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Remembering research: memory and methodology in the social sciences

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This article examines the conceptualisation and use of memory in the social sciences, both as a methodological tool and as an object of research. The article situates memory as a vast potential resource for the social sciences in the exploration of relations between public and private life, agency and power, and the past, present and future. It goes on to recognise that the methodological issues surrounding the use of memory have, with few exceptions, rarely received sustained attention. The article argues for, and moves towards, developing a coherent account of the variety of practical techniques of using memory in data collection and analysis, and their appropriate use within a clear epistemological framework which distinguishes itself from conventional historiography and it’s criteria of validity. It is argued that without this attention to method, memory will remain on the margins of social science research.

Keywords: memory studies; history; remembering; time; experience; everyday life

Historical context has always been a crucial element of social science research. Sociology has maintained a historical perspective on social change and relations, while after initial criticisms of being ahistorical, media studies has developed a significant strand of research devoted to histories of, and history in, the media (for instance, Bell, 2007; Edgerton, 2001; Foucault, 1965; Ward, 1989; Weber, 2002). Accounts of the development of particular concepts and research traditions have emerged alongside histories of disciplines themselves, embedding historical contextualisation thoroughly throughout the social sciences. In the last three decades, a new paradigm of historically inflected research has been gathering pace. Studies of memory have boomed in all areas of the social sciences (Barash, 1997, p. 707). A preoccupation with memory as a cultural trope, an aspect of everyday consciousness, an ethico-political concern and an object of multi-disciplinary academic study has been accelerating throughout the post-war period (Huyssen, 2000).

However, an analysis of how memory studies should be conducted and what they can offer the social sciences over and above historical research has been lacking. As Klein (2000) contends, memory should not be advanced as a substitute for history, as this brings with it a litany of dangers. History provides us with important narratives of the past and charts political, social and cultural change on micro to macro scales and although there are undoubtedly overlaps, memory is not history. Memory is a lived...
process of making sense of time and the experience of it. This process of sense-making has potential value for social research both as an object and technique, but the ways in which it can be used to illuminate social and cultural experience require examination.

In contemporary academia, the popular resurgence of memory is not so much contested in terms of its occurrence but in terms of its implications for the construction of individual and collective temporal identities and historically rooted cultures. Memory and its epistemological potentialities have been cast in misleading ways, condemned as a threat or celebrated as a pre-condition for social and cultural progress. There are those who position memory and history in a hierarchical relationship, setting verifiable, document-led reconstructions of professional history off against subjective fantasies of experience lost to time (Pickering & Keightley, 2006). In contrast, there have been celebrations of memory as automatically providing authentic access to the lived relations between past, present and future without attending to the limits and partialities of memory. As Kremer (1999, p. 29) identifies in relation to some Shoah literature, a number of critics have asserted that ‘eyewitnesses are the only legitimate chroniclers’, situating memory as a direct conduit to historical truth. Here, the value of memory is threatened by the over-inflated claims made on its behalf.

These polarised characterisations of memory have not gone unchallenged. The body of research characterised as trauma studies respects ‘the category of the real’, (Guerin & Hallas, 2007, p. 3), while refusing to cast memory as a direct link to the meaning of the past. Laub’s (1992) layered assessment of Holocaust memories argues that despite being empirically problematic, they can simultaneously attest to deeply held meanings of the past-in-the-present. In this analysis the value of memory extends beyond its potential to confirm or establish empirical historical truths (Kremer, 1999). It is a process of making sense of experience, of constructing and navigating complex temporal narratives and structures and ascribing meaning not only to the past, but to the present and future also. The kind of nuanced and multifaceted approach to memory which is explored here holds significant potential for research in the social sciences.

This article presents the potential of memory as a topic of research and a mode of investigation by considering memory on its own terms, distinct from the epistemological criteria of history. This enables the generalised lack of systematic methodological attention devoted to the use of memory in empirical research to be addressed. Despite the increasing academic consideration and use of memory and remembering, there has not been an expansion in the debate around the methodological issues associated with memory. As Cubitt (2007, pp. 2–3) points out, the interdisciplinary nature of the field of memory studies has neither agreed definitions, nor methodological co-ordination, resulting in suggestive and stimulating insights which are often in need of further elaboration. Both practical techniques for using memory in empirical research and analytical strategies for drawing rigorous conclusions from studies of remembering need to be considered. If memory is to be taken seriously as an object and resource for research, then sustained critical attention to the appropriate methodological treatment of memory has to be initiated.

**Will the real memory please stand up?**

Memory can be utilised in a variety of ways in empirical research, but its potential to illuminate everyday social and cultural life is determined by the particular conceptualisation of memory in any given study. These conceptualisations have become
increasingly complex as the study of memory has transcended traditional disciplinary boundaries, emerging from confluences of competing and complementary concerns (Roediger & Wertsch, 2008). So before it is possible to say how memory should be fruitfully used in the social sciences, a brief assessment of how memory is conceptualised is necessary.

Popular mnemonic lexicons include the metaphorical store or flashback and the activities of remembering associated with these are intentional recollection directed by an individual, or involuntary responses to sensory perceptions in the present. We call to mind the person, late for work, wracking their brain for the location of their house keys, or the sensuous Proustian reverie initiated by a recognised smell, taste or sound. In both cases, the level at which we remember seems undeniably individual and is compounded by the intense particularity of our most painful and pleasurable memories.

This popular understanding is aligned with sustained psychological attention to memory. From neurology to psychoanalysis, the examination of remembering has been focussed on the individual human subject and their acts, revealing the biological fragility and psychic constructedness of memory. This has qualified and challenged the sensation that remembering is a direct conduit to the past, and has demonstrated the frailty and contingency of our remembered narratives of self which compose our sense of identity (see for instance, Caruth, 1996; Freud, 1958). But while ‘memory can ensure the coherence of identity’ (Barash, 1997, p. 713), any given memory is not an inevitable product of a past experience. In psychoanalytic processes of ‘working through’, remembering is an active reconciliation of past and present. The meaning of the past in relation to the present is what is at stake here; memories are important as they bring our changing sense of who we are and who we were, coherently into view of one another. Of course, this is not always semantically unified or emotionally pleasurable. For instance, the end of a relationship could be remembered as an opportunity lost, a fortunate escape or a complex combination of relief and regret, eliciting various affective responses dependent on the specific explanatory connections forged in relation to the present. Seeing remembering as a process of constructing a relationship between past and present implies that choices and exclusions are made in mnemonic accounts, and suggests that other versions of the past may have been possible.

The selectivity of remembering can be articulated in different ways. For instance, some experiences are omitted from memory, often those that involve traumatic or socially unacceptable experiences. This is commonly thought of as repressed memory and has been hotly debated in both popular and academic forums, particularly in the context of childhood sexual abuse (Campbell, 2003; Loftus & Ketcham, 1996). However, trauma does not always involve experiences being absent from memory; some experiences are awkwardly incorporated into narratives about the past. Following a discussion about her experience of social exclusion brought about by her husband’s mental illness, a participant in my own research recounted the traumatic experience of returning to her recently deceased husband’s home. She spoke in fragmented, confused sentences which conflated past and present tenses, collapsing her memories of their home before and after his mental illness, their separation and his death (Keightley, 2007). The clinical issues at stake in working through trauma are beyond the remit of this article, but these examples demonstrate the difficulties involved in reconciling past, present and future, and their different manifestations. However, it is here, in the process of selection, omission and synthesis that we find the value of memory for social scientific concerns with unpicking the complex ways in which the social and cultural frameworks that shape not only our most mundane and
seemingly idiosyncratic remembering activities, but also the confusions, silences and absences in memory.

Remembering is not just an articulation of individual psychologies, but a performance rooted in lived contexts. Anthropological studies of memory have illuminated its everyday operation, analysing the mnemonic practices through which culture is transmitted from one generation to another and the specific ways in which remembering is enacted in sensory culture (for instance, Serematakis, 1996; Sutton, 2001). Sociological studies have also moved the analysis of memory beyond the cognitive to explore the importance of social relationships and networks through which memory narratives are negotiated. Studies of social memory have demonstrated how engaging with remembering allows the excavation of relationships between individual and collective identities; an exploration of the relationship between public discourses and representations of the past and our personal memories; the role of the past and its recall in social relationships and the relationship of remembering to social, cultural and political power (Fentress & Wickham, 1992; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998).

Despite some valid criticisms (see Misztal, 2003), Halbwachs’ (1992) On Collective Memory has been very influential in contemporary conceptualisations of memory as one of the earliest studies to position remembering as indivisible from its social context. Rather than recalling the past as it was experienced, an individual’s memory is the ‘intersection of collective influences’, from familial conventions to cultural norms (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 44). The relationship between memory and social environment is positioned as reciprocal. Individual remembering actively contributes to the multiple social and cultural frameworks within which we operate, endowing us with meaningful communicative material from which we can build social relationships, group affiliations and consensus. Remembering agents always occupy particular social positions or roles which shape their relationship with the past. This conceptualisation is evident in many sociological approaches to memory including the influential life-story approach which elicits and analyses autobiographical narratives in order to theorise social life, from the structures of meaning in participants’ narratives to patterns of exchange in familial relationships (Bertaux, 1981; Bertaux & Kholi, 1984). Despite multiple social affiliations and their unique intersection in individual memories, acts of remembering extend beyond the individual and enter a web of social communication and knowledge, acting on, as well as through, the social world.

But memory is cultural as well as social. To be communicable and meaningful, memories have to be reconstructed as representations (Terdiman, 1993, p. 8). Private memories can be represented through spoken narratives or family albums. In public, collective memories can be encoded in anything from feature films to political speeches. Both public and private remembering draw on and contribute to cultural representations and symbolic repositories. The nature, structure and use of these resources are central to the analysis of cultural memory (e.g. see, Ben-Amos & Weissberg, 1999). Nora’s (1989) ‘lieux de mémoire’ is one example of an investigation of particular cultural forms, spaces and practices as resources and arenas for memory. Considering remembering as a process of representation has also placed it as a central consideration in media studies, which attends to both the public and private ways in which memory and remembering are mediated. Particular concerns include the role of television and its reorganisation of public memory (Hoskins, 2004) and nostalgia in popular culture (Grainge, 2002). In the private domain, everyday media
have been considered as vehicles of memory in terms of what they provide as resources for navigating and constructing relationships between past and present (Keightley & Pickering, 2006).

Remembering, whether involving individual, social or cultural representation of the past, is a process which involves selections, absences and multiple, potentially conflicting accounts. Prager (1998, p. 215) suggests that recognising remembering as a ‘post-hoc’ representational practice is crucial if we are to appreciate the contribution of the present to our memory of the past. For precisely this reason, memory as the mode by which we represent experiences to ourselves and to others is an invaluable resource for researching the construction and communication of meaning in the present. In order to account for the plurality of roles that memory has in late modernity, the multiple positionings of memory in personal, political, social and cultural arenas, and the tensions arising from them must be embraced. Memories are constructed in the ‘liminal space’ between public and private pasts, meaning that they are always implicated in the multifaceted mediation between the individual and the collective (Radstone, 2000, p. 18). It is therefore simplistic and misleading to suggest that personal remembering is simply filtered through social relationships or representational conventions. In acts of representation and communication, multiple social and cultural codes of remembering are performed and reconciled, resisted or rejected in a constant process of locating and relocating the subject in time and space and meaning.

Attempting to evaluate memories without recourse to claims of fixed historical truths has motivated the conceptualisation of memory and remembering in frameworks of ideology and power. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1984) investigated the invention of traditions and their hegemonic utility in order to assess how memory as the modality of our relation to the past (Terdiman, 1993, p. 7) operates in the service of power. Yet, just as social affiliations are not the sole determinants of memory, neither are ideological structures. They are another structure of meaning, intersecting with social networks and representational conventions, through which memory is filtered and shaped. Multiple influences and affiliations create marginal space which can be populated with resistive and alternative accounts of the past. Conflicting and competing memories are constantly in the process of construction in the ongoing exchange between collective and personal accounts. In this constantly shifting context, both individual agency and hegemonic power are at play.

The assessment of memory as constructing meaningful relations between past and present has led theorists to offer radically different accounts of the nature of contemporary memory. Jameson (1991) casts doubt on whether post-modern engagements with the past function as productive memory and generate a sense of ‘historicity’ in everyday life. He suggests that authentic memory has been supplanted by stylistic references to the past in a constant stream of simulation, no longer anchored to referential realities. The rise of retro is a matter of pastiche and represents the antithesis of the dialectical relationship between past, present and future that memory has previously performed. This pessimism appears in equal measure with assessments of memory which emphasise the continuing capacity of memory to forge authentic temporal relationships. Kuhn (2002a) signals the vitality of memories of cinema-going in the early twentieth century and the plurality of dialogues between past and present forged in this process. Likewise, Lipsitz (1991, 1994) highlights the potential for social and cultural memory to be articulated through musical texts and technologies. But memory is neither completely absent nor in perfect health. Mnemonic resources on offer in contemporary life provide the possibility for both scenarios. For
instance, while a Che Guevara poster on a pub wall may not invite active political
dialogue between the past and present, selecting and listening to John Lennon’s _Imag-
ine_ might. It is the way that a reference to the past enters into a network of temporal
associations through processes of remembering that determines its potential to gener-
ate meaningful relationships between present, past and future.

If the meanings of memory are never fixed once and for all and the relationship
between memory and experience is contingent and fleeting, how can memory be
conceived as a valuable resource for investigating the experience of time in everyday
life? Measurable benchmarks of historical truth cannot be met by memory alone.
Saying ‘I remember’ does not provide a guarantee of veracity. But rather than being a
justification for its rejection, memory is better judged on its own terms. It is important
to identify the particular kind of truth to which memory makes a claim. The danger in
rejecting the epistemological criteria of history is that relativism is adopted in its place,
where all memories of the past are considered equally valid and valuable. The moral,
ethical and political implications of this are profound as, through their dialectical medi-
atation between individual and collective structures of meaning, representations of
the past shape the present and future. For instance, it cannot be claimed that all mnemonic
accounts of apartheid should shape contemporary political relations in South Africa in
equal measure. To suggest that memories celebrating or downplaying the nature of the
regime are qualitatively equal to memories of its brutality is both morally distasteful
and politically dangerous.

Understanding and evaluating memory are mutually informing concerns of
memory studies. Understanding memory involves making sense of how memory
operates in any given instance. Evaluation is a little more problematic as it involves
assessing the nature and value of remembering in terms of the relationship it fosters
between past, present and future. The definition of a progressive, positive relation-
ship is elusive and contingent on social, cultural, historical and political context.
However, a common feature is the capacity of these relationships to enable action in
the present, either practical or imaginative. For instance, personal remembering,
which is characterised by empathy and recognises the experience of others, enables
reconciliation or understanding. In contrast reductive remembering, such as the
collective mourning of a lost national past, may prevent bearings being taken for the
present and future. These valences are not mutually exclusive and do not form a
Manichean dichotomy of good and bad memory, but characterise the paradoxical and
ambivalent possibilities that memory provides for navigating the temporal tenses in
contemporary culture. Feuchtwang’s discussion of Wilkomirski’s _Fragments_ navig-
gates these complex evaluations. While Feuchtwang (2006, pp. 82–83) recognises
the problematic consequence of the ‘dilution of the singularity’ of Holocaust survi-
vors experience, he also notes the potential of the narrative to act as a ‘recognition of
the truth of the holocaust’ for survivors, acting as a ‘prop’ for memory. Although
Wilkomirski’s narrative has the potential to compromise the experience of others,
Feuchtwang identifies the mnemonic space the narrative simultaneously opens for
recognition and authentification of survivors’ experiences. Processes of evaluation
inevitably implicate researchers’ subjectivity and are consequently subject to ongo-
ing contestation and revision. This opens up a critical dialogic space dedicated to the
discussion of both the meaning and politics of memory and its relationship to
contemporary lived experience. It is this ongoing dialogue which allows an engage-
ment with ‘modernity’s equivocations’ that are expressed in memory (Radstone,
2000, p. 5).
For the value of memory as a research tool in the social sciences to be realised, it is necessary to consider the methodologies that operationalise studies of memory. The success of any investigation of remembering is only as good as the practical empirical techniques and the theoretical analytical frameworks through which it is performed. Memory studies has been reticent to engage with these issues, but if they are to be welcomed into the field as an approach that can offer insights alternative to those of history, an account of the practices and problems associated with memory methods must be accounted for.

**Memory data: beyond history**

Despite a general preference in historical research for documentary evidence, memory has been a formal method for collecting data in oral history for decades. Elicited memories have allowed alternative histories and marginal accounts of the past to be uncovered and reconstructed in social and cultural history (Leydesdorff, 1999). In the first instance, it is advisable for social and cultural memory scholars to look towards the techniques perfected in these disciplines when considering the most productive ways of utilising memory in empirical research.

Oral history has favoured qualitative interviewing for the striking detail and depth that it provides. These interviews are largely conducted on a one-to-one basis, guided by a researcher. Themes are introduced, prompts used and questions asked, but the unstructured format allows the participant to lead the discussion and fully explore and articulate their remembered experiences. Couples and small groups may be interviewed together to elicit collective accounts which allow the discursive negotiation of mnemonic accounts to be seen first-hand.

Although not concerned with gathering straightforward accounts of the past, my own research has utilised oral history-style one-to-one interviews with women of various ages and ethnic backgrounds in order to elicit women’s reflections on their mediated practices of everyday remembering. One-to-one interviews of this kind may be particularly appropriate when talking to participants about sensitive or personal issues which may generate conflict between the participant and loved ones such as particularly painful memories. The social dynamics between co-interviewees also shape the data elicited. For instance, I was concerned to hear women’s voices independent of their family or peers which may have inhibited their talk. Despite giving lengthy and detailed interviews, several interviewees commented: ‘you should really talk to my husband, he has a much better memory than me’, demonstrating how deeply memory and its performance are enmeshed in the politics and power relations of the family. Other research has used collective interviewing very successfully. Kuhn’s (2002) study of the cultural memory of cinema-going in the early twentieth century used both individual and collective interviews, resulting in richly varied data.

Eliciting memory data is not solely based on the conventional oral interview. The repository of qualitative techniques suitable for elicitation is vast. Pink’s (2004) use of visual ethnography involves video-recording people’s descriptions and explanations of their domestic space while guiding the interviewer around their home. This could easily be used to elicit memory narratives in domestic contexts or public spaces, revealing how particular objects or spaces facilitate particular forms of remembering. My research used photographs and music to stimulate dialogue with participants about their own memories and everyday mnemonic activities (see Harper, 2002 for an account of photo-elicitation techniques). The commonality
between these forms of elicitation is the relative autonomy of the interviewee to
direct research encounters, enabling their own personal experiences and frameworks
of meaning to be prioritised. This can be part of a deliberate political agenda in some
memory studies. Haug’s work on female sexualisation intends to promote and analy-
se marginalised accounts of women’s experience and democratise the processes of
generating gendered social knowledge by collaboratively generating and analysing
data. This problematises traditional power imbalances between researchers and the
researched. Rather than a positivistic polarisation of the knowledge-generating expert
and the layperson, these two positions are collapsed in the search for ‘indications of
how we have participated in our own past experience’ (Haug et al., 1987, p. 35). This
kind of data allows radical differences and similarities in remembering practices
between different socio-cultural groups to be respected and evaluated, allowing a
middle ground to be found between a-critical celebration of the autonomous remem-
berer with empowering and resistive memories, and the powerless subject whose
remembering is dictated by hegemonic structures imposed from above.

The question that needs to be raised at this point is, given their similarity in data
ercitation and collection, how is memory studies distinct from oral history? This is
not a question that can be answered simply. Oral histories which utilise empiricist theo-
retical frameworks of traditional history are the most easy to distinguish from memory
studies. Here, memory is a methodological tool used to serve traditional historical aims
of gaining an account of the past. In contrast memory, studies may elicit narratives about
the practices of remembering, the objects that stimulate and enable it, or the social and
cultural frameworks which shape its enactment and content. Memory studies is explic-
itly concerned with the relationship between the past, present and future, as remem-
bering is the activity which enables us to navigate and mediate these temporal arenas
and forge links between them. Respondents are chosen not only for their experience
of a particular event or period, but rather for their social or cultural location and char-
acteristics. The narratives elicited are not solely concerned with past accounts, but with
present perspectives on experience and the role of the past in orienting participants to
particular futures. For instance, studies using the memory-work method have been
explicitly concerned with the gendered frameworks of meaning of both past and present
that shaped respondents’ remembered accounts, rather than the nature or veracity of
specific incidents that were remembered (Crawford, Kippax, Onyx, Gault, & Benton,
1992; Haug, 1987). My own research recruited women of different ethnic backgrounds
in order to investigate cultural differences in uses of photography and phonography in
everyday practices of remembering.

The Birmingham popular memory group used everyday memory narratives to
construct a popular socialist memory which prioritised feminist and anti-racist
accounts of the past (Johnson, 1982, p. 214), providing unique access to accounts of
the past marginalised in conventional documentary history. They explicitly located
their work outside of conventional oral history which they characterised as failing to
account for the plurality and multi-layered nature of everyday memories (Misztal,
2003). This shows that remembering can be used as a method to achieve broadly
historical aims in the double move of generating theory which permits established
historical narratives to be challenged by vernacular accounts and synthesising these
into new radical histories.

The ‘impact of post-1960s cultural theory’ has meant that many oral historians
have come to share a critical concern with the nature of memory and have been central
contributors to the theorisation of memory and remembering (Radstone, 2000, p. 11).
The socio-political work of Portelli (1991, pp. viii–ix) has been particularly influential, emphasising the importance of attending to subjectivity as well as fidelity to the past, distinguishing this from much other oral history which is concerned with a ‘search for “more reality”, for direct experience and for first-person testimony’. By opening up the interpretative space between documentary accounts of a historical event and the orated accounts of it in order to gain a more sophisticated understanding of the meaning of the past in the present for particular political groups and individuals, rather than interpreting these contradictions and divergences using the discourse of facts and falsehoods. Passerini’s (1982, p. 195) oral history research shares this concern with memory as ‘an active production of meanings and interpretations, strategic in character and capable of influencing the present’. This interpretive space exists in every incarnation of memory, from the most intimate lacunae in an individual life story, to the silences and selections of shared public memories. This kind of oral history and memory studies occupy proximate positions on a continuum which has traditional historical concerns and analytical objectives at one end and a concern with subjectivity, individual and collective experience of time, and associated interpretative techniques at the other.

Contributions from oral history have helped to counter criticism of memory as historiographical evidence (Portelli, 1981). Memory has been deemed to be an ‘unreliable historical resource’ (Perks & Thompson, 2006, p. 2) when it is treated as a direct conduit to knowledge about the past and no attention is paid to its partialities and lacunae. Where memory has been used exclusively to access historical facts and realities this is a valid criticism, but in memory studies and some oral history this is not the case. The notion of the historical fact is not as significant to studies of memory and has been dealt with in several ways. As Portelli demonstrates, it is the lacunae between existing historical accounts and remembered narratives that provide the richest insights into the role of remembering in everyday life and its relationship to social and cultural structures of power. Whether a memory is, in the end, objectively true, is not the deciding factor in terms of the potential that it has to reveal how individual, social and cultural experiences in, and of the past, intersect in the accounts that we give and the extent to which these demonstrate the temporal relations between past, present and future. These relations cannot and should not be reified, and in this sense are concerned with the ‘reconstruction of subjective truths’ in mnemonic accounts rather than the objective enduring truths of history (Portelli, 1991, p. ix).

Despite this particular relation to ‘truth’, questions of validity in regard to memory data cannot be completely cast aside. The constructed nature of remembering may be recognised, but deliberately fabricated memories with absolutely no relationship to experience can be problematic for memory studies, as for oral history. When data is completely falsified, it becomes impossible to assess the mutual relationship between past and present social relationships and cultural frameworks, and individual or public forms of remembering. Strategies, such as triangulation, using alternative sources of data can ensure that the epistemological challenges memory poses are met. Kuhn contextualised her participants’ mnemonic accounts using a large-scale questionnaire and historical documentary sources, so anomalies could be identified. It is important to note that triangulation of this kind is not concerned with constructing a hierarchy of data where anomalous memories are drastically relegated in status when they are found not to confirm documentary or quantitative data. Rather disparities of this kind are explored and the reasons for them are investigated, often resulting in exciting new insights and explanations about remembered experience or remembering processes.
For instance, an event identified in documentary sources but absent from a participant’s account of the same time may lead a researcher to explore the potential reasons for this, such as the participant experiencing the event as traumatic, unimportant or for whatever reason irreconcilable to personal or social frameworks of meaning. This approach to incongruous data is neither new, nor specific to memory studies or oral history, and can be found in most research committed to mixing methods and triangulating data (e.g. Deacon et al., 1998; Denzin, 1970).

Reliability is another significant issue for memory studies. The nature of the fluid relationship between past and present necessarily means that notions of fixed truths are problematic. Remembering is an ongoing process of reconstructing relations between past and present, so memories are not fixed through time and therefore not straightforwardly replicable in the future. In this sense, the conclusions generated are historically specific and must be qualified as such.

**Analysing memory**

It is not only in their concern for, and orientation to, the past that distinguishes memory studies from history. Analysing memory data generated for conventional historical purposes will usually concern verification of narratives using alternative sources and the synthesis of the material into one, or a series of accounts about the remembered experience or event. Analytical work in memory studies is different from historical analysis in several ways. In the first instance, rather than being considered as transparent documentary accounts, each narrative or testimony is treated as a text in the cultural sense of the word. Transcripts, diaries, co-authored narratives and cultural texts are ‘analysed on several levels’ and must ‘be understood hermeneutically’ (Jedlowski, 2001, pp. 31–32). The meaning of memory narratives are not straightforwardly assessed based on the commonsense meaning of the talk, but critically interpreted in terms of both form and content.

Because of this dual approach to analysis, transcripts and other mnemonic representations are often subject to analysis of their structure alongside conventional assessments of their content. Narrative representations of the past, from personal memories to period television dramas, are characterised by particular codes and conventions, which can be identified and examined using narrative analysis. This is particularly relevant to trauma and film studies concerned with memory, such as Felman’s (1992) discussion of the narrative performance of testimony in the film *Shoah*. Oral history has also used narrative analysis in examining processes of remembering. For instance, Passerini (1987, 1992) examines the ways in which particular narrative techniques, genres and structures, mediate the construction of memories in participants’ accounts. In the memory-work method, analysis involves looking for themes arising from the accounts and identifying recurring commonalities in the form or content of the experiences. Discursive constructs, such as metaphors or clichés are identified which may allude to the social or cultural meanings of the experience and its relation to the rememberer, while notable absences are highlighted as potentially revealing aspects of experience that are socially or culturally unacceptable (Crawford et al., 1992, pp. 49–50). For example, in Kuhn’s (2002, p. 9) study, which explores the significance of, and patterns in interviewee’s memories of 1930s film-going and their potential causes, she is concerned not only with what is remembered of 1930s film-going, but also with how and why. She achieves this dual focus by adopting an analytical approach that balances the treatment of participant’s accounts of going to the
cinema as data that shed light on cinema-going and as situated discursive material that shed light ‘on the nature and workings of cinema memory’.

Similar to much historical research, analytical processes in memory studies often involve a range of data which require analysis as narratives of the past are often considered alongside the material resources they involve. Objects of memory, family albums or museum displays, are explored alongside accounts of their use. In historical research, these objects and documents are positioned in parallel with memory narratives, confirming or refuting their testimony to the past. In memory studies, these forms of data are positioned in a somewhat different relationship. An attempt is made to retain the integrity of the ways in which they are interconnected in everyday life, such as the particular music track embedded in the context of the family story to which it relates. There is no hierarchy of data here. Representations of the past may be analysed on their own terms as resources for or representations of memory using analytical techniques such as semiotic analysis, musicology or film theory to assess the range of meanings they might offer, but these conclusions are always kept in view of the range of ways these objects operate in everyday remembering practices.

In order to conduct analytical work of this kind, extensive close evaluations of transcript or other textual material are necessary. This precludes the exclusive use of broad quantitative methods as it is in the minutiae of participants’ talk that the taken-for-granted structures that shape memory and remembering can be seen. In textually analysing the materials of memory, the range of meanings of the past-in-the-present on offer are usually best assessed using qualitative techniques as the multitude of meanings provided in any one text and the various semantic levels at which these operate are not comprehensively addressed by a method such as content analysis. However, the use of quantitative methods should not be completely dismissed, particularly in a large-scale study, where a broad content analysis of memory objects could provide a helpful context in which the meanings of individual memory objects can be situated.

The analysis of memory data can be performed in several ways. It is frequently performed inductively by a researcher or researchers. In my own research, limited resources dictated that analysis was conducted on an individual basis. Transcripts were broken down into initial themes such as familial memory, bodily sensations and mediated memory and were then organised into more specific thematic structures until a satisfactory series of commonalities and differences could be identified between transcripts. Sections that appeared unusual or unexplainable, often involving incongruous use of language or intense emotions, were considered in isolation and in relation to the thematic structure. Relationships between participants, their social, cultural and historical position and their enactments of memory were gradually teased out from the thematic structure. This kind of analysis produces richly detailed and sensitive results, but can be time-consuming and labour-intensive. Kuhn (2002a, pp. 240–254) used this method in her study of cinematic memory, but also utilised a second analytical technique of electronic qualitative data analysis using the software QSR NUD*IST. This is a useful tool for dealing with large quantities of qualitative data, and for quickly identifying key themes and trends. However, qualitative data analysis software requires the analytical skill and flexibility of an individual researcher in order to explain and theorise divergences and lacunae between and within memory accounts. Tools of this kind are aids to analysis rather than rendering it unnecessary.

Identifying the sense-making structures that enable us to understand the past-in-the-present and its relation to the future has been a primary concern of many memory
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studies precisely because this analytical work leads to the kind of theorisation central to social research. The analysis of memory and remembering is connected and situated in relation to existing academic theory and can also be used to generate new theoretical concepts, contributing to wider discussions about the character of contemporary temporality and historicity. For instance, the acknowledgement of the social, cultural and historical specificity of remembering has led to a growing number of comparative studies which identify differences and commonalities in remembering across geographical, cultural and temporal boundaries. Volkmer’s (2006) study of the role of news in public memory for different generations in different national contexts used Mannheim’s concept of generational ‘entelechies’ to explain common underlying structures of mediated experience particular to the memory of generations. Other studies have sought to theorise memory by examining more specific experiences of remembering. Hirsch (1997) analyses the role of photography in the memory of second-generation holocaust survivors, developing the notion of post-memory to explore how the prevailing narratives of previous generations are inherited and articulated in the memories of their children.

The flexible and diverse approach to analysis in memory studies makes any attempt at standardisation undesirable. A formulaic process would not allow the variety and specificity of remembering to be appropriately addressed. There are difficulties arising from the co-production and flexible inductive and intuitive analysis of memory data, leading Pidgeon (1996) to ask whose ‘truth’ is being presented? All memory work must address how researcher’s interpretations can be validated, at least for the moment in which they are made. It is incumbent upon the researcher to demonstrate clearly and transparently how their conclusions were reached. Raw data, such as duplicates of photographs or quotations from interview transcripts must be available to readers of research outputs in order that processes of interpretation and the conclusions which arise from them are appropriately subject to scrutiny and challenge (see Keightley & Pickering, 2007; Kuhn 2002a, 2002b). Being reflexive in the analysis of research is central to ensuring this rigour. Situating the researcher clearly in terms of their own, social and cultural position, and in relation to the participants, is crucial in evaluating how knowledge has been generated in their interaction. Both data and analysis are fundamentally shaped by the ethnicity, gender, class or age of researcher and participant, and the relationship between them.

It is often deemed necessary for this accountability to reach beyond the boundaries of the academy so that participants can evaluate and respond to researchers’ interpretations of their memories and accounts of remembering. This is particularly important in memory research given the commitment to the empowerment of research participants. It is, however, much easier in theory than in practice. It does not necessarily follow that a researcher’s interpretation is invalid if it is not shared by the participant. Nor is it a simple matter to present findings and conclusions to a lay audience when specialist theory and technical language may be central in the analysis. This issue is not easily resolved but the need to be accountable to research participants should be an issue of concern to all engaging in memory studies and the social sciences more broadly.

**Memory studies for the future**

The study of remembering is a crucial way of exploring the temporally inflected relationships between personal life, social relationships and public culture and how these
contribute to the construction of personal and collective identities. This can only be fully realised if thoroughly distinguished from the aims of historical research as the loosely interchangeable use of the terms ‘memory’ and ‘history’ significantly inhibit the critical potential of the field (Klein, 2000). Remembering is a process which navigates between different levels of experience and embedded in the narratives and texts it produces are the historical and contemporary relationships of power that structure everyday life. It is these embedded processes of sense-making that memory studies is concerned with excavating. The turn to memory in social research enables the role of the past in the present to be explored. Ruptures and continuities, past events and forgotten episodes can be investigated, not as objective historical occurrences but as constructed and reconstructed accounts of the past acting in and on the present. If the frameworks of meaning in memory and remembering are to be understood, memories themselves must be treated as texts to be analysed. Attending to representations of the past, the conditions of their construction and their contemporary articulation separates memory studies from conventional history. Not simply concerned with the past, memory studies is concerned with the ways memories respond to the demands of current experience and future desires, and social and cultural frameworks of power and knowledge through which they are filtered.

To meet its critical potential, memory studies must develop an open dialogue which engages with both methodological and epistemological issues at stake when using memory. The capacity of memory to make marginal accounts of the past visible in the present is not sufficient to validate its use across the social sciences. Initially, this dialogue must involve a move towards a coherent account of memory which acknowledges the dynamic everyday role of remembering in both navigating and resisting social and cultural frameworks of meaning. This requires memory studies to evaluate their own empirical techniques. A repository of empirical tools and frameworks is presently unavailable for those wishing to enter the field. Drawing on the techniques of oral history is not in itself problematic, but without situating these methods in relation to the aims of memory studies, any sense of methodological specificity is lost. Relying solely on oral history’s methodological techniques discourages a move beyond conventional interviewing to incorporate a variety of other ways that memory data can be elicited. Constructing a distinct inventory of memory studies methods will also promote an accompanying evaluation of analytical techniques, which are driven by significantly different aims to those of history. Developing a cohesive body of methods will also prevent modes of collecting and analysing memory data being shrouded in mystery. Transparency and scrutiny are crucial if there is to be a broader acceptance of the empirical value of memory studies in the social sciences and beyond.

Perhaps most importantly, memory studies needs to engage specifically with issues of validity in contradistinction to the benchmarks of historical research. This means that empirical studies need to be transparent in their use of memory as a method of collecting data and determining how it is analysed. Even where remembering is used to generate data on a particular research object, such as the shared past of a particular social group, the ways in which memory operates to bring accounts of the past into the present must always be under investigation. Remembered narratives do not neutrally reflect experience, they are a process of reconstruction and must be analysed accordingly. This attention to memory as both a method and object of research means that using remembering to generate data must always be a reflexive process in which the researcher’s own role in co-producing remembered narratives and reflections on
remembering are identified and interrogated. This methodological transparency must also apply to the analysis and theorising that is performed using memory data, so that the processes by which data is interpreted are open to scrutiny. Articulating a line between empiricist traditional history which seeks to fix the relationship between past and present, giving the remembered past a definitive meaning, and post-modern relativism in which the contingency of the relationship between past and present robs the remembered past of all meaning, is not an easy task. However, this should not preclude an attempt to do so. Rather than sidestepping the critical evaluation of remembering, there is a need to be explicit about the criteria memories and remembering practices are judged against. This is not a one-off requirement and should be at the heart of any emerging methodological dialogue. As memory studies begins to coalesce as a field, so should a sense of where it is going in investigating relationships with time in late modernity. Without this, using and studying memory will remain on the margins of social research.

Notes
2. Benjamin Wilkomirski’s book *Fragments* was sold as an autobiographical account of the authors’ experience of the Holocaust. Subsequent investigations revealed that Wilkomirski was actually Bruno Grosjean, a Swiss orphan rather than a Jewish holocaust survivor. The meaning and value of *Fragments* has been, and continues to be, hotly debated in both popular and academic circles. See Lawler in Pickering (2008) for a more detailed discussion.

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References


