

Language and Collective Memory: Insights from Social Theory¹

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Language and Collective Memory: Insights from Social Theory. Various attempts to conceptualize the often vaguely used term *collective memory* come to the conclusion that collective memory is deeply related to *linguistic and narrative phenomena*. In the present paper, I aim to provide an overview and discussion of the link between language and collective memory in the context of social theory. In the case of the founding theoretical figures, M. Halbwachs and J. Assmann, the importance of language in relation to the issues of collective memory is profound. In the past two decades, the specific role of *narrative* and *conversation* had become an important subject in researching collective memory. In empirical research, on the other hand, the relationship of language and collective memory seems to be rather underrepresented. Various fields and disciplines deal with similar topics quite differently, and they also differ in the degree of explicit scrutiny of the collective memory phenomena.

Key words: collective memory; communicative memory; language; conversation; narrative; sociology

Jazyk a kolektivní paměť z hlediska sociální teorie. Různé pokusy o konceptualizaci často vágně užívaného pojmu *kolektivní paměť* dospívají k závěru, že kolektivní paměť je hluboce provázaná s *jazykovými a narativními fenomény*. V tomto článku je mým cílem předložit přehled a diskusi souvislosti mezi jazykem a kolektivní pamětí v kontextu sociální teorie. V díle zakládajících teoretických postav M. Halbwachse a J. Assmanna je význam jazyka ve vztahu k otázkám kolektivní paměti chápán jako ústřední. Stejně tak v posledních dvou dekadách se ze specifické role *narativu* a *konverzace* stává významný předmět teoretického výzkumu kolektivní paměti. Na druhou stranu, v empirických šetřeních jako by byl vztah jazyka a kolektivní paměti spíše podceňován. Ukazuje se, že různé společenskovední a humanitní disciplíny se s podobnými tématy vyrovnávají značně odlišně a rozdíly lze nalézt také v míře explicitní pozornosti věnované tématu kolektivní paměti.

Klíčová slova: kolektivní paměť; komunikativní paměť; jazyk; konverzace; narace; sociologie

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Introduction

Temporality of existence, human memory and processes of remembering are among the traditional topics of philosophy and social thought since the ancient times.³ However, memory has gained unprecedented consideration in the social sciences during the past decades. “The 'collective memory' became an obsession,” states Joanna Bourke in her preface to the monothematic issue of *Journal of Contemporary History* (Bourke 2004), focused specifically on the topic of “collective memory”. Memory-related topics are apparently entering the research foundations and considerations of the scholars in social sciences and humanities, sometimes almost indicating an intellectual fashion (cf. Gedi – Elam 1996). Collective memory, cultural memory and social memory have already gained considerable attention in political science, sociology, cultural studies, anthropology, philosophy, history, literary studies, art history and psychology.⁴

As a result, “collective memory” is conceived in different ways – as a metaphor, a sensitizing concept, a trait of individual memory or as a component of more general historical consciousness (Šubrt 2014). However, various attempts to conceptualize the often vaguely used term *collective memory* come to the conclusion that collective memory is deeply related to *linguistic and narrative phenomena*. My aim in the present paper is to provide an overview and discussion of the link between language⁵ and collective memory in the context of social theory. The first half of the paper is an attempt to briefly sketch some of the influential approaches to collective memory and their treatment of linguistic issues, the second half is focused on the role of conversation and narrative in collective memory maintenance and reconstruction. I presume that the relationship between language and collective memory is reflexive and dialectical on three levels: (1) collective memory *emerges* from language (everyday conversations and small narratives about

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⁴ As a result, the field of relevant literature had already become far too wide and variable to provide any satisfactory initial overview. Instead, I find it more useful and illustrative to refer to a recent bibliography of social memory studies (Brian – Jaisson 2011).

⁵ “Language” is understood throughout this paper in its structured and conventional spoken and/or written (i.e. verbal) realization (the primary object of research in the field of linguistics) rather than as any other semiotic system.

everyday experiences), (2) collective memories are *structured* linguistically (layers of meaning surrounding the representations of the past), and (3) the patterns of collective memory *influence* language (as socially and culturally shared narrative genres, metaphors, schemes or topics).

(1) M. Halbwachs: Social frames of memory

Challenging and developing the legacy of Maurice Halbwachs (1877 – 1945) constitutes the foundation for many contemporary scholars in the field of sociology of memory and social memory studies (Vromen 1995; Olick – Robbins 1998; Namer 2000). Halbwachs was a leading figure in the second generation of the Durkheimian sociological school in France (cf. Craig 1983). His scientific interests were indeed very broad: reaching from Bergsonian philosophy and psychology, statistics and economical sociology to sociological methodology and study of suicide (expanding the work of his mentor Émile Durkheim). For contemporary colleagues, his ideas on memory were often seen as marginal, quaint or even flawed accounts. It was not until the 1980s that Halbwachs was rediscovered and hailed as a founding scholar of collective memory research and theory.⁶ As Coser summarizes: “With the advantage of hindsight one may now assert with some confidence that his work on collective memory is path breaking and will have continued impact while his other contributions are not likely to endure. Halbwachs’s work is terribly uneven. Even though one may discern in his earlier work traces or anticipations of his genius, only the work on collective memory makes him a major figure in the history of sociology” (Coser 1992: 21).

Halbwachs’s insights on the social aspects of human memory are presented in two books (Halbwachs 1925; 1950) and one essay (Halbwachs 1941). There is an ongoing discussion on the theoretical relationship between *The Social Frameworks of Memory* (1925 in French, 1992 in English) and the posthumously published editions of *The Collective Memory* (1950 in French, 1982 in English; based on his notes, journals and unfinished manuscripts). French sociologist Gérard Namer is one of today’s most renowned experts on Halbwachs’s work and also an editor of the latest critical edition of *The Collective Memory* (1997). In the afterword to this edition, he proposes that in the two books, Halbwachs is not continuously developing one coherent theory

⁶ In this context, I would like to cite N. Russell’s remark that “the term collective memory appeared only recently, but the concept has existed for many centuries” (2006: 792). His article provides a comparison of “Halbwachs’s innovative concept of collective memory and its legacy to the concept of collective memory in French texts from the late sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century... [in other words the] pre-halbwachsian or early modern collective memory.” (ibid.)

of collective memory, but rather, two alternative theoretical approaches. According to Namer, in *The Collective Memory* Halbwachs explores an absolute inner connectedness of individual and collective memory; whereas in the earlier *Frameworks*, a structural hierarchy of social frameworks is introduced, and language is conceived as the supreme framework of memory (Halbwachs 1997).

The profound importance of language in collective memory is thus stressed out already at the very beginning of Halbwachs's first book on the topic: "[V]erbal conventions constitute what is at the same time the most elementary and the most stable framework of collective memory." (1992: 45). But it is, Halbwachs continues, a "rather slack" framework, which fails to entail complex memories and representations.⁷ The importance of language as a "memory framework" is an implication of the fact that "words and language presuppose not just one person, but a group of associated persons." (ibid.: 170) In other words, as Paul Ricoeur puts it, the language is naturally and inevitably "the language of others" (2004: 129). Language constitutes the collective nature of memory: (1) because we use language to communicate and share past experiences with other people; (2) because language serves as a mental structure that we use to make sense of the world, and this structure is not of individual creation, but acquired during the process of socialization.

In the opening paragraphs of *The Collective Memory* (1950), Halbwachs once again observes the importance of the accounts of other people in the process of remembering and reminiscence: "Our memories remain collective under any circumstances, and we are being reminded by others. (...) [I]n fact, we are never alone. Within ourselves and with ourselves, we are always bearing a certain amount of different people" (Halbwachs 1950: 6). Testimonies of other people bring the "seed of reminiscence" (*semence de remémoration*): they help us to remember events which we do not remember exactly and completely, and these testimonies are always shared through linguistic means. Halbwachs is also well aware of the fact that the narrative accounts of other people are often inaccurate, and "it is impossible that two people, who witnessed the same event, could give an identical description of the reality after certain time" (ibid.: 41). However, a systematic treatise on linguistic and narrative dimensions of collective memory is absent in

⁷ In my opinion, Halbwachs's understanding of language is rather narrow and limited, and the language is in fact much more powerful than he implies. The recent proliferation of studies locating collective memory in close relation with narrative seems to prove this point convincingly (Currie 2010; Freeman 1993; Ricoeur 1983 – 1985, 2004; Wertsch 2002 a.o.).

Halbwachs's writings and came only recently with his followers. Some of these developments are discussed in the later sections of this paper.⁸

I have already mentioned the dichotomous and problematic nature of Halbwachs's theory of collective memory. Jeffrey K. Olick (2007) draws more attention to the ambiguities of the collective memory concept and to the unfortunate fact, that scholars almost never clearly delimit their exact understanding of the term. He points out that as early as in Halbwachs's work, the term collective memory can be interpreted differently from the *individualist* and *collectivist* perspective: it indicates "two distinct, and not obviously complementary, sorts of phenomena: socially framed individual memories and collective commemorative representations and mnemonic traces" (Olick 2007: 20). Halbwachs does not explicitly acknowledge this ambiguity and – unfortunately – neither do many of his followers. Olick claims that as a result, there are two parallel traditions, both building on Halbwachsian inspiration and using the term "collective memory", although apparently with a different meaning. To resolve this confusion, Olick presents an alternative terminology: *collected memory*⁹ for the individualist paradigm and *collective memory* for the collectivist paradigm; he also suggests a new label for this field of research: *social memory studies*. A very similar distinction is proposed by J. V. Wertsch (2008), who outlined the *strong* and *distributed* accounts of collective memory, the former designating the "memory of the group" and the latter the "memory in the group" (Wertsch 2008: 120-121). The individualist/distributed conception of collective memory seems to be the preferable approach for Jan Assmann (1992; 1995), as we will see in the following section. I will also

⁸ There are also another aspects of Halbwachs's work that he did not develop in a sufficient way. For instance, Halbwachs did not pay any particular attention to the issues of *memory politics*, *competing memories* or *memory clashes*, and also the general relationship of *power and memory*. Just quite recently, e collective memory management, creation, and maintenance have been studied through the lens of different groups pursuing contradictory images of past events. M. Blaive, Ch. Gerbel and T. Lindenberger claim that "what makes memories clash in different communities is mainly the extremely variegated forms of their political representation and/or instrumentalization in public spheres." (2011: 11) As we can see, the topic of "clashing" or "competing" memories is closely related to politics, as well as other societal power structures. The issues of "abuses of memory" and "politics of memory" (Boyarin 1992; Kramer, 1996; Todorov 1996; Resina 2000; Nevins 2005; Lebow – Kansteiner – Fogu 2006; Olick 2007; Maslowski 2013 a.o.) are amongst those most often addressed.

⁹ It is worth noting that the term "collected memory" was already coined earlier by James E. Young (1993) in a very similar context, although Olick does not include any reference to Young's work in his essay. I will return to Young's notion of collected memory in the following section of the paper.

briefly sketch Assmann's perspective on the importance of language in the context of memory studies.

(2) J. Assmann: Communicative memory

At about the same time as Maurice Halbwachs, art historian and culture theorist Aby M. Warburg (1866 – 1929) proposed the term “social memory”. His intention was to study artwork as a memory disposal, and “historical psychology of human expression” in art and culture (Warburg 2009). Although there are many differences in these two approaches, it is possible to find a similar attempt in both of the author's works: to shift the core of the analysis of shared aspects of human memory from the biological (or racial) frame, quite popular at that time, to the domain of society and culture.

The influential theory of *cultural memory*, developed since the 1980s by Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann, is designed as an attempt to elaborate both Halbwachs's and Warburg's ideas. Assmann attempts to overcome the insufficiency of both approaches mentioned above, that is, the conception of collective and social memory: “Halbwachs thematizes the nexus between memory and group, Warburg the one between memory and the language of cultural forms. Our theory of cultural memory attempts to relate all three poles – memory (the contemporized past), culture, and the group (society) – to each other” (Assmann 1995: 129).

Assmann reminds us that the Halbwachsian notion of collective memory is not to be understood as a mere metaphor. Quite the contrary, when we speak about collective memory, it is not an implication of analogy or similarity between the group “memory” and individual memory. *Sensu stricto*, only individuals are capable of remembering. However, the individual memory is always functioning in the collective (societal, group) context: “Albeit collectivities do not ‘have’ any memory, they determine the memory of members. Memories, including personal memories, are formed only through communication and interaction within social groups” (Assman 1992: 36). In Olick's terms (2007), Assmann stands firmly on the position of the individualist interpretation of collective memory, while he clarifies: “Halbwachs went so far, that he postulated the collectivity as a subject of memory and coined terms as ‘group memory’ and ‘memory of nation’, which are shifting the term memory towards the realm of metaphor. It is not necessary to follow him; for us, the subject of memory and remembering is always a human individual, but he is always such according to the frames, that provide organization to his memory” (Assmann 1992: 36). S. A. Crane captures the very core of this problem when she writes: “Collective memory maintains the lived experience of individuals within groups, according to Halbwachs, because the individual experience is never remembered without reference to a

shared context. But there is a body/body problem lurking in this theory of memory (as opposed to a mind/body problem) that is rarely alluded to: we all know that groups have no single brain in which to locate the memory function, but we persist in talking about memory as ‘collective’, as if this remembering activity could be physically located. (...) [C]ollective memory is located not in sites but in individuals” (Crane 1997: 1381). Therefore, most of the contemporary theorists would, at this point, probably agree with Assmann (1992) in his opinion that the individual memory is primary, but the individuals are always remembering in social conditions and within societal frames. This might be also understood as a form of *sociological nominalism* with regard to collective memory.

Assmann (1995: 126) defines the cultural memory by “double delimitation” to distinguish it: (1) from the “communicative” or “everyday” memory, consisting solely of daily communication and lacking the cultural framework, permanent structure, or basis in traditions or conventions; (2) from the scientific (historiographical) conception of history.¹⁰ In the following paragraphs, I will concentrate only on the first delimitation, i.e. *communicative memory* and *cultural memory*.

In Assmann’s understanding, *communicative memory* consists solely of everyday communication and lacks any broader cultural frame, time-persistence, foundation in tradition or conventions. Communicative memory is unspecialized, thematically unstable, disorganized, informal and contingent. In contrast to cultural memory, the roles of narrator and listener are interchangeable and not institutionalized. Finally, communicative memory involves a limited and floating temporal horizon (approx. 80-100 years). Communicative memory is not fixed to a certain moment in history: any time fixation is possible only by cultural formation, and this already indicates a transition from communicative to cultural memory (cf. Assmann 1992: 48-66). In other words, cultural memory begins where communicative memory ends. Of course, as H. Welzer also emphasizes, these “terminological and conceptual

¹⁰ The attempt to define the distinction between *history* and *memory* has been emerging since the 1970s and is related to the postmodern critique of historiography as a science. There are certain problematic aspects affecting professional historians’ conceptions of history. Amongst the most often mentioned is the political and power influence and the conception of history as a legitimization of the *status quo*. This discussion led to many results, one of them being the thesis that “schoolbook history” is just one form of social memory, containing a “convenient piece of shorthand”, which is created in a complex “process of selection and interpretation” (Burke 1989). For a deeper inquiry into the issues of the relationship between history and memory, see e.g. (Olick – Robbins 1998: 110-111; Nora 1989).

divisions first and foremost have an analytical function; observed empirically the various memory forms flow into one another...” (Welzer 2008: 286).

As Assmann points out, oral history provides insight into the realm of communicative memory. Oral history – whether as a qualitative research method or as a discipline *sui generis* – has been the object of growing attention and recognition among scholars in recent decades.¹¹ There are numerous oral history research projects capturing the past of cities, regions, states, social groups or even business companies through the narrative accounts of individual witnesses. But what exactly is the position of oral history, and especially the archives of oral history recordings, in the context of Assmann’s communicative and cultural memory?

In the previous section, I mentioned the notion of “collected memory”, which in my opinion is useful for this explanation. According to J. E. Young (1993), *collected memory* is a set of different individual memories gathered together and assigned a social meaning. The individual oral historical interviews are captured pieces and fragments of the communicative memory, but as a part of whole collection, they are attributed with specific cultural meaning, significance and social interpretation in relation to the past, i.e. cultural memory. If we understand oral history archives as a form of collected memory, it may be conceived in this context as a specific transitional form between communicative and cultural memory. Indeed, the process of sedimentation, creation and re-shaping of the past does not take place exclusively in oral history interviews. In fact, as we are about to see, any (retrospective) conversation can be conceived as a mnemonic practice.

(3) Conversation and collective memory

Everyday speech and conversation is certainly not a focal topic of most sociological theory and research. One of the most systematic social scientific approaches to conversation and linguistic interaction was developed within the borderline areas of sociolinguistics, strongly influenced by Garfinkel’s (1967¹²), Goffman’s (1959; 1981) and Schütz’s (2004 / 1932/) approach to sociology. It is conversation analysis (CA), founded in the 1960s by Harvey Sacks, Gail Jefferson and Emanuel A. Schegloff (see Sacks – Jefferson – Schegloff 1992). As Schegloff notes, the main feature distinguishing Sacks’s CA from its inspirational resources is his assumption that “the talk can be examined as an object in its own right, and not merely as a screen on which are

¹¹ For a systematic treatment of oral history see e.g. (Perks – Thomson 1998; Thompson 2000; Ritchie 2003).

¹² For an introduction to Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology, see (Heritage 1984).

projected other processes... (...) The talk itself [is] the action..." (Schegloff 1992: xviii).

Given the close relationship between memory and identity¹³, I am inclined to consider the research on linguistic and interactional expressions of collective identities (namely Membership Categorization Analysis¹⁴) to be the first step on the path between CA and memory studies. The specificity of the ethnomethodological approach lies in the focus on "how and why identity matters to real individuals in their joint actions" (Williams 2000: 145). This indicates a substantial departure from mainstream sociological thought, distinct for ethnomethodology in general, also in the research of national identities, as Hester and Housley summarize: "The methods of accomplishing, displaying, contesting, negotiating, managing and recognising national identity are therefore of fundamental importance... (...) We therefore aim to treat national identity not so much as a social fact but as 'a social accomplishment'" (Hester – Housley 2002: 4). However, these authors continue, the interest of ethnomethodology is not in creating a better theory of social identity, but rather in "social identity as a members' phenomenon. Its concern is purely a descriptive one, namely to identify and describe how members of society *make use* of social identity in their talk and action." (ibid.) Assigned or expressed collective (national) identity is therefore conceived as a membership categorization device, i.e. a linguistic category, and its meaning is constantly negotiated and changing. There are also more subtle ways of expressing identity and identification with social groups at the linguistic level through *pronouns* (Mühlhäusler – Harré 1990).

Despite what has just been mentioned, it eventually seems that there is not much space for the explicit integration of collective memory in ethnomethodology and CA.¹⁵ One of the exceptional overlaps seems to be

¹³ The link between memory and identity is being already discussed for centuries in the humanities. It is based on the proposition, that the memory is just what makes human being identical during the course of time. Locke's theory of personal identity (1690) is the first consistent attempt in the modern era to grasp the question of personal identity from the memory perspective: personal identity is a matter of psychological continuity. Some scholars even claim that memory and identity „are virtually the same" (Boyarin 1994: 23), in other words that they are synonyms (Ricoeur 2000).

¹⁴ See e.g. (Hester – Eglin 2002; Hester – Housley 2002; Schegloff 2007).

¹⁵ Of course – likewise in general sociological theory – memory is always an important implicit assumption: in fact, any social life is based on the very fact that human beings are capable of remembering things. This is probably one of the reasons why Olick and Robbins (1998) suggest conceiving "collective memory" as a sensitizing concept rather

present in Sacks's interest in the shared cultural background of *common-sense knowledge*, which serves as a fundamental basis for understanding and influences many other features of conversation and talk-in-interaction: "The analysis of the membership categorization device and of the commonsense knowledge organized by reference to its categories is, in its fashion, an analysis of culture..." (Schegloff 1992: xlv). At the same time, "commonsense knowledge cannot properly be invoked as itself providing an account, rather than providing the elements of something to be accounted for" (ibid.: xlii). Talk and action as the research data for CA are thus "made available via the 'common sense' culture presumed of both analyst and member" (Hester – Housley 2002: 7). Although this may indicate a certain sensitivity towards the past-oriented knowledge and macro-cultural features of social reality, it is still questionable to what extent "common sense" and "collective memory" are similar: S. Fuller conceives them actually as "opposing paradigmatic images for the repository of social knowledge", which are "based on rather different conceptions of knowledge acquisition." (Fuller 2007: 6-9).

As it seems, the most developed and prominent sociological analytic approach to human conversation does not have much in common with the social memory studies (at least so far). This is quite surprising, especially in the light of the previous sections, where I documented the pivotal relevance of language and narrative in the process of collective memory (re)construction. However, once we look beyond the borders of sociology, the linkage of collective memory and conversation is quite recently explored in psychology.

Hirst and Echterhoff (2012) provide a comprehensive review of the relevant research findings and literature on the influence of social interaction and conversation in particular on the functioning of individual memory and formation of collective memories. In the past 20 years, they observe a certain shift in psychologists' willingness to acknowledge the importance of understanding the social aspects of memory and including them in their research agenda. Unlike some of the other scholars using the notion of collective memory, Hirst and Echterhoff also include a clear definition of the concept: it consists of the "representations of the past held by members of a community that contribute to the community's sense of identity" (Hirst – Echterhoff 2012: 71). Among others, they refer to the work of M. Halbwachs and J. Assmann.¹⁶ With regard to the fact that people constantly talk about past

than as an objective phenomenon, allowing us to focus on certain topics from a new perspective.

¹⁶ Elsewhere, Mainer and Hirst (2008) explore the notion of collective memory in an attempt to provide a cognitive taxonomy of collective memories, based on the features of individual memory, and following the assumption that "the distinctive structures of

events to each other, and they influence each other's memories during this practice (cf. Loftus 2005), Hirst and Echterhoff provide insight into various research results, proving that remembering in conversation "can be viewed as a social practice that promotes the formation of a collective memory" (2012: 71). Retelling in conversation is selective (people do not speak about everything that they remember), subsequently influencing both the memories of the narrator and his or her audience. The shared image of the past within a social group is a result of well-researched memory mechanisms such as social contagion, reinforcement and rehearsal, or retrieval-induced forgetting. There is also the profound importance of narrative schemes and culturally-shared templates (see e.g. Wertsch 2002 and Wertsch 2008).

Despite having a similar research subject, experimental work in psychology – dealing with the issues of the development of collective memories in conversation –, and conversation analysis in the tradition of ethnomethodology, seem to be quite isolated and disconnected fields. I am convinced that there is much to achieve through the further exploration of topical overlaps in these respective disciplines. Ethnomethodology and CA could be enriched in understanding the background memory mechanisms and motivations taking part in conversation process. On the other hand, the psychology of memory would gain further insights in the particular speech actions of the conversation participants, but also people's interpretation of social roles involved in the conversation as a social situation and performance. In the following section, the general practice of narrativization of remembered personal experience will be discussed in more detail.

(4) Sociology, (auto)biography and narrativity

Since the 1990s, there has been a growing interest in personal (auto)biography (both in narrative and non-narrative form) as a departure point and research subject of humanities and social sciences. During the last decades, social sciences went through not only so-called linguistic and cultural turns, but most recently also a "narrative turn" (cf. Olick – Robbins 1998: 122-126; Bruner 1990; Calhoun 1994). N. K. Denzin asserts, at the very beginning of this century, that "[t]he narrative turn in the social sciences has been taken." (Denzin 2000: xi; Jones 2002). A couple of years earlier, M. Murray entitled contemporary society a "storytelling society" (1997: 10). During the same time, other scholars also asserted that the conception of narrative and narrativity has a strong potential to serve as a *lingua franca* in the human sciences (Hinchman – Hinchman 1997). Bamberg (2013) claims that the main impulse for the

human individual memory may be reflected in the varieties of collective memories" (ibid.: 254).

narrative turn was a (partially metaphorical¹⁷) conception of human *life* as a *story*. The recent increase of narrative research also depends on the technological development and availability of recording devices (digital cameras, audio recorders, smartphones, etc.).

Two basic analytical paradigms can be distinguished in the sociological research on narrative: *collective* and *individual* narratives.¹⁸ The first notion includes the societal and group practices of reproduction and interpretation of history and memory as a basic component of collective identity. The second notion includes the understanding of one's life course and events of "great history" by the individual, and also the social influence on his or her own interpretation of past events. These two simplified dimensions of the analytical framework are intertwined and reflexively organized – in fact, only under certain circumstances, because sometimes they can function in a harmonic symbiosis, but are often perceived as parallel or even conflicting aspects of reality. The different forms of relationship between various manifestations and expressions of individual and collective levels of narrative, their interaction, influences and confrontations, or even absence of relation, are, in my opinion, among the most important and intriguing areas of sociological investigation.

The relationship between narrativity and the social sciences includes another topic as well, which we could entitle "scientific narratives". Various social and historical issues are often formulated in different ways in the discourse of sociology, anthropology, political science or history. The examination of the patterns and structures of narrativization of the findings and results of sociological research would be an interesting research area itself. "Indeed, as scholars we are storytellers," Denzin (2000: xi) reminds us, "telling stories about other people's stories. We call our stories theories." According to H. White, who attempted to analyze historical texts as literary artifacts at the beginning of the 1970s¹⁹, the scientific stories tend to be plotted by the most conventional narrative forms precisely because the story is not told "for its own sake" (White 1973: 8). Classical narratology conceives any development of a

¹⁷ Lakoff and Johnson (2003) note that the metaphor LIFE IS A STORY is deeply rooted in Western society. They also treat it quite thoroughly in the broader framework of their influential theory of conceptual metaphor, originally elaborated in 1980.

¹⁸ Indeed, this distinction must be understood solely as an analytical one: I am aware that the idea of any "opposition" between individual and society is distorted in the context of memory, narrative and identity (cf. Denzin 2000: xi). This topic is also further explored in section 4 of the present paper.

¹⁹ For a Czech review of his book from the sociological perspective, see (Mlynář 2013).

verb as a “minimal narrative”²⁰, therefore it can be analyzed as a narrative – understanding sociological studies as narratives is therefore not a revolutionary or controversial approach, however, it is a form of scholar self-reflection which has not yet become a routine. Similarly, Jane Elliott (2005) distinguishes the “first-order” and “second-order” narratives: in the former case referring to the everyday and spontaneous, but also more formal narratives of individuals speaking about themselves; in the latter case referring to the narratives constructed by the researchers. Both types are attempts to find and express meaning of social reality – in the first case by lay methods, in the second case by scientific means. Interest in the first-order narratives displays itself in *method*, whereas focus in the second-order narratives is manifested in *methodology* and *epistemology*. In the following paragraphs, I will outline some aspects of both levels.

At this point, it is indeed necessary to outline the delimitation of sociological understanding of “narrative” – what is (and is not) a narrative? The definitions of narrative usually point out that it is a linguistic formation with a distinct beginning, middle and end. Another important feature of narrative is its chronological structure. Narrative also implicitly includes and assumes social context: it is formed by a communicative intention and the interaction of the narrator and the listener/audience. In the more specific sense of social sciences, narrative captures the temporal dimension of social reality: narratives “organize a sequence of events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole” (Elliott 2005: 3). The notion of “minimal narrative”, which I outlined earlier, seems to be too narrow for the purpose of sociology. As E. Hamar proposes, sociology might conceive narrative as a “discursive formation in the form of story, whose coherent content is organized by a formal structuration of a plot around the beginning, middle and end” (Hamar 2010: 17). The three basic features of narrative to be reflected by the social sciences are *chronology*, *meaningfulness* and *sociality* (cf. Elliott 2005: 3-4).

The Czech philosopher Jan Patočka notes in his *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* that the narrative is an element which provides meaning to history – but the nature of narrative is indeed different from the nature of the historical course of events (Patočka 1990: 29). It is precisely this issue that contemporary (historical) sociology has to deal with – where does this “meaning” originate, how is it created? What is the interference of collective identities and related social interpretations of the past – often expressed as

²⁰ Labov defines the *minimal narrative* as a “sequence of two clauses which are temporally ordered: that is, a change in their order will result in a change in the temporal sequence of the original semantic interpretation” (Labov 1973: 360).

coherent and “meaningful” stories – with the self-understanding of personal identity in the narrative of one’s own individual past? The first range of topics, outlined earlier as the “collective” narratives, could be also analyzed from the political/power and ideological point of view: (a) what is narrated and what is not narrated – the mechanism of *selection of important themes*, events, “stories”, thus “what is worth narrating”; (b) how is the narrative on the selected theme structured – which *elements within the theme* are emphasized and suppressed. Apparently, the notions of social memory, individual and collective identities and individual and collective narratives are intertwined into a web of related phenomena, with different lines intersecting in the issue of *(auto)biographical narrative*.

Although (auto)biographical methods belong to the common equipment of the contemporary social scientist – generally overlapping with qualitative methods in a broader sense or with the method of oral history in the research of the historical past²¹ –, they were stabilized within sociology only during the late 1980s and just recently they received wider recognition, along with a deeper theoretical and methodological grounding. The biographical approaches tend to overcome the contradiction of structure and agency at the theoretical level, they attempt to grasp the reflexive relationship of individual and society, and they provide means to understand the intertwining structural and interactional elements of social reality. As early as in 1959 Charles W. Mills wrote: “Social science deals with problems of biography, of history, and of their intersections within social structures. (...) Without use of history and without an historical sense of psychological matters, the social scientist cannot adequately state the kinds of problems that ought now to be the orienting points of his studies.” (Mills 2000: 143). It is precisely the analysis of (auto)biographical narrative and the issues of memory, which is, in my opinion, an efficient way of doing this kind of sociological research.

Conclusion

The various attempts to conceptualize the often vaguely used term *collective memory* support the conclusion that collective memory is deeply related to *linguistic and narrative phenomena*. In the case of the founding theoretical figures, M. Halbwachs and J. Assmann, the importance of language in relation to the issues of collective memory is profound. In the last two decades, the specific role of *narrative* and *conversation* had become an important subject in researching collective memory. In the empirical research, on the other hand, the

²¹ See e.g. (Roberts 2001: 93-114) or (Hesse-Biber – Leavy 2006: 149-194) for the discussion of oral history in the context of qualitative biographical research.

relationship of language and collective memory seems to be rather underrepresented.

However, various fields and disciplines deal with similar topics quite differently, and they also differ in the degree of explicit scrutiny of the collective memory phenomena. Language in its broad sense seems to serve not only as a common ground for connecting theory and research in different fields of memory studies, but also as a topic of profound importance for social theory in general. The recent sociological interest in memory might also be caused by the (unreflected) ability of the notion of *linguistically interpreted collective memory* to offer some new possible answers to the classic dichotomies of sociological theory (e.g. consensus and conflict; agency and structure; society and individual). Indeed, this is already beyond the scope of the present paper, and would require a separate study.

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