plastic Ideal Subjects." Memory, history, education and culture contribute to this reproduction as "certain practical activities which, in the distribution of functions described above [kinds of discourse], are, on the one hand, a part of the State Apparatus (the Réel group) and, on the other hand, are governed according to the domination of the regulating ideologies of the State Apparatus." In the French debate on the Devoir de Mémoire, past historical events need to be transmitted in a specific way so that they can be recollected outside their significance. In this sense, education monopolised by the State functions as an apparatus of ideology, and does so through the Idée (civilisation). As Judith Butler agued, education, in its vast personalisation, could be both an apparatus for producing subjects that rationalise their surveillance by the institutions controlling memory on behalf of the State, and a production of "a different present," insidious to the naturalisation of "the continuity of the Memory variations" on behalf of forgotten impairments. This produces a novel vision of civilised ordering while reconstructing collective sovereignty, and could be effectively implemented through the educational effort taking Memory as a value [11, 12].

The Role of Monuments and Memorials

Monuments and memorials are not mere towers of bricks and mortar. They glorify a past event and act as a testimony to a collective memory. But even monuments are subject to interpretation and thereby represent different collective memories. Thus, the height of a monument can signify grandeur in some collective memories, while in others it can signify despotism. In addition, it is the community's interpretation of a monument that directs its role in 'monumentality.' The following pages provide a discussion of the role of monuments in cultivating a public commemoration. From the Biblical book of Genesis, we discovered the first monuments built – mountains of stones placed in a location of a dramatic and pivotal moment. These monumental 'standing witnesses' function as 'silent witnesses,' evidencing in the sense of 'an object was in a certain place at a certain time.' A sign must be established, commemorating the event, and it will serve as an authentic testimony to the past event, because it was there to witness it. Only through witnesses can an event receive authenticity. According to the 'collective memory' concept, a group of people share a memory of a significant event in their history, and this

memory is cultivated by and through group symbols (monuments, myths, rituals, symbols, and even texts). Accordingly, monuments and memorials take a significant part in public commemoration. Monuments are the representations of past events in the present, clinging to the location in which the event occurred, to thereby solidify its authenticity and prevent objecting interpretations. A monument's solidity ensures its continuity through time and place, while its physicality represents the event in the present, objecting to its forgetfulness. Different communities construct and employ different memorials that represent and convey their unique memories. Each community memorializes a certain event in a specific way, thereby shaping its understanding of that event and adding a layer to its collectivity. Memorials are physically interpreted texts, hence must be read [13, 14].

Media and Memory

Collective memory shapes national identity, with states constructing memories as sources of shared identity and legitimacy. Mechanisms like national holidays, monuments, and media regulation emphasize specific histories. Media regulation is a powerful tool for state memory construction, as mass media—especially electronic media—allow memories to be contested widely. The media creates a "permanent gallery" for commemorations, shaping the significance of events in the information age. This is especially true in societies with contested identities or unstable state power. In the former Yugoslavia, different nationalist movements shared a common history but constructed differing narratives. The Bosnian tragedy exemplifies how memory manipulation by state and non-state actors can influence identity. During the Bosnian conflict, the Bosnian Serbs utilized the resources of the former Yugoslav army, while the Bosnian Croats leveraged their decentralized communication system. The Bosnian Muslims could capitalize on rich cultural potential but had minimal infrastructure and entered the conflict later. Ultimately, they gained access to sophisticated media resources previously restricted by the Iron Curtain [15, 16].

Globalization and Memory

Many fear that the proliferation of diverse places, technologies, and practices will increase conflict between competing memories. This concern often stems from historical instances of intolerance and violence due to colonialism's legacy. However, analyzing memory practices indicates a different outcome. Dispersed and collective memories help groups understand their histories and cultivate identities, potentially forming bridges across conflicted national borders. Memory practices can cross political, cultural, and linguistic boundaries, leading to hybrid identities. Institutional efforts, including remembrance tourism and academic research, also cross borders, affecting local identity. Analyzing these practices reveals complexities of memory that may foster accommodation rather than conflict. This translocality leads to the transmission of remembrance forms, resulting in hybridization of their meanings and functions. As memories tied to justice or harm are nationalized, memory practices, which encompass notions of personhood, may be remediated across borders, affecting how identity is constructed. This framework expands to consider disembedding, reembodiment, and translation's roles in reshaping collective memories. Memory practices can converge in surprising ways across borders, allowing constrained identities to be transcended and new ones to emerge. In an age of dislocation, communities form around contemporary remembrance practices [17, 18].

Case Studies

This chapter presents two case studies of national identity formation processes, the Arab-Israeli conflict in Israel and how Indian identity is represented in textbooks, explaining ambiguities and inconsistencies in the national identity narrative formation processes in both countries. The first case study examines representations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in textbooks used in official Arab schools in Israel. The chapter begins with historical background, focusing on the systematic exclusion of Arabs from nation-building processes in Israel during the state's first decades. The paper explores how Arab school textbooks reflect 'not knowing' the other, specifically the Palestinian people. The analysis takes three forms: absence of representation, selective presentation, and distortion and misrepresentation. Some examples will be presented here, with emphasis on those that provide insight into how society may learn to forget-not-remember events as they are embedded in representations. The chapter concludes with some issues for further investigation. The second case study examines how Indian identity is represented in history and social studies textbooks drafted by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in India. The findings suggest that through textual strategies such as selection, omission, and distortion, the textbooks express a nationalist representation of Indian identity. Some examples are presented to elaborate on how society may learn to remember certain events of the national

past and not remember certain events as they are embedded in representations. The chapter illustrates the collaborative aspect of the act of remembering, using as an example the implementation of the NCERT social studies textbooks in classrooms and colonial events that were silenced in the curriculum and classroom discussions. The case studies also point to continuity and change in the shaping of a national identity narrative in both cases [19, 20].

Challenges to Collective Memory

Cultural differences in remembering are made obvious in. These examples illustrate the potential role of subcultures as sources of counter-memories, those memories that oppose, resist, or evade official cultural narratives and the political projects behind them. It is important to stress at this point that counter-memories should not be credited as necessarily more 'authentic' than official narratives. Michel Foucault, who in some quarters has been credited with the idea of counter-memory, celebrated their transgressive aspects as 'liberating, divergent and marginal elements,' but later on argued against romanticising the margins as inherently liberatory. Like official narratives, counter-memories can be entangled in a power game whose stakes are unclear and never static. Counter-memories always exist about the dominant paradigms they contest. They are themselves contested and are increasingly understood as something that can be absorbed into the mainstream via a dynamic process of reinterpretation or recontextualisation. Few '(sub)cultural memories' can be found that are not touched by national, transnational, and transcultural perspectives. Transcultural, borrowed from Wolfgang Welsch, highlights the intersection and confrontation of cultures, asking who has the right to own memories among different groups [21, 22].

The Future of National Identity

Existing nationalist forms of identity may not prove viable in the long term due to increased flows of people, data, values, and ideas across national borders as a result of improving telecommunications and transportation technologies. Myers emphasizes that national borders will not go away completely, but rather be redefined. Language and culture will, a hundred years from now, be more fluid, flexible, and hybrid than it is today. Michalowsky cites 's notion of "ethnoscapes" – moving groups such as tourists, immigrants, refugees, and guest workers; "technoscapes" – global configurations of technology; "financescapes" – global markets; "mediascapes" – the distribution of electronic media and the images they produce; and "ideoscapes" – streams of images, concepts and discourses about political ideologies. Memory, however, will continue to play a role in shaping identity, which will not become a conditionless mash of untrackable linguistic exchange. Memory landmarks, like monuments, traditions, religion, and artefacts, will remain, for better or for worse, (sometimes dangerously) built into landscapes, creating several "memoryscapes" which can be used to create or invalidate group identities. Ethnic nationalism, culturally informed collective identities, both tradition-based and interactive, will continue to serve as the basis for group cohesion. Memory, according to, moreover, is a social act, and attempts to revive an ancient collective identity and cohesive culture should be read as intensely political acts dealing with power in both societies. Memory can also be used to deprive one's social existence in the space, acculturate, or assimilate either openly or covertly to control communication and ensure a future as a group. Machinery of memory, recalling on the mind and remembrance, serving some collective background for further generations, or structuring standards for a proper shared discourse, is necessary for the production and reproduction of a collective ethnic identity. Thus, socially shared "products of memory" presented or imposed in a predetermined form become the elements and sites for the reckoning with the past. The social act of remembering is more visible than the inner operations of the mind. Nevertheless, memories are (re)constructed, and tend to serve different identity purposes or tasks like distinct individual memories [23, 24].

Theoretical Frameworks

In social scientific discourse, traditional logics for understanding social and collective memories as influential forces in shaping social knowledge and identity are explored. Memory resources are recognized for sustaining historical knowledge, which significantly impacts identity performance. This relates to the memory-identity equation that has informed academic and broader discussions since the late twentieth century in the West. Various forms of narratives, oral traditions, memorialized architectures, and commemorative sites emerge from historical contexts to recollect socio-culturally significant pasts. Such memory creations are often linked to identity-making interests, be they social, ethnic, racial, national, or state-related. Broadly, memory takes on numerous cultural forms and serves as a key resource for collective identity construction. This idea exists within a spectrum of concepts broadly termed 'social

memory' or, more specifically, 'collective memory'. Although defining and differentiating these concepts can be challenging, scholars generally concur that collective memory consists of shared past knowledge among a social group defined by nationality, ethnicity, culture, or tradition, as well as larger social wholes like nation-states. Memory is considered social because it is collective; unlike individual memory, which is treatment-based, collective memory involves the shared recollection of a once-collective past, commemorated by society [25, 26].

Implications for Policy

Political implications A desirable implication of a cultural psychological understanding of memory representations and national identity is that narratives of conflict within nations, as well as narratives of conflict between nations, are not immutable, and it is therefore possible to shape representations of history in ways that foster narratives of coexistence and avoid conflict. Indeed, history powers in many contexts actively attempt to shape narratives of the past and the practices of commemoration to maintain such a discourse. For example, one implication of a cultural tool for shaping national identity is that it may be possible to change a national holiday or the practices of commemoration associated with it, to transform national identity. Thus far, the empirical research has examined this for the case of changing a national holiday, but further work is required to understand how attempts to highlight particular aspects of a historical event can influence beliefs about the national community. Fortunately, there are numerous additional historical holidays and memorials across the contexts reviewed, which allow for further investigation of such issues. Importantly, the salience of national identity influences implicit memory for majority and minority celebrations. In contexts where most ethnic groups are in the numerical majority, the ethnic group one belongs to is an implicit dimension of social categorization. Members of the visibly larger group have a greater tendency to encode stimuli about their group more richly and conspicuously. Thus, they have a greater potential to activate representations comprising that group in the service of judgments, impressions, decisions, and behaviors [27, 28].

CONCLUSION

The role of memory in shaping national identity is both foundational and transformative. As this paper has demonstrated, collective memory is not merely a repository of historical facts but an active and selective process involving cultural, educational, and political mechanisms. Memory serves as a cohesive force that creates a shared sense of identity and continuity, yet it is also a contested field where dominant narratives meet counter-narratives. Institutions such as schools, museums, and media channels play critical roles in curating these memories, often reinforcing state ideologies while marginalizing alternative perspectives. Case studies from Israel and India reveal how textbooks and educational frameworks reflect and reproduce national ideologies by promoting selective remembrance and orchestrated forgetting. In the globalized context, memory practices are further complicated by transnational exchanges, diasporic identities, and postcolonial reckonings. Memory, then, is not only about preserving the past but about navigating the present and envisioning the future. To foster more inclusive and equitable national identities, societies must critically engage with their memory cultures, acknowledging silenced histories and embracing plural narratives. Only through this dialogic process can nations build identities that are not only coherent but also just and reflective of their diverse constituencies.

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