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OVERVIEW

Collective memory and autobiographical memory: Perspectives from the humanities and cognitive sciences

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Abstract

The current overview provides an interdisciplinary synthesis of autobiographical and collective memory studies, focusing on history and cognitive psychology, to help other scholars bridge the disciplinary gap. We describe the various interpretative frameworks used to build theoretical knowledge on how autobiographical memory and collective memory are intertwined. We expose how research exploring self, social and directive functions of autobiographical memory echoes three main functions that can be identified for collective memory, that is, social identity, social schemata, and means for actions, or a political decision tool of research in these fields. In doing so, we hope to stimulate opportunities for more interdisciplinary research.

This article is categorized under:

Psychology > Memory

Psychology > Theory and Methods

KEYWORDS

autobiographical memory, collective knowledge, collective memory, directive functions, history, social identity, social schemata

1 | INTRODUCTION

Wars, terrorist attacks, natural disasters and other types of collectively experienced upheavals can leave their mark on the people who experience these events, or those who learn about them through the media (Brown et al., 2009; Favier & Granet-Abisset, 2000). Evidence for this comes from research showing that such events can be remembered for many years (Schuman & Scott, 1989), that they can trigger flashbulb memories (Brown and Kulik, 1977; Hirst et al., 2015), and that those memories can be influenced by group membership and nationality (Muzzulini et al., 2020; Schuman & Rodgers, 2004). We might imagine a person who directly experienced the attacks of November 13, 2015 in Paris, which left him with symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including intense flashbacks. However, other people with him at the time might not then have gone on to develop PTSD symptoms. A recent study by Mary et al. (2020) analyses this phenomenon, noting that those who developed PTSD after the attacks seemed to be unable to “adaptively suppress memory activity” and that “a generalized disruption of the memory control system could explain the maladaptive and unsuccessful suppression attempts often seen in PTSD.” How then might we extrapolate from the memory

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processes of such individuals, which can be explained at a neuroscientific level, in order to understand how to help groups of people living through traumatic events? What policies might we implement at the societal level that would help individuals and groups to cope in the face of disaster?

We know that there is a rich interaction between the individual at the cognitive level, where there is a focus on processes, and society understood at the historical level, where there is a focus on meanings and shared values. However, there has been relatively little interdisciplinary research that brings together psychologists' work on individual cognition with humanities scholars' work on what "memory" represents at the level of society. Over the past several years, the authors of this article—two cognitive psychologists, a political scientist, a historian, and a scholar trained in history and psychology—have been working to address this lacuna. In this review article, we explore how far it is possible to combine approaches to memory at the individual level (via the concept of autobiographical memory) with approaches at the collective level (via the historians' understanding of the concept of "collective memory"). One of the unique challenges of such radical interdisciplinary work is the fact that in cognitive psychology and in history, our methods and concepts can be radically different, and we sometimes use similar terms to describe very different phenomena. This review article is intended to give scholars in cognitive psychology and across the social sciences and humanities, a better toolkit for working towards effective collaboration. We hope to demonstrate how far our understanding of both autobiographical memory and collective memory is enriched by a deeply interdisciplinary approach, and to highlight where work in one discipline has deep synergies with work in the others.

2 | MEMORY: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

The disciplines of cognitive psychology, political sciences and history have each explored memory, but with different aims and methods. Historical studies offer a crucial contribution to the definition of memory, often taking a functionalist approach, that is, driven by an interest for understanding why something is being remembered. Prost (2010) defines history as a science, but one that has a social function. Since the foundational works of the modern discipline were written in the 19th century (Seignobos & Langlois, 1898/2014), history has been seen first and foremost as a practice aimed at gathering a body of knowledge, and establishing proven facts through the critical analysis of a set of materials (referred to as historical sources). These sources are then compared and analyzed through interpretations of the causal relationships between these established facts. The historian considers that "History, a narrative of the past, establishes a distance from the outset; in most cases, the historian has not lived through the past he or she is describing, the affective, sensitive and personal link is not spontaneous, even if the subject he or she is writing about always has some connection with his or her own history" (Joutard, 2015, p. 15). As such, historians count oral recollections as historical sources (i.e., oral sources) that they can use to develop both a better understanding of past events, and of the dynamics involved in remembering (Fulbrook, 2014). The entanglement between past and present concerns in historical works explains the thin line between "history" and "memory" (Nora, 1984), as the research conducted by historians can itself influence the value placed on heritage within a society, and the public discourses surrounding how the past is discussed in the present (Crivello et al., 2016). One might argue that one of the roles played by historians is to contribute to the formation and diffusion of those cultural schemata proposed by psychologist Frederic Bartlett (1932) and defined as mental representations of an individual's generic knowledge about the world. These schemata are then used by individuals to interpret current events, and by societies to make decisions at the collective level.

In cognitive psychology, memory has long been understood as a learning process, and there is no shortage of theories of memory, each one treating memory through its own disciplinary lens. Human memory research focuses primarily on the processes involved in encoding, storing and/or retrieving a piece of information (Roediger et al., 2007). For example, as early as 1890, the psychologist William James said that "The secret of a good memory is the secret of forming diverse and multiple associations with every fact we care to retain." Following the same conception of memory, Mary Calkins (1905) wrote about the example of trying to remember the year 1861, the year of her cousin's birth, by associating it with other more historical events such as the administration of Kansas as a free state and the burning of Fort Sumter. More recently, Brown et al. (2009) discussed the "living in history" effect, showing that historical events that are of personal significance are used to organize autobiographical retrieval. These findings illustrate how historical knowledge can be used to aid memory, and directly relate to what sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1925) called "historical memory," defined as knowledge about past events transmitted from one generation to another. Halbwachs is particularly well known for proposing the notion of "collective memory" (Halbwachs, 1950/1997), defined as a "social memory" as opposed to a "personal memory" (which he referred to as autobiographical memory).

According to Halbwachs (1925, p. 99), collective memory refers to memories that originate with a groups' shared history, whilst personal memories are memories that belong to the individual, memories of events that the individual directly experienced and always embedded and framed by social relationships with others. He also suggests that collective memory is a living memory, a reconstruction of the past in the present, with a host of cultural meanings in the present. Most important for our purposes, however, is that Halbwachs (1925, p. 99) argues that autobiographical memory relies on collective memory, as "the story of our life is part of history in general." Collective memories, he argues, nourish individual memories, and individual memories are described as "autonomes": specific to each individual, not because the latter would be independent from society but because one's social position at the intersection of groups is always unique. In this line of thinking, individual memory is always a point of view on collective memory (Gensburger, 2016). First in a chain of elements, individual memories are associated to a conscience phenomenon (Halbwachs, 1925, p. 107). Halbwachs's theories are frequently used by historians working in the area of "memory studies," but there are clear synergies here with psychologists' interest in aspects of memory that relate to the subjective experience associated with the retrieval of an event (James, 1890). Indeed, the retrieval of a specific episodic memory (i.e., having a sense of oneself in the past; Tulving, 1985) involves the recollection of personal context at the time of encoding. It is well-established that retrieval is facilitated by linking memories to pre-existing networks of knowledge (e.g., Calkins, 1894, 1896; James, 1890). Pre-existing knowledge, including "historical memory" as defined by Halbwachs, therefore serves as a framework for better learning and remembering.

3 | COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY DEFINITION

Scholars in both history and psychology, and indeed in many other disciplines, but in particular political sciences, sociology, anthropology and literature, have often struggled to define collective memory itself, and there exist a range of definitions. A central problem, and one which many definitions attempt to address, is the ambiguity between the contributions of the individual to the social process, and vice versa. Here we examine some of the definitions most frequently used by historians, and how they have intriguing parallels with working definitions used by psychologists.

Cultural theorist Assmann (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995) argues for a distinction between what they call "communicative" and "cultural" memories. Communicative memories are time-limited memories constructed through oral interactions, while cultural memories are long lasting and publicly available, sometimes in a concrete form (for example via memorials and monuments). Yet this in turn raises the question of where we might draw the line between "memory" and "history" (or indeed, if it is even possible to draw such a line). Historian Pierre Nora (1978) launched a long-lived debate on this question, when he proposed that "collective memory" was "the memory, or set of memories, conscious or not, of an experience lived and/or mythologized by a living community of which the feeling of the past is an integral part of its identity." Nora thus set up an opposition between what he saw as the subjective and emotive dimension of collective memory, which echoes with the definition of episodic memory used in psychology, with the rigor and objectivity of historical work, based on proven facts, that constitutes historical memory. This theoretical reflection was the starting point for Nora's highly influential *Les Lieux de mémoire* (translated as *Realms of Memory*; Nora, 1984, 1986, 1992). The aim of the three volumes of *Realms of Memory* was to draw up an inventory of the symbols of French national memory, such as the *Marseillaise*, monuments like the Panthéon, or commemorative events like Bastille Day or the funeral of Victor Hugo, and then to explore how each "lieu de mémoire" developed, from its creation through to its interpretation in the present day. Nora's study took place at a moment when there was a certain sense of decline in the "national memory" in France (Ledoux, 2017), and this gave Nora's work a political slant: in writing about the nation's key *lieux de mémoire*, Nora and his colleagues also enhanced the status of these mnemonic objects and sites—which highlights just how far the work of the historian potentially has a normative function, allowing him or her to contribute to a certain reading of past events. The political scientist Marie-Claire Lavabre (2000) notes that Nora's work proposes a "notion of memory, doubly connoted by the national and the political," which over-emphasizes the political uses of the past, and downplays how memory might also be considered an object worthy of study at different levels within a society.

Ongoing debate on this topic illustrates just how far theoretical concepts of "collective memory" as used by historians remain vague; indeed, some scholars have argued that the concept might best be understood at a metaphorical level. Criticizing Halbwachs' theory of memory (Halbwachs, 1950/1997), the philosopher Noa Jedi and the historian Yigal Elam (Gedi & Elam, 1996) compare the "private memory" held in the mind of each individual to a "collective memory" which is composed of the narratives available in a given social space (Gensburger, 2016, for a discussion of

their critics). Their position supports a metaphorical interpretation of “collective memory,” defining it as a set of myths, traditions and customs that “represents the ‘spirit,’ the ‘psyche’ of a society, a tribe, a nation” (Gedi & Elam, 1996, p. 35); they consider collective memory to be the product of a set of actions and not the mechanisms at work in recollection. This approach has in turn been criticized by some cultural and social historians, who are interested in the role of agency in the development and reception of representations of the past. For example, Winter and Sivan (1999) define collective memory as a construction operated by “the action of groups and individuals in the light of the [present] day” (Winter & Sivan, 1999, p. 6). They further distinguish this from “collective remembrance,” which they see as the public manifestation about a specific moment of the past. Winter and Sivan’s work thus highlights the modes of *action* that promote a memory. These authors further argue that there are two distinct ways of engaging with the social dimensions of remembrance: through focusing on the ways in which shared conceptions of the past are developed, or through focusing on the product and form via which a memory is expressed in the public sphere. Interestingly, this distinction parallels the difference proposed by Bartlett between memories recalled “in” the group, and memories recalled “by” the group. (Bartlett, 1932). It is today at the core of the new subfield of research in social sciences on the topic of “memory activism” (Gutman & Wustenberg, 2022).

These definitions of collective memory emphasize the dynamic nature of these social forms of remembrance: they are constantly changing and can be variously appropriated by the individuals who are confronted with them. This appropriation is partly in line with Halbwachs’ conception of memory. However, Winter and Sivan (1999) argue that the more individual dimension of memory, which they call “passive memory” and understand as a noncommunicative form of recall, is an inherently individual form of memory which cannot be accessed by others; in their view, it is the very act of communication that allows the transformation of a “passive memory” into a “collective memory.” Other historians have used other qualifiers to discuss the forms that mnemonic narratives can take in the public sphere, writing of national, public, divided, shared, contested or conflicting memories (Bodnar, 1992; Clifford, 2013; Foot, 2009; Herf, 1997). These qualifiers aim to emphasize the recognition and scope of a form of discourse on an event, or the existence of competing discourses surrounding the same event. Ultimately, the genealogy of collective memory studies in history reflects a broad spectrum of approaches, from those that consider the symbolic and metaphorical aspect of collective memory to those that focus on the role of actors in promoting certain memories in the public space (Olick et al., 2011).

Before turning to psychologists’ work in this area, it is worth noting that there is another body of historical research that explores the interactions between individual and collective memories: this is the theoretical and methodological work done by oral historians. Oral historians use oral sources (interviews conducted with living witnesses to a historical moment or event) as a key resource in their work. As such, they are highly attuned to, and have widely theorized, how far dominant and/or publicly circulating narratives of historical events impact upon an individual’s own recounting of that event. Alessandro Portelli, one of the leading experts in this field, is in fact not a historian by training, but rather a literature studies scholar and expert on the short story; hence he is particular sensitive to the connections between narrative and “memory” as it is expressed in an interview. In his seminal article “The peculiarities of oral history,” Portelli (1981) argues that the memories recounted in an oral history interview “tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did.” Oral historians thus argue that the memories that a speaker marshals in an interview have a deep subjective resonance with that speaker’s identity at the moment of speaking. Dominant narratives of the past that circulate at the collective level can have a profound influence on an individual’s description of their own past, leaving them unable in some cases, or even without the vocabulary, to describe personal memories that run against the grain of dominant collective narratives (Abrams, 2010; Dawson, 2007). So powerful can be the impact of dominant narratives of the past on individuals that Clifford (2012) has described them as a “third person” present in the interviewing room, and Mouton and Pohlandt-McCormick (1999) have detailed how important it is for oral historians to understand “the socio-political context of experience, in particular the way in which revisions of a nation’s historical memory may compel individuals to repress or alter their private memories,” and to be attuned to any points in an interview where “the normal narrative broke down, a boundary was crossed and the narrative ruptured into something atypical.” They call such moments “boundary crossings,” where an individual’s attempts to steer their recollections away from dominant narratives quite literally causes the flow of their recollections to rupture (Mouton & Pohlandt-McCormick, 1999).

If historians have been working with collective memory theory since the 1970s, cognitive psychologists’ interest has developed recently (Roediger & Abel, 2015). Proposing an overview of this emerging field, Hirst et al. (2018) identified two trends in the definitions of collective memory: the first trend focuses on the symbols maintained by society, that is, the cues present in the social environment which are likely to act on individual memories; the second trend focuses on the individual memories shared by the members of a community, and how these memories are part of the identity of

this social group. They consider that these two dimensions are in fact two aspects of the same phenomenon, and that it is essential to focus both on social efforts to promote certain collective memories, and on the psychological mechanisms involved in these acts of remembrance. This situation is in many ways similar to the definitions of collective memory used in history. However, Hirst et al. (2018) take this classification a step further by distinguishing five approaches to the study of collective memory in psychology. First, there are studies that focus on the consequences of remembering a historical episode (Liu & Hilton, 2005) and those that focus specifically on the intersection between personal and historical memories (Brown et al., 2009). Both approaches are essentially concerned with the way in which periods or events considered as historical are recalled within different social groups, that is, to what extent they are known and detailed, but also what emotions and what meanings they carry for those who remember them (Zaromb et al., 2014). Such studies are based on measures that aim to evaluate the degrees of cohesion and convergence among these representations, and to understand the permanence and weight of a given vision of the past within a group (Abel et al., 2019).

Hirst et al. (2018) also describe two complementary approaches to identifying collective memories: we can take either a “top-down” or a “bottom-up” approach. The objective of the top-down approach is to identify patterns in the organization of collective memory (Buskell, 2017), for example, by measuring time curves of collective forgetting. Thus, Roediger and Desoto (2014) measured which American presidents were spontaneously recalled by cohorts of students in 1974, 1991, and 2009. This study revealed the permanence of the most recent presidents, and a few presidents considered iconic in the United States, such as Abraham Lincoln, while the others were inserted into a “forgetting curve” observed at the level of most participants. In a complementary way, the bottom-up approach focuses on the role of individuals in transmission processes and the relevance a particular memory may have for the identity of a person (e.g., Reese & Fivush, 2008; Stone et al., 2010; Svob et al., 2016). Overall, this approach aims to measure the elements of narratives transmitted from one individual to another, from one generation to another. The last approach described by Hirst and Yamashiro explores the psychological mechanisms involved in the formation of collective memory. This perspective examines the effects of the conversations, collaborative actions in recall and the narration of the memory for others that are studied (Harris et al., 2017; Rajaram & Maswood, 2017; Yamashiro & Hurst, 2014). The aim of these studies is to measure the difference between a memory recalled when there has been no social interaction and when this memory is recalled after having had focused interactions.

The role of social interactions is thus a central component of such definitions of collective memory. As Roediger and Abel (2015) state, “collective memory is an umbrella term that reflects how people remember their past as members of a group. This can be studied as a body of knowledge, as the attribute or pattern of a people, and as a process of contestation or change. Such collective memories are likely to stimulate identity and shape political and social discourses. In particular, the study of how different groups remember the “same” events could help to uncover important psychological factors at work in group dynamics and conflict.” Overall, this body of research mobilizing the notion of collective memory in cognitive psychology now constitutes a sizeable field, addressing research questions such as how membership of one or more social groups contributes to shaping memories produced at the individual level, or how the action of each individual contributes to shaping forms of collective memory. In the end, research in psychology, as well as in other social sciences and humanities subjects, agrees on the fact that collective memory is a complex phenomenon that can be studied in many ways depending on the research questions.

We propose here, as illustrated in Figure 1, that what we named “collective knowledge” akin to the concepts of collective memory, cultural memory, social schemata, or history is a shared knowledge serving as interpretative framework for both individuals and societies. Collective knowledge would be constantly under the influence of the environment and the events that might happen and modified through communicative memories defined as individual memories, private memories, and autobiographical memories recalled in the group. In agreement with the current literature, we suggest that it is the vulnerability of memory which renders possible the formation of collective memory, of a unified view of a past event. This is because memory can be deconstructed; an individual can collectively build their history and imagine their future. Roediger and Abel (2015) also suggest that what maybe characterizes collective memory the most is its “restless nature” as the past is often reshaped according to social or political events. Individual memories will therefore be shaped by collective knowledge and the result of this interaction will rely on other processes linked to the communicative function of memory such as conversations, shared attention, social contagion, or even expertise, all notions explained in further details in the section below.

Paralleling the idea that collective memory can shape a groups’ narrative identity, the field of autobiographical memory research proposes that, at an individual level, identity is supported by the construction of autobiographical memory (AM) (e.g., Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; McAdams, 2013). Autobiographical memory allows individuals to define themselves in relation to others and to their own personal life story. According to the Self-Memory-System

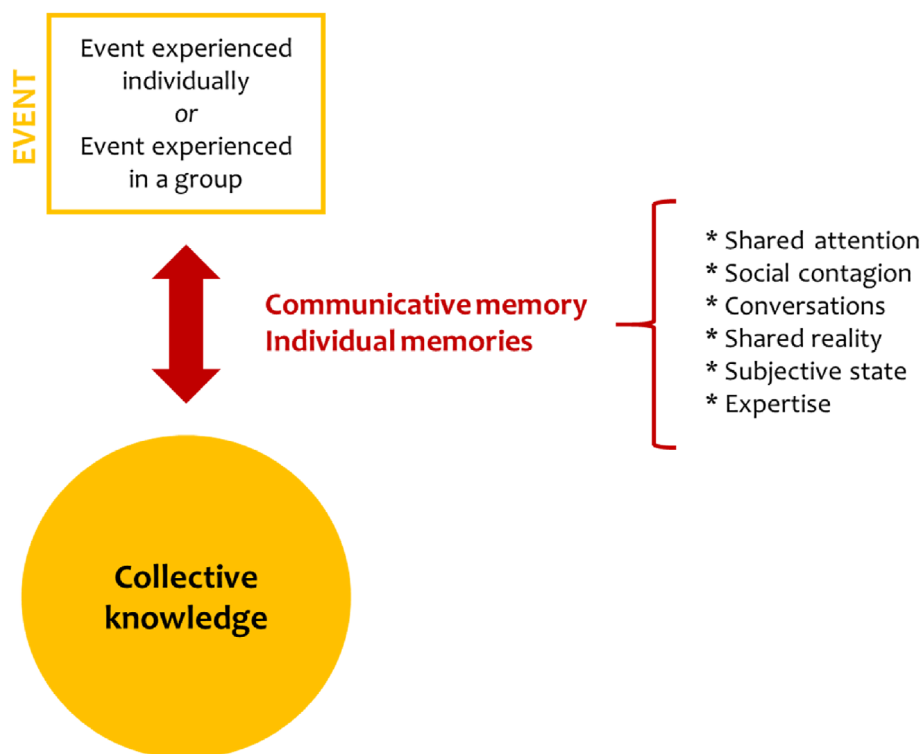


FIGURE 1 Collective knowledge (collective memory, cultural memory, social schemata, history) is a shared knowledge serving as interpretative framework for both individuals and societies, in constant interaction with the environment and modified through communicative memories defined as individual memories, private memories, autobiographical memories recalled in the group

(SMS) framework proposed by Conway (2005), autobiographical memory is structured hierarchically at different levels of specificity. In this hierarchy, the first type of memory representation is general semantic AM (i.e., knowledge) which can be separated into lifetime periods (when I went to university X) and general events (I had lectures with supervisor Y). The second level of AM representation is specific episodic AMs. These are sensory-perceptual representations of personally experienced specific events, or *episodic memories* (Conway, 2005; Tulving, 1972). In the SMS, episodic and semantic AMs are thought to provide the content for various self-images and representations of the self, such as “I am Welsh” or “I live in the mountains.” In line with this idea, it has been found that AMs which are cued by self-images tend to cluster temporally around the time of emergence for that self-image, a phenomenon suggested to explain the reminiscence bump (Rathbone et al., 2008).

The reminiscence bump is shown when older adults retrieve memories from across the lifespan, producing most memories in the “bump” period of approximately 10 to 30 years of age. Memories from this lifetime period tend to be “self-defining” (Singer & Salovey, 1993) and contribute to the formation and maintenance of a stable self (Chessel et al., 2014; Tanweer et al., 2010). Reminiscence bumps have also been observed from a period outside of this 10–30-year-old period. For example, Conway and Haque (1999) found that a group of older Bangladeshi participants showed a second reminiscence bump between the age of 35 and 55, coinciding with a period of conflict in Bangladesh. Here, a political event resulted in memory changes in the individual, creating another reminiscence bump. Social events, or social contexts, can therefore be seen as impacting individual remembering and identity. Other studies have explored the difference between reminiscence bumps for private versus public events (e.g., Koppel & Berntsen, 2016; Tekcan et al., 2017). In a review of studies examining the reminiscence bump for public events, Koppel (2013) found that there was greater inconsistency in the location of the bump for public (compared to private) events—with many studies not demonstrating a reminiscence bump for public events at all. Koppel suggests this may reflect the wide range of participant ages (some being too young to demonstrate a clear reminiscence bump) and of cueing methods used. Although it is likely that different processes are involved in the encoding and retrieval of important public events compared to important private events, there may also be some similarities. Tekcan et al. (2017) proposed that retrieval during the reminiscence bump period is enhanced for public events that are high-impact and an important part of a country's collective memory. Similarly, the SMS (Conway, 2005; Conway et al., 2004) proposes that important events

that are central to the goals of the self will have heightened accessibility. This has notable parallels with the approach of oral historians such as Portelli (1991), who have argued that, in the context of an oral history interview, speakers are most likely to articulate memories that allow them to narrate those elements of the self that most resonate at the moment of speaking. In other words, speakers make sense of their memories via the framework of what most matters to their identities in the present (Abrams, 2010; Portelli, 1991).

This also echoes Halbwachs's notion of the connection between individual and collective memory. He argued that "it is the individual, as a group member, who remembers" (Halbwachs, 1950, p. 46), even if he argues that it is impossible to distinguish what is individual and what is social about memory, as society itself exists through the individual (Gensburger, 2016). It is therefore the study of the interaction between the individual and his or her social embeddedness that will allow for a better understanding of memory. Interestingly, this idea fits with the theoretical framework proposed by Bartlett (1932), according to which remembering is also social in nature, as it happens within human interactions. Bartlett (1932) also introduced the idea of the reconstructive nature of memory. He argued—much like Portelli (1991) and actually Halbwachs (1925) too—that memories are reconstructed depending on an individual's current situation. This reconstruction is guided by schemata which are socially and/or culturally inherited. At the center of this reconstructive process is the idea that the representation of the past can be distorted both at the individual and collective levels. Like Bartlett's conception of schemata, Wertsch (2002) explored what he termed "schematic narrative templates" used by individuals to guide the reconstructive process of remembering. According to this model, individuals in two different social groups might agree on the core events but apply different narrative templates, leading to different historical interpretations of the same event. In a related line of research, Berntsen and Rubin (2004) discuss the idea of cultural life scripts: culturally shared ideas about major life transitions that influence autobiographical retrieval (e.g., the reminiscence bump). The focus in psychology on the social function of memory parallels the interest of historians in memory as a social construction. Historians are interested in how the past resonates in a given society (Winter, 2006). Thus, the historian Pierre Laborie (Goetschel & Granger, 2011) argues that "some events exist more by what they become than by what they were in the very time of their manifest, materialized and dated existence." This idea of reconstruction—and the biases that shape it—is reflected in the cognitive literature on autobiographical memory, which emphasizes the motivated nature of recollection, shaped by the current goals of the self (e.g., Conway, 2005). We might see this approach as a functionalist one, as its purpose is to understand the uses of the past within a society, rather than to study the individual processes involved in recall.

4 | ASSESSING THE FUNCTIONS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

Any attempt to define the concept of collective memory also raises questions regarding its function. The growing scholarly interest in collective memory is mirrored by an increased interest on the part of the general public in the topic of memory and heritage (Lavabre, 2020; Winter, 2000), which raises broader questions about the functions of memory in modern societies.

From what we have set out above and in agreement with social psychologists (Bouchat & Klein, 2019), we can speak of three main functions of collective memory: the first relates to collective identity, the second relates to social schemata, and the third functions as a means of action or a political decision-making tool. These three functions mirror the three proposed functions of autobiographical memory (Bluck et al., 2005): self, social and directive. As discussed earlier, many cognitive accounts of autobiographical memory center on the role of memory in supporting personal identity (e.g., Conway, 2005). Other researchers have explored the social function of autobiographical memory, emphasizing the key roles it plays in facilitating social interactions and strengthening relationships (e.g., Nelson, 1993). Third, the directive function of autobiographical memory refers to the way we learn from the past to change behaviors in the present and future (Pillemer, 1998).

Like autobiographical memory at the individual level, collective memory serves an identity function, nourishing a group's sense of identity and continuity. Collective recollection can foster group unity both at the family level (e.g., a family reminiscing together around the dinner table about a holiday that took place many years ago) and also at the national level (e.g., sharing memories of the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games in London may, for British people, evoke nostalgia for happier times). Recalling past episodes within a family or a nation-state makes it possible to emphasize the link that unites the individuals in this group (a common ancestry, a similar place of life and culture, etc.) and to share stories that convey values with which the various members of a group can identify. Research in psychology has shown how this shared identity and link with others is impacted in cases of memory loss (e.g., McCarthy & Hodges, 1995).

Related to this identity function is collective memory's communicative function: it is the product of interindividual transmission, evolving from verbal communication or from more tangible forms of communication, such as writings, monuments, or any other medium aimed at recalling information about the past. This communicative aspect helps collective memory to nourish social links between individuals, and to identify synergies and differences between individuals, thus strengthening both the individual's and the group's sense of identity. As Liu and Hilton (2005), collective memory shapes how a group understood itself in the past, defined itself in the present, and anticipates its future.

Second, social schemata can be understood as a tool to recount historical episodes (Wertsch, 2002) but also as narrative templates to interpret current situations and cues to retrieve individual autobiographical memories (Bartlett, 1932). Whether at the social or autobiographical level, those templates share common features as they both involve generalized knowledge structures, dates and temporality and can be used to generate different memories (e.g., a specific birthday dinner or the bombing of a town in the Iraq war). In all societies, those representations of the past or narratives might alternate according to what they might be used for and for example the national identity they might serve. It is also possible to speculate that life scripts can also differ from one generation to the other. According to Bruner (1990) storytelling, in the form of narratives, has been viewed as a very powerful means to create, maintain, and transmit collective memories. As life scripts may change across generations, several versions of the same events might generate different narratives, due to the processes of collective remembering (e.g., Schuman & Corning, 2000). For example, Wertsch and Karumidze (2009) showed that Russians and Georgians had very different accounts of the brief war between the two nations during August 2008. The authors suggest that individuals in different groups can therefore agree on the same set of events but might also interpret those events differently because of their own historical background, or historical schemata, that they apply during the process of collective remembering. Again, this idea is paralleled in the field of autobiographical memory, where a vast body of research has shown that memories are reconstructed at retrieval in accordance with pre-existing schema and self-related goals (e.g., Bartlett, 1932; Conway et al., 2004).

Third, collective memory can be understood to have a political function and can be used to support—or even enforce—a certain point of view or political program. It is important to note that this political usage is historically contingent, which is to say that the political uses of collective memory change with changing historical contexts. During these past 20 years, the very idea of a culture of memory of violent pasts has been promoted by the European Union or the United Nation as a way to promote peace and tolerance. However, sometimes the very same story can be used as much to promote hate, division and intolerance as the on-going Russian war against Ukraine illustrates it strongly. This links back to the question of identity. If we agree with oral historians that the memories recalled in an interview are a performance of an individual's identity at a given moment in his or her life, we might see the political function of collective memory as playing a similar role at the level of the group or collective, or even at the level of entire societies. As group identities shift in societies, so the political function of collective memory shifts.

We can see how far this political function is historically contingent by looking briefly at the significant changes that took place in many Western societies after the end of the Cold War, at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. The collapse of the Cold War geopolitical system—which had been in place in some respects since the late 1940s—allowed for some quite dramatic new considerations of the history and memory of the Second World War to enter public discourse. There were obvious political reasons for this change, most notably the fact that as strategic Cold War alliances lost their value, it became possible to raise troubling or difficult questions about the wartime behavior of former Cold War allies. The result in many Western European countries, however, was a dramatic shift in public understanding of, and narratives concerning, wartime events such as occupation, collaboration, civilian massacres, and (most significantly) the Holocaust (Judt, 2005). Changes at the level of “collective memory”—involving new public narratives about the wartime past, new commemorative events, new memorials, etc.—in turn had a significant effect on individual autobiographical memories of the past for people who had lived through and/or survived these wartime events. For example, Holocaust survivors were able to relate their personal histories in interviews with far more confidence and coherence once discussion of the Holocaust began to rise in the public arena (Clifford, 2020).

The post-Cold War era also brought with it new ideas about the function of difficult, humiliating, or painful memories in collective remembrance. With the growth of a new discourse around human rights in the 1990s, more and more countries adopted policies that embraced a “working through” of difficult pasts to foster tolerance in the present, and to work towards reconciliation and resilience. Thus, from the early 1990s through to the mid-2010s, many democracies embraced public discussion and commemoration of violent or troubling aspects of their own pasts, in the hopes of encouraging inclusiveness and a rights-based approach to citizenship in the present. Such initiatives have started from the premise that collective remembrance of dark moments of the national past has a potential “healing” or “curative” function, sometimes likened to an individual recalling memories of an earlier trauma—although most historians would

agree that using language such as “repressed memories” or “trauma” in the context of the nation is only metaphorical. In other words, collective memory is imagined here to have a prophylactic function, stopping societies from repeating the collective mistakes of the past via an engagement with “memory politics” (Gensburger & Lefranc, 2020). This agenda can be seen particularly clearly where states have initiated programs for transitional justice or reconciliation in post-conflict situations, but it is equally visible in the “memory politics” of stable democracies around the world. It has also, interestingly, gone hand-in-hand with a “memory boom” in scholarly research (Kansteiner, 2002; Winter, 2000). It is interesting to note that this political function of collective memory has a concomitant echo in psychologists’ studies of the directive function of autobiographical memory, which dictates that our memories allow us to learn from our mistakes and make better choices in the future (Pillemer, 1998, 2003).

Although there has historically been some push-back against such “rights-based” initiatives from far-right political groups and organizations, with the global swing to the right that has occurred from 2016 onwards the notion that democracies can marshal difficult pasts to foster unity in the present has increasingly come under attack. This raises the question of how states, societies and communities build collective memories that promote a shared vision of the past without white washing its most challenging aspects. Which traces of the past does a society need to preserve, or to celebrate? How can groups split apart by historical violence use collective memory to learn to coexist again? Is discussing the past the best way to “heal” from it? In the wake of the return of mass authoritarian politics over the past 5 years, these questions are more pressing than ever before.

This also raises the question of how and why societies “forget.” How far is there a “politics of forgetting” that mirrors the “politics of memory,” and how far might other factors and processes be at play in the lapsing from group / public consciousness of relevant memories of the group’s past? Here we take as an example a recent study published by Fanta et al. (2019) examining how long flooding events persist in collective memory, and how far memories of floods impact behavior (such as the location of house-building projects). Those authors investigated 1293 settlements over nine centuries, impacted by seven extreme floods. They showed that it took only one generation to “forget” the floods and to begin once again to build housing closer to the river. They conclude that the impact of such traumatic events on behaviors depended on the presence of living witnesses and did not last more than two generations. In this scenario, the type of collective memory that might induce changes in behavior was short-lived and required the embodied memories of individuals who had lived through the floods first-hand—although other factors, such as economic ones, could also come into play.

This example reminds us just how far memory is a selective process—and, as several authors argue, collective memory is no different (Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012; Rajaram & Pereira-Pasarin, 2010). At the level of the individual, it is well understood that in recalling an event, some, but not all, of the relevant details will be remembered; the retrieval of specific details might itself inhibit the recall of similar related details, as shown by the Retrieval-Induced Forgetting paradigm (RIF, Anderson et al., 1994). Yet similar functions have been shown to take place at levels beyond the individual as well. Hirst and colleagues (Stone et al., 2012) have applied this paradigm to social interactions and demonstrated similar effects. Coman et al. (2009) demonstrated that asking pairs of unrelated individuals to recall their flashbulb memories of 9/11 induced individuals to change their own memories of the event. Social contagion, defined as the mechanism that allows for the social sharing of a memory from one individual to another, has been shown to lead individuals to recall details that they themselves did not directly experience (Echterhoff et al., 2005; Loftus, 2005). The social status of an individual has also been shown to influence a group’s collective memory; Cuc et al. (2006) have proposed that we might think of certain individuals as playing the role of the “dominant narrator” in these contexts (with some interesting parallels to the “dominant narratives” discussed by oral historians). The concept of a “shared reality” has equally been proposed to explain the influence that a speaker can have on reshaping a memory, leading to the reformation of the collective memory of an event (; Echterhoff et al., 2008; Hirst & Echterhoff, 2008). Taking this issue further, Cuc et al. (2006) have demonstrated that stories recalled in groups of four individuals, over time and through conversations between group members, change over time as different versions of the stories converge into a more uniform, shared version.

Oral historians have noted very similar phenomena in their research but have further linked divergences in group members’ recollections of an event to tensions between the group’s experience and the official narratives of that experience. Portelli (1997) gives a remarkable account of a 1944 clash between Communist partisans and Fascists in the small Italian town of Poggio Bustone, in the final months of the Nazi occupation of northern and central Italy. Comparing a number of oral and written accounts of the battle, Portelli notes that most stories describe a fairly similar scene: the Fascist commanders ended up barricaded inside a single dwelling in the town, where the partisans eventually killed them. However, two key details vary across the accounts: the place where the Fascists were killed (inside or outside the house), and—quite notably—whether or not the Fascists attempted to surrender before they were shot, or whether they indeed fired first on the partisans. Portelli (1997) argues that the partisans involved were aware that the violence of the

battle (as well as the fact that they may have shot at men who were trying to surrender) contradicted official accounts of Resistance activity that had been largely stripped of elements of revenge, of “wild justice,” and even of violence itself. “The cleansing of violence from the official discourse of the Resistance,” he writes, “was perceived by a number of those who fought in it as a denial of their role, an expropriation of memory. This makes them, if we try to listen and understand, more articulate and credible historians than those professional writers and administrators of history who constructed the myth of a domesticated, pacified, almost nonviolent Resistance.” (Portelli, 1997, p. 139). The historian John Bodnar (1992) has similarly written of tensions between what he terms “official” and “vernacular” memories around the creation of memorials in the United States. Such research reminds us that however we assess and understand the power of collective memory, individuals can reject and subvert it, just as they can see their own memories shaped by it.

This leads us back to the issue of the function of collective memory, and raises a further question: why are some memorials, commemorations or narratives of the past better remembered than others? Why do only some promote the formation (or the alteration) of collective memories, while others fairly quickly become invisible, forgotten or rejected? In a broader sense, what are the cognitive characteristics of human memory that make the formation of collective memory possible? Several authors have argued that it is the very nature of memory itself that can lead to the creation of a shared collective memory despite the different perspectives of individuals remembering. Perhaps the first and most important of these characteristics, essential to the formation of collective memory, is memory’s malleability—or, as argued by Coman et al. (2009), its reconstructive nature. According to these authors, the malleability of individual memory is what allows different individual’s memories of the same event to converge towards a collective memory. Historians and other humanities scholars would certainly agree that when we view collective memory in the light of historical context, “memory politics,” and the tensions between “vernacular” accounts and official narratives of the past, what is most striking about memory is its adaptability, its susceptibility to change, and its continual reconstruction of itself.

5 | CONCLUSION

This review article was intended to give scholars in both psychology, political sciences and history a shared conceptual space to emulate collaboration. We showed that our understanding of both autobiographical memory and collective memory is enriched by a deeply interdisciplinary approach. Historians understand the creation of collective memories as a *historically contingent* process (which means that it is grounded in a specific time and place, with significance both to the individual and beyond the individual). Might grounding memories in the historical moment of their creation better help us to understand the connections between individual remembering and collective “memories”? An idea for future research could be to look at how the impact of factors such as, conversations, expertise (the factors that affect individual and communicative memories shown in Figure 1) on collective knowledge might be affected by whether an event is experienced alone or in a group. This could be studied in the real world for already-experienced events, or—on a much smaller scale—a virtual reality environment allowing more experimental control. The virtual reality set up would enable predictions about causality to be tested. We suggest here that a better integration of humanities approaches to memory at the level of society, could open space to explore autobiographical memory. Oral historians indeed broadly agree that groups that experience an event together tend to work together (consciously and unconsciously) to arrive at an agreed narrative concerning the event. This can make it challenging for individuals to hold onto divergent memories of the event (or at least to express these in the interview situation).

From our perspective, a key remaining question—one that has been explored by psychologists, but less so by historians and political scientists—is the interaction between collective memories of the past and collective visions of the future. Cognitive psychologists have explored this idea at the individual level under the term “episodic mental time travel” (MTT, Tulving, 1985), a process in which participants think about their past to envisage what might or could happen in the future (Schacter et al., 2008). A large body of literature in psychology has investigated similarities and differences between remembering and future thinking. For example, similar regions of the brain are reported to be used in remembering and in future thinking (e.g., Addis et al., 2007; Szpunar et al., 2007). Scholars have recently extended the research on future thinking and episodic MTT to the collective domain (Merck et al., 2016; Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016). In a recent study, Topcu and Hirst (2020) investigated this issue further by asking participants to generate 15 past events that happened in the nation, and imagine 15 events that might happen in the future. Participants then were asked to rate each event (past and future) for their phenomenal characteristics, date in time, emotional valence, agency, and entitativity. The results showed correlations between memories of national events, and projections of future events in terms of content, specificity, phenomenal characteristics, and valence. From these findings, the authors propose that

the reconstructive process at play during the recall of past events is equally at play during the construction of future events. Taking stock of these conclusions, some activists have called for witnessing climate change to change the future of the Anthropocene (Garde-Hansen et al., 2017). We suggest that one avenue for future research could be an interdisciplinary approach to this question of the relationship between memories of the past and constructions of potential futures, as part of a wider analysis of the interactions between autobiographical memory and that difficult-to-define phenomenon that scholars across the social sciences and humanities deem “collective memory.”

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Lucrèce Heux: Validation (equal); writing – original draft (lead); writing – review and editing (equal). **Clare Rathbone:** Writing – original draft (equal); writing – review and editing (equal). **Sarah Gensburger:** Writing – original draft (equal); writing – review and editing (equal). **Rebecca Clifford:** Funding acquisition (equal); project administration (supporting); supervision (equal); writing – original draft (equal); writing – review and editing (equal). **Céline Souchay:** Funding acquisition (equal); project administration (lead); supervision (equal); writing – original draft (equal); writing – review and editing (equal).

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The authors have declared no conflicts of interest for this article.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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