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Rumour as a symptom of collective forgetfulness

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Abstract

This psychosocial study attempts to shed light on the essential distinction between memory and recollection, and suggests a view of forgetfulness in terms of its intrinsic links with transmission. We study the effects and manifestations of collective forgetfulness, which still remain under-explored in psychology. The relatively recent case of a rumour that offered an explanation for and asserted the unprecedented character of a natural disaster—a symptom of forgetfulness—will serve as the basis for our investigation. The qualitative methodological design (documentary research, focus groups) used in this research reveals that the group has not transmitted its own painful past and that the rumour that continues to be promulgated offers an explanation which suits the residents, demonstrating much about their identity and history in the process. This paper will attempt therefore to investigate the ways in which this forgetfulness is transmitted, as well as the evident paradox of its coexistence with the recollection of history within the collective memory of the very same group.

Keywords

Collective memory, focus group, forgetfulness, natural risk, rumour, transmission

Memory and forgetfulness in society

Common sense contrasts memory with forgetfulness and, according to Rousso (1999), somewhat too easily accords a positive value to memory and an explicitly negative value to forgetfulness. However, though memory clearly provides individuals with a sense of continuity and belonging, it can also be the source of problems, negations and denial when the weight of the past proves too heavy to bear. Thus, “memory is not set against forgetfulness, which it incorporates, and does not

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identify with recollection, which it implies” (Nora, 1984, p. viii). It is clear therefore that memory can no longer be considered as a simple phenomenon. We must distinguish between its literal definition and the possibility of reminiscence it entails. Yerushalmi (1988) sheds light on the matter by differentiating between memory (from the Greek, *mnéne*) and reminiscence (*anamnesis*). For him, memory is something essentially uninterrupted and continued, while *anamnesis* designates a consciously recreated version of the past, i.e., a reminiscent recollection of what has been forgotten. It follows that we may distinguish memory from recollection, and that we may define forgetfulness in a collective sense in the following terms: “when human groups fail—voluntarily or passively, by dismissal, indifference or indolence, or even by the fact of some historical catastrophe breaking the daily routine—to transmit to posterity what they have learned from the past” (Yerushalmi, 1988, p. 12).

The past, present and future must indeed be taken into account and carefully considered when studying collective memory. Viewed for too long in a compact, uniform and frozen manner in the field of psychology, memory has more recently been re-examined in its plural, dynamic and modular senses, enabling us to ask questions of its underlying identity. The questions of temporality and historicity within the phenomenon of memory are hence no longer relevant. However, defining what corresponds to a collective memory is not a simple task and there is no real consensual definition of this subject. The terms “social” and/or “collective” memory are often used in a relatively undifferentiated manner. Psychosocial literature offers a multitude of definitions: it includes the fact that it is shared by a community (a society, a social group or an age group); that it is dependent on social processes such as social communication; and that it is shaped by frames of reference provided by the social organisation and society’s ways of expressing itself (Haas & Jodelet, 2007, p. 128). Collective memory is socially constructed through social interaction, experience and communication (Billig, 1997; Edwards & Middleton, 1986; Middleton & Brown, 2005, 2007; Tschuggnall & Welzer, 2002). As a legacy of the pioneering work of Maurice Halbwachs (1992, 1994), certain research postulates an intrinsic link between memory and identity in the choices a group or a community makes for the present and future (Licata & Klein, 2004). However, the link between such reflections and the question of collective forgetfulness is a very tenuous one (Brockmeier, 2002).

In social science literature, there are, to our knowledge, no books dealing exclusively with forgetfulness, especially in its collective and cultural senses. Ricœur himself makes this regretful observation (2002) and dedicates a part of his book *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Ricœur, 2000) to the concept. He explores its meaning in detail and offers an interpretation on two levels: depth and manifestation. More recently, Olick (2009) discussed the historical perspective in a sociological essay. In addition to this, a single volume from the excellent literary oeuvre of Harald Weinrich (1999), entitled *Léthé*, is entirely devoted to this concept. Weinrich describes in detail what he calls “the art of forgetting,” in a similar manner to Yates’ exploration of the “art of memory” (Yates, 1966). He makes

critical observations on the relationship of our Western (particularly European) societies to forgetfulness since ancient times, based on an in-depth reading of literary and scientific works. In psychoanalysis and cognitive science, the research on forgetting is exhaustive, though this tends to be confined to an individual level. Our paper will not focus on these developments due to lack of space.

In the social sciences, meanwhile, attention has been mainly devoted to memory, probably because the reasons underlying selection of content (whether informational, historical, symbolic or institutional), like the functions it performs, are difficult to explain, quantify and materialize. Moreover, images of forgetfulness commonly transmitted suggest that this other aspect of memory suffers from a rather negative representation. What about forgetting at the collective level? Might there be good and bad forms of forgetfulness within a given group? Above and beyond the dangers of forgetting, can we venture to speak of a forgetfulness which plays a salutary role, i.e., a form of forgetting necessary for the group?

In political history, we also know of imposed forms of forgetfulness, such as in totalitarian regimes (Todorov, 2010). These are often inextricably linked to an official story. Ferro's seminal work in this area, written over 30 years ago and dealing with the rewriting of history in textbooks was exemplary (Ferro, 1981). Orwell's *1984* is a disturbing illustration in literary terms.

The issue of institutional forgetting has mainly been addressed by sociologists and historians. Merton was one of the first to study the issues involved from a scientific viewpoint. However, monuments, street names, memorials or museums, movies, and also commemorations (Namer, 1987) are no less instrumental in the formation of a certain historical consciousness (Ferro, 1985). At this level, memory becomes particularly selective and forgetfulness may be actively sought out. At collective level, memory, forgetting and identity are intrinsically linked. But the question of institutional forgetting and the forms that the reconstruction of the past can take are not exclusively linked to this almost mechanical and volitional selectiveness of memory. Echoing the work of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983), we might assert that there are other issues involved in the invention of a history, consisting for example of the structuring of certain elements of social life and the ways in which individuals are inculcated with values and norms of social or cultural behaviors that did not previously exist.

In addition, further active forms of forgetfulness may play palliative roles within the group. In a previous paper, researched in the town of Vichy in France, a place of memory par excellence of French collaboration (Nora, 1984), we illustrated how the reconstruction of a new history by and for the group could also be suggestive of a need to transform a past seen as too burdensome (Haas, 1999, 2002, 2004). Other such palliatives include the politicisation of memory, or the legislation of memory. An example would be an amnesty, or the issuing of a collective pardon—a kind of ethical use of forgetting (Ricœur, 1999), which acts in a “curative” sense for the community. However, the question of institutional forgetfulness brings us back to that of collective forgetfulness, in which a whole community or group forgets.

Might there also be a palliative element to this collective forgetting, when the weight of the past is too much to bear—a past which would have been too difficult, too painful to pass on? Can the fact of having “forgotten” give rise to surprising events in the present at community level? How can a group that has forgotten traumatic past events “make sense” of what is happening in the present, if it is not able to fully recognize any link to the past? This will be the main issue of this paper through the example of the rumour of Abbeville.

Rumour: A symptom of forgetfulness

In order to illustrate our argument, we have focused on a case study from a region of France (Picardy) which highlights the importance of the role of transmission of recollection by and within the group—the example of the rumour of Abbeville. Rumour is not seen as an object of study in itself but will serve here to illustrate and illuminate the “symptoms” of memory—or rather the absence of transmission. We will not therefore be exploring the theoretical aspects of rumour exhaustively, but our study will enable us to grasp the importance of the way in which an explanation passed on and recounted in the present is rooted in the group’s past history. We will see how the group resorts to a sort of “cobbling together” in order to “come to terms” with a situation that it is unable to comprehend.

The aim of our study is neither to verify nor examine the rumour of Abbeville, but rather to see how the “rumour of Abbeville” reveals a great deal about the collective memory of its inhabitants. Finally, we will see how the past (or the absence of past, to which we return) has implications for the present. In what sense is it revelatory of history as perceived by the inhabitants and what does it tell us? Have the inhabitants of Abbeville actually forgotten part of their local and environmental identity?

Introduction

Before referring to the “text” of this rumour, let us examine the socio-demographic and historical context of the town of Abbeville. At the last census¹ it had a population of 24,129 (a population in constant decline since 1975). The number of people of working age in employment represents 53.6% of the total population, with an unemployment rate of 18.8% and a relatively substantial concentration of manual workers (22.7%), the area being heavily industrialized but adversely affected by the various crises. Furthermore, the city has a relatively elderly population, with 23.3% over 60². The inflow of immigrants is low at 1.1%, compared with 8.2% for mainland France as a whole. Furthermore, the rate of natural movement is negative (−0.2%). People rarely leave Abbeville and those who come to the city tend to be already from the area. One of the main activities of the people of Abbeville is hunting; the idea of “familiarity with one’s natural environment” is dominant among the population—a point to which we shall later return.

A major part of Abbeville's history is maritime—rooted in a “story of water.” It began as an area dominated by marshes, then became an island inhabited by fishing folk who took refuge there from the barbarian invasions from the North. In the 13th century it was one of the region's largest ports—its port trade (in salt or woollen cloth, for example) constituting one of its main activities. Until the 15th century, it alternated between English and French possession. One important aspect of its history should be underlined: the two World Wars had serious after-effects, especially in terms of the destruction of historic buildings; unexploded ordnance from WWI still disrupts agriculture and industry to this day. The town was almost completely destroyed by the bombing of 1944 and rebuilt after the war.

These historical details are important, as they form the backdrop against which the rumour has emerged, anchored in an historical context dating from long ago, in which the town or region was considered to have been “sacrificed” as a sort of frontier or rampart for Paris. Abbeville positions itself as a sort of scapegoat for the capital.

Context and content of the rumour

During the month of March 2001, the Somme³ began to overflow. People living along the banks of the river described the way in which the water seemed to “come right up out of the ground” or to break, as if swept by a wave. The water remained for over 2 months, over 3,500 homes were devastated and hundreds of people were evacuated. 167 families were re-housed in mobile homes. Although over 160 towns were affected by the flood (all 160 were considered to be natural disaster areas), the small city of Abbeville⁴ was particularly badly affected. Against this backdrop, and while the people of the Somme valley were battling with ever-rising water levels, there emerged what the media immediately designated as “the rumour of Abbeville.” This rumour accused the Parisians of having once again sacrificed the people of Picardy (and particularly the inhabitants of Abbeville) in order to save their own city from the imminent threat of flood. The same rumour “explained” that the Paris authorities had chosen to drain the rising waters from the River Seine into the Somme via the North Canal, and that this choice was motivated by the need to preserve the capital from disaster in order to show it in its best light to the International Olympic Committee, which at the time was evaluating Paris' candidature for the 2008 Olympic Games. The rumour contained a double message: on the one hand, there was the “recollection” of many such sacrifices suffered by Picardy (and by Abbeville in particular). On the other hand, the oldest inhabitants of Abbeville asserted that there had never been a major flood like this before—previous occurrences would of course have rendered this phenomenon more natural and less surprising.

Connections between rumour and collective memory

The emergence of this rumour in the Somme and particularly in Abbeville seems to us to constitute a veritable textbook case. It contains all the classic

elements: conspiracy theory, the designation of a scapegoat, the mobilisation of the disaster victims group, etc. However, at the same time, the content of this rumour was intriguing for several reasons: why were the inhabitants of Abbeville surprised by this flood, given that their region had always been a wet zone, at risk because of its geophysical characteristics? Indeed, such a rise in water levels is a likely, even predictable phenomenon in this “wet” valley. Did they all simply “forget” on the basis of this widely disseminated story that their region was exposed to this very natural risk and that their city used to be “an island in the middle of a river flooded by tides”? Indeed, only 150 years ago, Abbeville had been the principal port in the *département*, and even though the Somme has long been described by all as a “small, peaceful river,” its history clearly demonstrates the risk of it “breaking its banks.”⁵ Picardy is a region where the main leisure activities are still hunting and fishing to this day, and where people claim an affinity with nature and with an ecosystem of which they deem themselves to be the guardians, the best defenders and ultimately the “experts.” The statement made by Daniel Cadoux, then Prefect of the area, in *Le Monde* on April 18, 2001, is extremely striking, and particularly significant in this regard: “When I arrived in this region, I was told that there was no risk of floods!”

Does this rumour, which captures the town’s sense of astonishment at the flood, reveal a forgetfulness, a hiatus in the transmission of the group’s history? Several methodologies were used in this research in order to examine these questions in some detail.

A case study on rumour: Methodological issues

Our study was based on a qualitative design and conducted in a diachronic manner (Flick, 2009). Initial research focused on documents concerning one of the two main themes of the rumour: the history of floods or more precisely the question of the “memory of water” as the link between the inhabitants and the river. This first stage allowed us to identify the “objective” facts of the town’s history: Abbeville was a coastal town and for centuries had made its name from water, which constituted its main economic and social activity. The documents also inform us that the town had long suffered from terrible floods. During World War II, Abbeville was entirely destroyed and, in the urban rebuilding process, the decision makers chose to erase all traces of water when redesigning the town. As a result, the water completely disappeared—buried, hidden, as if mastered and under control.

Given this background, can the “Abbevillois” really have forgotten? With this in mind, we chose to focus on the rumour 6 months after the floods, while most of the disaster victims were still living in mobile homes or with their families while waiting to be re-housed. They were therefore still very close to the real-life experience of the flood and its dramatic and indeed traumatic consequences. The threat of a new flood was ever-present in the region, with the media explaining that all the conditions were in place to provoke a new flood within the following 6 months.

After a first series of exploratory interviews, 25 semi-directive interviews were conducted. This first part of the study enabled us to examine the discourse of the inhabitants in relation to the topic of the floods, including the place of rumour in the manner of apprehending the phenomenon (Haas, 2006). The second phase of our study, presented briefly here, consisted of a series of focus groups with Abbeville inhabitants. The time that had elapsed since the flood enabled us to record discourse which was more remote from the actual crisis and less “in the thick of things,” and also enabled the subjects to draw on other kinds of vernacular knowledge (Wagner, 2007) such as their relation to the collective memory of the people of Abbeville.

In the following section we present the methodological design and some major results.

Focus group setting

These first interview results confirmed this “lack of memory” of which the rumours, according to our hypothesis, were a symptom. It was then necessary for us to examine this more closely, in order to find out more about the history of the memories transmitted by and for the group. The methodology of the focus group therefore seemed to be the most appropriate. Described as being more “social” than any other method used in social science research (Markova, 2003), this technique takes into account the probability that even in normal circumstances, precisely *these people* might meet each other naturally and discuss *these topics* in particular. A brief description is provided by Kitzinger, Markova, and Kalampalikis (2004) for whom “focus groups are open and organised group discussions with the goal of defining a subject or a series of questions pertinent to research.” Here, moreover, it is a question of socially based communication concerning a social subject. To enable this group to produce “words,” to work out content which can be attributed to social characteristics, it seemed better to form homogeneous groups according to variables which we will present further on. However, bringing these ideas, opinions and attitudes to light also allows them to be updated, by means of comparisons, reactions, and confrontation with those of others—all group phenomena allowing for the possibility of readjustment.

Population and variables

In constituting our sample, we took two variables into account. Firstly, the status of the participants: were they native Abbevillois (themselves, their parents, grandparents having been born in the town), or simply people who had settled there in the course of their lives? The objective was to observe the extent to which (and particularly the manner in which) history has a hold on memory and discourse, and how it is negotiated in terms of one’s roots in the town. In this sense, family can be seen as one of the primary “frameworks” of the collective memory (Halbwachs,

1994) and of the formation of opinions, with transmission between generations also playing a determinant role. The second variable comes from the notion of generations and the relative distance from certain events which marked the history of the town and in particular the changes in one of the main “social executives” of the group memory—its space. We chose to set up three “generations” or “age groups”: a first generation composed of individuals aged over 60; a second generation composed of individuals aged from 40 to 60; and a third and final generation of individuals aged from 18 to 25. We then set six criteria, and one focus group was constituted per criterion. We required that these six groups of four subjects be homogeneous and set up on the basis of inter-knowledge at the same time. We recruited our subjects at a number of colleges, vocational and professional training centres for adults, and old people’s homes in Abbeville.

Methodological design

This methodology of focus groups is based on the idea that material can serve as a projective tool to stimulate the subjects’ discourse. Such material serves as a basis for opening discussions on broader themes and enables the researcher to structure the discussion in terms of certain underlying assumptions without influencing the subjectivity of the group. In this case the texts and photos address the themes of water and the salience of its presence in the daily life of the inhabitants. The items included a coloured poster in the style of ancient cartographers representing Abbeville bordered by the Somme river, a second poster representing the city as it was in 1346 and an excerpt from an article dated 1840 describing the spring floods from which we removed all temporal indications and which read as follows⁶:

Seventy families have quit their flooded homes. To this number must be added twenty other houses where the residents are only managing to remain by means of scaffolding erected in both the houses and the stables and byres. The losses of all kinds are incalculable. The waters have not risen to such a height in 42 years, and never in living memory with such great rapidity. On the evening of Saturday 16th, it was still possible to make one’s way through almost all the streets; by five o’clock in the morning the next day, the water had risen above the thresholds of the houses and there was a metre of water on the path, where the day before one had been able to walk in the dry. All the residents were seized by the greatest alarm, made worse by the darkness and the fear of the flood’s worsening; the spirits of the worst-affected were shaken, and on all sides one heard nothing but grim cries and lamentations. During this time, the means of rescue were organised with the greatest difficulty; all the residents of the upper districts, ran to the water’s edge, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the first boats to obtain news, some of a father and a mother, others of a brother or sister; some folk anxious to hear about a close relative, others about a friend.

The grimness of this scene of desolation was compounded by the piercing squeals of the swine, the lowing of the cattle and the whinnying of the horses being forced to board the boats. Human voices intermingled with these echoes. Cries of distress and moaning could be heard from afar. Mere words cannot do justice to the gravity of this situation!

Presentation of the results

The qualitative content analysis carried out on the basis of the results of the focus groups enabled us to highlight a certain number of elements. Firstly, the results revealed that the majority of focus groups (regardless of where they came from) knew about the maritime past of their region, its history as a port area and the “water-based” nature of Abbeville. Below is an extract from focus group 2 that demonstrates this knowledge of the past at the moment they were shown the engraving of Abbeville in 1346⁷:

- (4) Well, I think it’s clear that what they wanted to show with this picture is a city of water.
- (3) Absolutely, that corresponds to the picture (shows engraving).
- (4) That image is similar to this one: a city of water, a fortified city.
- (3) A fortified city . . .
- (1) Pretty impressive boats used to come to the port of Abbeville.
- (4) A very major port yes.
- (2) Yes, yes, absolutely . . .
- (4) With a thriving trade.
- (2) It was famous, eh? It was big.
- (4) They traded in woollen cloth, fabrics. They used to make a lot of oars.
- (2) Yes, there were dyers, and all that.

Secondly, of the six groups questioned, only those subjects native to Abbeville and of the first and second generations made reference to another flood in the past when they were shown the article from 1840 recounting the flood in the 19th century⁸:

- (4) It’s the flood in Abbeville . . .
- (3) Isn’t that when there was an accident there? Wasn’t there a bridge that fell down? ‘*Quai de la pointe*,’ see, ‘*Quai de la pointe*.’ An accident.
- (1) When was that?
- (silence)
- (3) Now, there . . .
- (1) No, I think it’s about the floods.
- (4) They’re talking about the flood.

- (3) There's a flood, but there's something more as well.
- (1) (reads out) "On the evening of Saturday it was still possible to make one's way around."
- (3) You know, opposite '*Rue de la résidence des rames*'?
- (4) Yeah. But this, I don't know if it's the last time the river rose . . . that was in 1901 I think.
- (1) 42 years.
- (4) What?
- (1) 42 years. That the waters had not risen to such a height.
- (4) I know there've been several floods, haven't there? There were some in the Middle Ages, there were some in the 17th century, in the 18th century, maybe in the 19th century.
- (3) There were some articles about that . . .
- (1) Ah yes, during the latest floods.
- (3) Well, it's not 2001, that's for sure.
- (2) You don't know the date?
- (4) Ah, that's not the 2001 flood.
- (2) It's not the 2001 flood, that's for sure.
- (1) It's not the 2001 flood!
- (3) To start with, there were no victims!
- (4) On the one hand, and then, er, and then er, there were no . . .
- (2) It's old, because there were still . . .
- (1) Boats.
- (2) Boats.
- (4) So the way I see it, it's before about 1900, I'd say.
- (2) Ah yes, yes, yes, because there were boats here.
- (3) There was a block of flats built, and it reminds us of exactly this accident. This accident with a boat (silence).

It should be noted and indeed emphasized that these "pieces of knowledge" came from articles published "during the last flood" according to the same subjects in these two groups. Only two people referred to these articles, especially the two published in *Le Monde*. These articles seem to be an element in the construction of a memory of the floods. In this respect, the role of the media in transmitting memories is noteworthy. Moreover, they were surprised that the "elders" at that time "had not talked about the floods even if they themselves had experienced them," which confirms that the lack of memory can be explained here by the lack of transmission . . .

The other groups made no mention whatsoever of any other flood than the most recent one. One subject stated that "if Abbeville had already been flooded, I would have known about it" (group 1). Another said "I have never heard of it" (group 2) and a third person added that "I don't know what happened before" (group 3). The statements made by the subjects, therefore, bore no traces of awareness of potential risks in this area, or knowledge or culture of the flood risk—which remains very much present nevertheless.

Water, which for several centuries formed the basis of activity, commerce, trade as well as the entire social life of Abbeville, is still relatively present in the collective consciousness. However, the fact that it was buried, diverted and controlled around 1945 has meant not only that inhabitants have no culture of potential risks, but are also totally unafraid of what water, or “nature,” can do. As a consequence of this obliteration, this masking of water in the town (following its reconstruction after 1945), the inhabitants of Abbeville have experienced a real collective lapse of memory of the features of their natural environment and the direct consequences of these. Water, once mastered and obliterated, is no longer seen as dangerous for the community. Hence, although the fluvial and maritime past has left traces in the collective consciousness and is part of the identity of Abbeville, the traumatic recollections of former floods have never been transmitted. This raises the following question: how and why is it that certain parts of the group’s history seem never to have existed, while others remain at the forefront?

Discussion

In interpreting these results, we can take into account the social frameworks of memory (Halbwachs 1992, 1994)—a notion of primary importance. For this author, the spatial framework intervenes in the activity of recollection of the group in two respects: it constitutes a stable point of reference enabling a group to remember its recollections, but also bears within itself the traces of its history. It is, therefore, not only the physical guardian of the group’s past, but also the symbol of it. Space, as a permanent reference, a source of stability and a symbol of the group, must enable individuals to remain in a common universe with which they identify (Haas, 1999, 2002, 2004). What happens then when a part of the environment and hence a part of history completely disappears? And when the group can no longer refer to its spatial framework in order to recover its recollection? We have an illustrative example of this among the inhabitants of Abbeville. Rumour has simply filled in the gaps in the group’s knowledge. Here it is not a matter of an elucidation of the collective memory (Rouquette, 1997), but rather an elucidation of the *lapse* of memory. The collective fabrication which held the Parisians responsible for having deviated water from the North canal into the Somme merely filled in the vacuum created by the memory lapse or, in other words, exploited the absence of transmission. This enables us also to ask an important question: are the current threats to identity stronger than the environmental threat? For in Abbeville, what remains as a trace of the past is the threat, the risk represented by Parisians (referring to the sacrifice from Abbeville’s past) rather than the risks posed by the recurrent floods.

The interpretation of the origins of the disaster included in the rumour comes at a very opportune moment for a group which, at least since the last two wars, feels it has been “sacrificed” to save Paris...⁹ But can the term “collective forgetfulness”

be used, with regard to the Abbeville case, in the literal sense? Because, as observed, the group's past seems not to have been transmitted by earlier generations or by the dominant institutions in particular: there was no transmission of the memory of those floods, no trace of accounts of earlier disasters in local or regional museums, no signs of earlier flooding, nor street names or plaques commemorating these past events prior to 2001 . . .

Here, then, it is not a question of an *a posteriori* construction or reconstruction of group recollections as described by Bartlett (1932, 1958) and Halbwachs (1992, 1994); the issue is rather that this construction simply could not take place at all because previous generations did not transmit it to subsequent generations. Yerushalmi (1988, p. 11) helps us to clarify this aspect:

Strictly, people and groups can only forget the present, not the past (...) [and consequently] a people 'forgets' when the keeper of the past generation does not transmit it to the following (...) A people can never 'forget' what it has not primarily received.

The questions of transmission *to* the group and reception *by* the group are therefore key in our field of study and can also explain the way in which a rumour comes "to take the place" of an eventual possible explanation. In order for reception to take place in the present—followed eventually by construction or reconstruction of the collective memory in the form of recollection, prior transmission is necessary. Such transmission occurs via a certain number of channels, by means of particular social processes and according to different modalities. Mediators of memory—in the full sense of the term, whether they be private, public or institutional—exploit these channels and are the guarantors of the collective memory for the present. Thus, long before the group, the mediators themselves (especially the Abbeville institutions), choose, whether voluntarily or not, what will remain for the future. They therefore often play an active role in collective forgetfulness and in the group's difficulty with remembering, as the way in which the account of a disaster is given in the present has implications for the future and for any possible transmission. Thus a number of studies—primarily historical—show how the modes of narration chosen and the narration itself at the moment of the event play a role in future transmission (Favier & Granet-Abisset, 2005). In this sense, the impact of institutional, and more recently media memory should be underlined. The challenge lies in ascertaining both how the accounts came about, i.e., how they were known and transmitted from the facts, and how people then live with the threat—do they accept, deny, or cover up? Collective or institutional accounts then become a sort of social indicator, with a temporality that varies depending on the period. The question is also to identify which mediators or memory-bearers are going to transmit the discourse: autobiographical or family memory, the authorities, the Church or the press, depending on the period, and to what extent they exert their authority by "instrumentalizing" the group's memory.

The aim of our paper has therefore been to show, through the evidence of theoretical elements and qualitative results, the way in which societies or communities deal with risk from the point of view of knowledge, attitudes and representations, as well as, *de facto*, via the construction of the collective memories that ensue. The question relates not only to how the group chooses to manage the fear of the event in the present, and of the measures it takes for facing up to it, but also the choice of whether or not to cover up the risks facing the population.

In this sense and from the point of view of collective memory, it is instructive to study at what moment a disaster actually takes on meaning in the collective memory and when or why this is denied. Not every story is suitable for telling or transmitting, and transmitting events that are painful at group level will always be fraught with difficulty. It also goes without saying that socio-economic stakes sometimes prevent a town or village from drawing the attention of its citizens to the natural risks they may be running.

Whatever the underlying explanation, the work carried out in the context of this research clearly reveals the respondents' lack of knowledge of this specific memory, which was not transmitted via institutional channels until 2001: no prior reference was made to this history of disasters in the city or to water as a potential danger for the community. While narratives, accounts and discourse about the disaster are constantly being reworked in the longer term, the total initial absence of discourse and the silence around the event are revealing. This is borne out to the extent to which it ultimately appears new and surprising to a population—the initial absence in a way evokes the “return of the repressed” so dear to Freud, whereby the rumour emerges as the symbol or rather the symptom of an event that is not mentioned, not spoken about, perhaps even buried.

Conclusion

The French poet Supervielle (1980) writes of the “forgetful memory,” a title we might easily have chosen for this paper. He outlines the difficulties in building the future based on the legacy of (imperfect) memory—an unfaithful friend which often lets us down. Concerning groups and communities, we need to examine prior history in order to understand the dynamics of transmission and transformation, and by empirical research, to investigate further the issue of collective memory and collective forgetfulness. A vast field of reflection opens up here, concerning the manner in which attitudes and representations can be formed and changed via the transmission of past events to the present. Its significance can help understand and explain social situations which are sometimes “incomprehensible” and enable groups to deal with the present or future. However, the topic of the culture of natural risk (Beck, 1992) seems to us to offer numerous avenues for research. This memory of risk, involving the preservation or transmission of sometimes painful recollections, is confronted with an institutional obliteration of the very traces of that same risk. It seems to us interesting, then, to investigate the way

groups, in the face of these paradoxes, determine what they deem relevant to transmit, and what they choose to omit.

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Notes

1. INSEE (French national statistics body), June 2011.
2. Higher than the national (21.6%) and *départementale* (21%) rates.
3. This refers to the river which gives its name to the *département*, crossing it for 185 km on its way towards its mouth in the Channel (Bay of the Somme).
4. Abbeville, second city of the *département* and situated on the river, is located a few kilometres from its mouth.
5. “On March 5, 1658, the Somme river broke its banks in Abbeville with such impetuosity that it flooded two-thirds of the city and swept away several of its bridges, with a notable loss of its inhabitants’ possessions, several of whom were reduced to extreme necessity” (Champion, M. (1858). *Les inondations en France, depuis le 6ème siècle jusqu’à nos jours, recherches et documents*. Paris, France: Dalmont, p. 163).
6. This text dating from 1840 is written in the style of the period. It was translated for the requirements of the article.
7. The speakers in each focus group are numbered (in brackets). This sample is taken from focus group 2, the intermediate generation, people living in Abbeville.
8. Extract from focus group 5, intermediate generation, people originally from Abbeville.
9. In this respect, let us highlight that one of the streets in Abbeville that was severely flooded in 2001 had been renamed by its residents as the “street of the sacrificed ones,” referring to the sacrifice the people of Abbeville had to endure once again “instead of Paris.”

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