

## From Collective Remembering to a Social Psychology of Experience

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### Introduction

Within Psychology there are two distinct traditions that take memory as their object of concern. The most visible is the cognitive-experimental approach, which studies the mental architecture that underpins processes of remembering and forgetting. The other is the discursive approach (sometimes referred to as Discursive Psychology), which treats remembering as a social activity that is accomplished through interaction. To say that there are significant differences between these two communities of psychologists would be to understate matters rather. For example, in response to a target article in *The Psychologist* (Edwards, Middleton & Potter, 1992) outlining the principles of a 'Discursive Action Model' (DAM) of remembering, two eminent experimental psychologists offered the following evaluation:

we have tried several times to comprehend the nine tenets of DAM ... but ... fear that we have failed. The model seems so general that it excludes nothing ... At one point in our efforts to understand discursive remembering we looked up *discursive* in the *Oxford American Dictionary* (1980) and were informed discursive means 'rambling from one subject to another'. Just so. (Roediger & Wheeler, 1992: 453)<sup>i</sup>

Statements of this kind – there are similar choice examples that we could cite from authors in the discursive camp – leave precious little by way of scope for a conversation. But they also mask the true extent to which current work in each tradition is beginning to converge on some common issues. Work on 'Autobiographical Memory', for instance, is increasingly concerned with how recollections of the past are shaped by the ongoing needs and projects of the present self and with the cultural communities that shape its emergence and development (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Nelson, 2009). Similarly, discursive work has acknowledged the need to grasp how continuities and discontinuities in episodes of remembering are fitted into a broader notion of experience (Middleton & Brown, 2005). Both approaches may then be said to concern themselves with the *functional significance of memory*, that is, the role of the past in creating and/or maintaining current self and identity.

In this paper, our aim is not arrive at a reconciliation of the two traditions, but rather to engage in a dialogue around how concepts of continuity, time, context and experience have emerged, and might be tackled as shared concerns. To do so we must get past a number of obvious and rather intractable differences. The cognitive-experimental and discursive approaches are distinct from one another with respect to their fundamental ontology, styles of theorizing, methodological preferences and modes of application. There is remarkably little compatibility here, let alone possibilities for synthesis. But if we take a genealogical perspective, we can see that there is a shared problematisation. Surprisingly, this appears at first to have nothing to do with memory. It is instead the question of how best to understand adult-child interactions.

Developmental psychology is the sub-discipline principally concerned with human ontogeny. Following the agenda set by Jean Piaget, developmental psychology took the development of thinking – notably the ability to deduce

causal relations in the physical world and subsequently the capacity for symbolic representation – as its object of study. This was consolidated during the so-called ‘cognitive revolution’, which provided a vocabulary for describing mental processes drawn from information science and cybernetics (Richards, 2009). Research in this area has traditionally practiced a mixture of observation, interviews, psychometric testing and formal experiments. Each of these methods necessarily involves some degree of adult-child interaction in order for the researcher to access the mental ‘inner world’ of the child. This raises the problem of bias, the extent to which the behaviour of the child participant is shaped by way they interact with either the researcher or with the features of the research setting. It was in the course of considering this problem of bias that developmental psychologists noticed an interesting phenomenon. Children are typically not passive participants in research settings (see Wood & Middleton 1974). They look for clues and hints as to how to respond to the questions they are asked or the tasks they are set. And when child participants are accompanied by parents or carers, a subtle interaction occurs where the adults provide helpful guidance, both direct and indirect, that assist the child in framing the problem at hand. Jerome Bruner and colleagues termed such interaction ‘scaffolding’ (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1975).

In what sense is ‘scaffolding’ a memory problem? The core feature of scaffolding is the parent facilitating the child’s self-reflection upon past experience. This coming together of social interaction and remembering is a persistent theme in the history of psychology. William James famously placed a chapter on memory at the exact mid-way point of *The Principles of Psychology*, where it served as a bridge between a discussion of the continuity of experience within the ‘stream of thought’, and the perception of matters at hand in ongoing interaction. The problem, as James put it, was that although ‘the stream of thought flows on’ the majority ‘of its segments fall into the bottomless abyss of oblivion’ (p.643). It is therefore necessary to consider the recovery of these ‘segments’ through reflective acts – ‘memory proper [is] *the knowledge of an event, or fact, of which meantime we have not been thinking, with the additional consciousness that we have thought or experienced it before*’ (p.648, original italics). Memory sits at the crossroads of two directions in which experience extends – one axis stretches back towards the past and forward to an anticipated future, the other axis mobilizes memory to inform our current actions in relation to the changing world around us. James’ fellow pragmatist, John Dewey, offered the following characterization:

The two principles of continuity and interaction are not separated from each other. They intercept and unite. They are so to speak, the longitudinal and the lateral aspects of experience. (Dewey, 1938: 44)

Our experiences of daily matters at hand are not disconnected from our ongoing sense of who and what we are over time. They ‘intercept and unite’ as though together they formed the co-ordinates in a cartography of possible experiences. Through interaction with others, we ‘turn around’ on our experiences and mobilize the past to create continuities, to fit the present into putative trajectories of experiences that create a sense of identity. The great early

psychologist of memory, Frederic Bartlett (1932) made this turning around on the ordering of experience central to his expanded conception of memory (see Wagoner, forthcoming). Like Dewey, he recognized that interactions where we are guided or instructed by others in our efforts to establish the relevance of the past to the present were especially important.

Across the history of psychology, we see the continuous re-appearance of 'instruction' in relation to memory as a pivotal matter of concern. This is framed on the majority of occasions with regard to the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, typically in the form of adult-child interaction. 'Scaffolding' is one of many successive efforts to grasp how memory is engaged with the social and cultural complexities of such interactions. It is possible, of course, to treat this matter strictly with respect to the accuracy or reliability of the outputs of the process. This is what Elizabeth Loftus (1994) has done in her efforts to debunk the notion of 'recovered memory', which sees adult-child interaction, and their subsequent recollection, as the source of 'false' continuities and errors in remembering. However, we might call this a 'restricted' view of memory, in contrast to the 'expanded' view offered by Dewey, Bartlett and Bruner, and also in contemporary work in both autobiographical memory and discursive psychology.

What we will be seeking to do in what follows is to show how work in the discursive tradition develops this expanded view of memory and how this relates to parallel developments that are occurring in the cognitive-experimental tradition. As far as possible, we will try to bracket away philosophical and methodological differences between the traditions, so that we can focus on points of intersection around emergent concerns. What we will call for is not synthesis or resolution, but rather a guarded rapprochement. In the next section we will briefly describe some of the themes of the expanded view in autobiographical memory studies. We then turn to the development of the discursive approach, before situating our own recent work in that tradition. Finally, we will identify three points – continuity, normativity and setting-specificity – where we feel a future dialogue across the traditions could be usefully pursued.

### **Autobiographical memory studies**

In the early 1970's, developmental psychology had begun to develop a 'skills based paradigm' that proposed that children's psychological capacities were shaped and progressively developed by the ways they interacted with others in varying social contexts (Wood & Middleton, 1974). Experiments where children were supervised by parents/carers in completing tasks (such as constructing a pyramid from wooden blocks) demonstrated that children did not simply imitate or passively follow guidance given by adults, but instead participated in a jointly shared 'action programme'. The child looked to the adult as the person 'in the know', whilst the adult sought to 'scaffold' the activity. This took the form of progressively steering the child through the task by managing the complexity of its various components through directing attention, modelling, maintaining direction etc (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1975). Subsequent work drew on the writings of Lev Vygotsky (1978) to produce a richer conception of the context in

which scaffolding operated. Whilst parent-child (and child-child) interactions remained the empirical focus, development was now seen as expansion of the child's moral-practical-conceptual world (or 'umwelt') through engagement with others (Shotter & Newson, 1982). Children learn who and what they are through the way they engage with instruction - both informal and formal - provided by others who are more 'in the know' (usually adults), who draw in turn on the wider cultural norms and practices of the social settings they inhabit.

Remembering is fundamental to this instruction. From as young as 16 months old, parents/carers routinely scaffold the personal experiences of children by asking sequences of questions about the recent past - 'For example, the mother will ask, "Did we have fun at the park today? What did we do? Did we go on the swings?" and wait for some confirmation by the child before continuing, "Yes, and didn't we swing high? Wasn't that fun?"' (Fivush et al, 2011: 323). Since children of this age are barely able to participate in the shared act of recollection, Fivush (2007) argues that the purpose of such interactions is to instruct the child in the critical importance of telling and sharing the past. Bruner's own work in the 1980s moved in this direction, emphasising the role of autobiographical narratives in lending shape to personal experience and thereby underpinning a sense of self and continuity through time (see Bruner, 1986, 1990). Katherine Nelson (1989, 1991) shows how narratives are co-constructed in such a way that the child can both place themselves in relation to past events and 'turn around' on what they recall in order to tell stories about themselves from memory. The interactional structuring of personal narratives leads the child to position themselves within a broader cultural domain. For example, gendered styles of telling stories about oneself appear by the age of 4, and explicit cultural differences appear in autobiographical narratives by age 6 (Fivush et al, 2011). This can be seen as a dynamic relationship, where the child is both shaped by the world and acts to shape the world around them, a cycle of 'mutual constitution' (Markus & Kitayama, 2010).

The cognitive-experimental approach has built on the model of the child as an active participant in co-construction of the past. This is particularly evident in Martin Conway's influential cognitive psychological model of autobiographical memory and the self-memory system (SMS) which emphasises how our memories of particular events are shaped by our current concerns, cognitively organised by a set of mental processes they refer to as the 'working self'. (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). The working self is responsible for organising event specific knowledge, and often does so with present concerns in mind. However, in more recent work, Conway has extended this formulation of the self to incorporate a 'conceptual self', whereby memory can be structured and taken hold of by cultural convention, such as culturally generated life scripts (e.g. marriage, going to college, being a house, having a child) (Conway & Jobson, 2012). It appears that highly salient life scripts (usually occurring between the ages of ten and thirty years of age) are disproportionately represented in adult recollections, commonly referred to as the 'reminiscence bump' (REF). One explanation for this is that this period involves the highest number of 'first' experiences and new social bonds that have the most dramatic effect on an emerging identity and either affirm or disconfirm membership of culture norms

or groupings (e.g. good wife; responsible citizen). These cultural conventions help organise episodic memories, which reflect social and cultural expectations (e.g. helping us to also answer questions such as 'was this normal/expected, right/wrong?' etc.

The 'expanded view' of memory that runs through this work is mirrored by the turn towards different methodological practice and objects. William Hirst and colleagues have followed Bruner's lead in making conversation the focus. Their studies have demonstrated that the conversational structuring of recollection can inhibit memorial accuracy and induce selective forgetting, whilst at the same time act to foster and maintain collective identity (Hirst et al, 2012; Hirst & Echterhoff, 2012). Katherine Nelson's work also uses conversational data, but moves outside the laboratory setting to look at naturalistic settings, such as tape recordings of bedtime interactions of a two year old infant with her parents (Nelson, 2006). The shift towards 'real world' settings is consonant with the approach taken by Ed Hutchins in his influential study of maritime navigation, *Cognition in the Wild*. The notion of 'distributed cognition' that Hutchins developed to show how psychological processes become part of larger problem solving systems, has been elaborated best in the collaborative work of Amanda Barnier, Celia Harris and John Sutton. Using a mixture of experimental and qualitative material drawn from older couples jointly remembering, they argue they the most appropriate unit of analysis is a 'transactional memory system' that encompasses both individuals, along with other 'cognitive technologies', such as diaries, handbags etc (Harris et al, 2010; Sutton et al, 2010).

In summary, this very brief and very partial history of how the cognitive-experimental tradition has taken an expanded view of autobiography memory to be a 'critical developmental skill' (cf. Fivush et al, 2011), demonstrates the centrality of the problematic of 'instruction'. Now from a discursive psychological perspective, it would be very tempting to raise immediate objections to some of the ways in which culture and mind are conceptualised here, or with the ongoing use of laboratory based methods. But to do so would be to not merely shut down the possibility of a dialogue, but also to stubbornly ignore the extent to which there are genuinely shared concerns with interaction, 'being in the know', cultural resources and the mediation of remembering as a distributed activity. We will try to pick out these shared concerns as we now turn towards the discursive treatment of memory.

### **The development of Discursive Psychology**

The volume on *Collective Remembering* edited by David Middleton and Derek Edwards in 1990 clearly set out how the discursive approach intended to distance itself from the cognitive-experimental tradition. The line was drawn primarily around the rejection of experimental methods. Psychological experiments are designed to explore the causal effects of varying *independent variables* (i.e. those controlled by the experimenter, such as the information provided by participants, or aspects of the environment in which it is presented) upon *dependent variables* (i.e. a measurable response made by the participant, such as the accuracy of their subsequent recollections). The logic of experimentation forces a conceptual separation between these variables. In the case of memory, this means treating the

act of recollection as independent of, yet influenced by, the contexts in which remembering happens:

In experimental designs, meaning and context are defined as variables, factors whose effects on the accuracy of recall are manipulable. In the study of discursive remembering, significance and context are intrinsic to the activity, constitutive of it and constituted by it, rather than causally influential upon some other thing called 'memory' (Middleton & Edwards, 1990: 42)

Middleton & Edwards here argue against that separation, claiming that what it means to remember something on a given occasion is utterly intrinsic to the nature of the act itself. Memory is never independent of the context where it is enacted, rather those contexts form an indivisible part of the phenomenon that psychologists study. Remembering is then a social accomplishment performed as a joint-activity with others, on particular occasions in specific contexts.

What is interesting here is the route by which both authors had arrived at this position. The discursive tradition is typically seen as part of social psychology, but Middleton and Edwards' respective backgrounds were in developmental and educational psychology. David Middleton had been part of the research group at the University of Nottingham who had conducted some of the experimental demonstrations of 'scaffolding' (Woods & Middleton, 1975). Along with fellow member John Shotter, Middleton's concerns had turned towards an explication of the social contexts that shaped the development of psychological capacities. Derek Edwards' early work had dealt with language development in both family and classroom settings (see Edwards & Mercer, 1987). Using tape-recorded 'naturalistic data', where the researcher observes and tape-records an activity occurring in its usual context, Edwards had argued that lexical development was not the gradual accumulation of conceptual understanding, but could be shown instead to be part of the everyday pragmatics of adult-child interaction (Edwards & Goodwin, 1985). Children use language functionally to 'do things' within interactional contexts before they can be said to understand the referential meaning of the words they acquire.

Given these individual interests, it is unsurprising that their first joint work together at Loughborough University (where both would go on to be founding members of the internationally renowned Discourse & Rhetoric Group - DARG) was a quasi-experimental study where student participants were asked to jointly recall the feature film E.T.<sup>ii</sup> The resulting data showed how participants constructed a shared understanding of what they were collectively recalling, which was systematically built up within the interaction, and involved the use of a range of conversational pragmatics. Edwards & Middleton (1986) proposed that verbal statements made during the task, such as 'I remember' or 'Don't you recall', were not verifiable expressions related to an underlying cognitive event, but were rather interactional strategies for legitimating or agreeing with or hedging jointly accomplished accounts of past event. This is not say that there are no cognitive mechanics underpinning public claims to recollection, just that the postulation of such processes is not needed to explain the empirical findings.

Mind could be 'bracketed out' from the explanadum (see Coulter, 1979 for a full argument).

In subsequent work, Edwards & Middleton (1988) turned towards using naturalistic data, but maintained the key scene of 'instruction', this time involving conversations between adults and children around family photographs. The following example comes their study of conversations around family photographs. Here a young boy, Paul, and his mother are looking through photographs of family holidays:

Example 1 (From Edwards & Middleton, 1988)

Mother: oh look (.) there's when we went to the riding  
[stables wasn't it?  
Paul: [yeh (.) er er  
Mother: you was trying to reach up and stroke that horse.  
Paul: where? (laughs)  
Mother: would you like to do that again?  
Paul: yeh  
Mother: you don't look very happy though  
Paul: because I thought I was going to fall off  
Mother: you thought you was going to fall off did you? (.) right  
misery (.) daddy was holding on to you so that you didn't  
(1) did it FEEL very bumpy?  
Paul: yeh.  
Mother: did it make your legs ache? [Paul laughs] Rebecca enjoyed  
it.  
Paul: yeh  
Mother: she's a bit older wasn't she? (.) you were a little boy  
there.

In this extract we see how remembering operates as a shared activity. Paul and his mother are working together, assisted by the use of the photographs, to establish an account of a past event (in this case, a particular family day out). The mother offers a series of turns where she makes claims about the past event in relation to some aspect of the photograph ('there's when we went to the riding stables', 'you was trying to reach up and stroke the horse'). These are framed as interrogative inferences that appoint Paul as the next speaker to respond. In this way, Paul is being gradually committed to the account of the past that is being progressively built. As the extract progresses, Paul's mother shifts to offering candidate experiential claims – 'you don't look very happy though', 'you thought you was going to fall off did you?' – which invite completion by Paul, albeit in fairly minimal terms ('yeh'). The details and significance of 'what happened' are jointly accomplished in the unfolding interaction between parent and child.

The data here bears strong resemblance to the kind of adult-child interactions recorded in the scaffolding studies (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1975) and those discussed by Robyn Fivush & Katherine Nelson (e.g. Nelson, 2009). The manner in which Paul's mother steers her son through the activity of remembering could

certainly be glossed as 'scaffolding'. However, what is at stake is not merely producing an account of the past event, but also establishing its contemporary relevance. For example, the question 'would you like to do that again?' sets up a contrast between Paul's interests and desires at the time and in the present, as does the concluding statement 'you were a little boy then'. Similarly, the statement 'daddy was holding on you' responds not just to parental accountability at the time, but also serves as a re-statement of an ongoing relationship of care. Paul is being actively tutored in not simply telling a story about the past, but also how to use that story to demonstrate family togetherness. From this perspective, we can treat the various cognitive ascriptions of intentions, feelings and emotions as rhetorically organised formulations which are designed to establish a continuity between family membership and belonging in the recollected past and the present activity of shared recollection. This is not to say that matters of accuracy – what 'really happened', what was 'really felt' at the time – are entirely irrelevant, merely that they are subservient to the conversational pragmatics of family remembering.

Middleton & Edwards's approach to qualitative data was informed by an emerging turn towards Discourse Analysis (DA) in psychology. Initially, this developed from work in the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK), most notably Gilbert & Mulkay's (1984) study of scientific discourse around the nature of research (see also Ashmore, 1989). Gilbert & Mulkay had shown that what appeared to be contradictions in scientists' expressed attitudes and beliefs were explicable when analysed in the argumentative context in which the utterances were made – scientists describe the nature of scientific work differently when they are explaining successful and unsuccessful research. Jonathan Potter (who had studied with Mulkay) and Margaret Wetherell took this analytic point further to propose that the social psychological study of attitudes and attributions could be revolutionised through discourse analysis as the study of interactionally occasioned and rhetorically organised claims about self and others. Their jointly authored *Discourse and Social Psychology* had an enormous methodological impact on the discipline since it finally offered a viable empirical strategy in which the conceptual and philosophical alternative to experimental psychology could be pushed forward (see Brown & Locke, 2008).

Potter & Wetherell's work on attitudes and Middleton & Edwards's work on memory was brought together under the umbrella Discursive Psychology (see Edwards & Potter, 1992a). This revised approach was also highly influenced by Conversation Analysis (CA) (see Edwards, 1997). As a consequence, there was an explicit rejection of formal theorisation in favour of close readings of transcripts of audio recordings. These readings were guided by knowledge of the patterns and regularities found in ordinary conversation identified by Harvey Sacks and his followers (e.g. Gail Jefferson, Emmanuel Schegloff), such as turn-taking, repair and action formulation. Following this approach, Edwards & Potter (1992a) argued that if a cognitive process such as memory is studied in the 'real world' settings within which it is occasioned, the central focus needs to be on the conversational pragmatics through which the psychological act is accomplished.



Discursive Psychology emerged at roughly the same time as the 'expanded view' of memory was gaining pace within cognitive-experimental work. Ulrich Neisser, considered one of the 'founding figures' of modern cognitive psychology, had followed Jerome Bruner in turning toward narrative and contextual treatments of memory and self-knowledge (see Neisser, 1982; Fivush & Neisser, 1994). In what he dubbed an 'ecological approach', Neisser proposed that inconsistencies and discontinuities in recollection could be explained by positing a series of modes of organising self-knowledge (or simply 'selves') that interact with the environment in different and sometimes contradictory ways. For Edwards & Potter, this kind of theorising is flawed because it retains the notion that it is possible to establish the truth or veridicality of a given recollection outside of the various transformations wrought on that information by a hypothetical self-system. The problem needs to be turned inside out – rather than seek to evaluate episodic memories against 'what actually happened', we must study claims to memorial accuracy as social actions in their own right that seek to accomplish local interactional goals.

The contrast is clear in Edwards & Potter's (1992b) treatment of Neisser's (1981) famous study of the testimony given by John Dean to the Watergate hearings. In this work, Neisser argues that when Dean's testimony to the Senate committee is compared to the transcripts of some of the original conversations with Richard Nixon and others that he is recalling, it is clear that Dean misremembers details considerably. But, at another level, his characterisation and general account captures much of the nature of 'what happened'. By contrast, Edwards & Potter (1992b) propose that what is analytically interesting here is to look at how the participants in the Watergate hearings (including Dean) fit their claims about what happened into the evolving conversational contingencies of the hearings. They offer a counter example from the UK, involving contested accounts of what was said in a private off-the-record press briefing given by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Nigel Lawson in 1988. Lawson's account of not just what he said, but the correct interpretation of those words, was at odds with those of the journalists present, resulting in a major public dispute. Edwards & Potter show through careful analysis of media reports how the various claims were established and warranted through the use of discursive devices. For example, the following extract comes from an exchange in the House of Parliament:

Example 2 (from Edwards & Potter, 1992b)

*Mr Lawson:* ... the statements that appeared in the press on Sunday bore no relations whatever to what I in fact said. What I have said to them is that, while we were absolutely, totally committed to maintaining-  
*Ms Clare Short* (Birmingham, Ladywood) They will have their shorthand notes.

*Mr Lawson:* Oh yes, they will have their shorthand notes and they will know it, and they will know they went behind afterwards and they thought there was not a good enough story and so they produced that  
(Hansard, 7 November)

Edwards & Potter note that a variety of strategies were used by each side (Lawson, the journalists) to discount the version of events given by one another. Some media articles had blamed Lawson's efforts at denying the reports on his 'arrogance'. This strategy of appealing to psychological dispositions was not possible for Lawson – it would be implausible to claim that all the journalists in the room had faulty memories. What he does instead in the Parliamentary exchange above is to readily admit that not only were the journalists in agreement, but that also a record of the conversation exists in the form of shorthand notes. But he then follows this with a claim that the interpretations of the briefing reported in the media were erroneous because the journalists, under pressure to come up with a 'good enough story', subsequently colluded to construct a different version of events - recollection was wilfully distorted by institutional forces. Now the point of this is not to say that Lawson's version of events is any more or less accurate than that of the journalists, but rather to understand how these rival versions are constructed and the rhetorical and political work that they do.

Discursive Psychology, as developed by Edwards & Potter, is noteworthy because it insists on the considerable interactional skills of ordinary people. In tune with Fivush et al's (2011) call for the study of autobiographical memory as a 'critical developmental skill', Discursive Psychology rejects a 'deficit model' of memory, in favour of highlighting the complexity and subtlety of the social acts that we all accomplish, from a very early age, when we make claims about the past. For Edwards & Potter, psychology ought to be principally concerned with social development and enactment of these abilities. Psychology loses its way when it appeals to a concept of 'mind' (and private 'cognition') as an explanation of action without having first grasped the situated, contextual nature of the activities such as remembering:

Mind can be studied as intrinsically social and contextualised; it makes sense to begin with no a priori separation of person/mind from its embodiment in communicative practices. It is both possible and fruitful to pursue the study of action itself – accounts, versions, constructions – as discursive activity. Rather than offering us a window upon the workings of something else called 'mind', discourse can be examined for how speakers orient themselves to notions of mind, using these as resources in conversation (such as in framing accounts of truth and falsity, accomplishing blamings and excuses, mitigations and accusations, explanations of why people do what they do, and so on). Our recommendation is to let go of a commitment to mind as a pre-existing, independently knowable explanation of talk and action (Edwards & Potter, 1992b: 211)

Here we can see the return of what we earlier called the 'intractable differences' between approaches. Despite a high degree of common cause on context, pragmatics, function and reconstruction in memory, Edwards & Potter 'recommend' that central organising concept in the cognitive-experimental tradition – mind as the engine that drives action – be 'let go'. As Edwards, Middleton & Potter (1992) found, forcing the point in this way tends to curtail

rather than foster dialogue. A better way forward, perhaps, is to ask what it is that the concept of mind provides. Classically, psychology has wanted two things from 'mind' – a locus for the skills that underpin psychological operations and a principle of personal continuity over time (hence the derivation of psychology from the ancient greek term *psuche* meaning 'breath of life' or 'soul'). The first requirement can be readily reformulated to ease the differences. The sociocultural model of autobiographical memory and the 'extended cognition' approach, share the desire of Discursive Psychologists to reject the a priori separation of person/mind from communicative/cultural practices. The second is more difficult. Is it possible to conceptualise a notion of personal continuity over time that exceeds the conversational pragmatics of recollection without necessarily committing us to 'something else' called 'mind'? Or is such a notion merely itself an interactionally occasioned formulation that needs to be analysed discursively? Put slightly differently, if recollection is the occasioned production of versions of personal pasts, then how do we name and reflect upon the huge *set of versions* that each of us accrues over time?

### **The Social Psychology of Experience**

David Middleton's work in the 1990s followed a different trajectory to Discursive Psychology. Influenced by work in Sociocultural Psychology (see Valsiner & Rosa, 2007), Middleton became increasingly concerned with the problem of how individuals cede their memorial concerns to a notion of collectivity (see Middleton, 1997a, 1997b, 2002). That is to say, how we invoke the idea of a group, organisation or nation to underline that the meaning and importance of what we are remembering is 'bigger' than us alone – it is a concern that either is or ought to be shared by many others. Middleton characterised this as an 'interdependency' between personal and collective experiences that was shaped through recollection. We cannot think of personal experience as distinct from the social milieu where it has meaning.

The relationship between the continuity and interdependency of personal and collective memory was taken up in a different way in Middleton & Brown's *The Social Psychology of Experience*. Drawing on the philosophy of Henri Bergson, Middleton & Brown (2005) situate memory within 'duration'. Bergson (1908/1991) argued that the time we live is not social or 'clock time', which can be neatly divided into measurable instants, but rather an ongoing indivisible flow – or 'duration' – which we experience as expanding and dilating according to our needs and concerns. Since duration is not divided within itself, we are perpetually connected to the entirety of past experience. From this it follows that the question concerning memory is not around the recall of the past, but rather how to disconnect or hold back the enormity of the past, to prevent it from overwhelming the present. This is accomplished through the interdependency of our own duration with that of others, and through a range of social and material practices, described in the work of Maurice Halbwachs (1980; 1992). The continuity of personal experience is punctuated and disrupted by the 'collective frameworks' we share with others, and which extend into artefacts and places. These enable us to turn around on our experiences and see new patterns and temporal relationships, such that the past is never really 'over' but is instead continuously active in transforming the present. Put in cognitive terms, we might

say that given the perpetual *availability* of personal experience (as duration), collective remembering involves the social management of the *accessibility* of a given portion of that experience (see Conway, 2008).

Take the following example, which originates from Buchanan and Middleton's (1995) study of elderly people participating in a reminiscence group session:

Example 3 (from Buchanan & Middleton, 1995)

- Vera: my mother used to wear erm (.) sack apron (.) cos years ago they used to make the aprons out of a (.) sack bag hadn't they  
Doris: [ooh that's right  
Enid: [you could buy [the sack bag (...)  
Vera: [can you remember (.) I can remember  
[my mother (.) and she used to-  
Jean: [yes (.) yes (.) used to make aprons out the sack bags or a black one (.) and you'd go and change after dinner and she'd put (.) you know (.) a new pinafore and a clean dress or something like that  
Enid: we used to buy ours from the Beehive  
Vera: ye:s (.) I can see my mother (.) she used (...) sack bag y'know (.) [of her back and her front-  
Jean: [yeah (.) that's wash day

Here Vera is recalling her mother, with support and elaboration from Doris, Enid and Jean. What interests Middleton & Brown (2005: 145-149) is the direction this recollection takes. Vera is not describing any particular episode; she focuses instead on an item of clothing, a 'sack apron'. Together the women begin to unpack various facets of the sack bag – when it would be worn, how they were made, where the materials would be purchased etc. The world inhabited by the Mother gradually emerges, a time when women would 'make do' with garments fashioned from cheap materials whilst engaged in domestic labour, but would also change into fresh clothes in the evening. Out of the mass of possible versions of the past involving Vera's mother, the women jointly stabilise or fix this particular 'habitable world' with its own moral universe and relations between people and artefacts. The past is then worked up and shaped in the present as the speakers' own particular durations are made to intersect, and are 'punctualised' or rendered cohesive through the mutual orientation to the features of particular objects and places.

Middleton & Brown's (2005) work appeared at the time when a number of critical psychologists were attempting to reclaim the notion of 'experience' (see also Bradley, 2005; Stephenson & Papadopoulos, 2006). The phrase is usually associated with Humanistic Psychology, with its central image of a bounded, self-contained psychological subject. However, following the efforts to 'de-subjectify' the psychological initiated in the work of Foucault and Deleuze, amongst others (see Brown & Stenner, 2009), it is possible to treat experience as emergent from and shared across persons and the material world with which they interact. Our experiences are not then entirely 'ours', but are interdependent with others and with things (Reavey, 2010). This is well illustrated in the following example,

taken from Helen Hewitt's study of life story work with persons with severe learning difficulties. Here a father describes two linked events around his son, Lance:

Extract 4 (from Hewitt, 1997)

- Father: (...) (.) this is basically it (.) all I can literally add to it (.) or say (.) there's not much I know but (.)
- Interviewer: oh no I'm sure there's a lot more really I mean (.) there's special memories that you've got of sort of (.) of isolated events that (.) you know (.) I mean I'm sure you must have a lot of photographs haven't you?
- Father: oh yes if you want photographs but uh (.) he was a (.) wheelchair case (or should I say pramulator) and (.) most of the time he sat in his chair (.) one of those chairs like that and he became quite (paralyzed) but he has a memory (.) that's one thing that I would tell you (.) and the reason that I know this is because in Australia (.) he used to have a chair that used to (stand) (.) and have these springs that went across (.) and he used to put his hand on one of these things and twang them (.) and of course with it being on a wooden floor (.) because there they have wooden floors (.) it was just like a double bass
- Interviewer: (laughing) like a digeree-doo
- Father: and he used to love this (.) you know (.) he'd really get excited by it (.) well (.) we took him away (.) and it must have been ten years later that we bought a chair that was similar to that (.) and do you know the first thing he did his hand went straight underneath[
- Interviewer: [and twanged it[
- Father: [ten years later (.) so he's got a memory (.) now if he thinks about that what other memories has he got about other (.) so:: (.) he wasn't a cabbage (.) there was something in there ((points to head)) that was (.) functioning somewhere (.) although he couldn't express it (.) it was there (.) but he uh (.) we were amazed he just sat in this chair (.) we sat him in this chair never never (thought of) and the first thing he did his hand went straight under (.) well he tried to do it (.) he didn't quite make it but that's what he wanted to do because he used to like (.) and that was ten years earlier (.) he was quite grown up then (.) so honestly he thought about this noise (.) or music or whatever and he wanted to do it again (.) and he knew how to make that (.) that sound so he could put pieces together to make something which was functional to to himself

At the start of the extract, Lance's father is asked for 'special memories' about his son, using the cue of family photographs. This occasions a recollection about an

incident when the family were living in Australia. Lance's father introduces this recollection as demonstrating that although he has considerable physical and learning challenges, Lance does 'have a memory'. Whilst this exemplifies Middleton & Edwards' (1990) point about 'meta-cognition' that memory talk often involves talk around what memory is, more importantly, in the turns that follow, the father points to an interaction with a particular chair as evidence for his claim about Lance's abilities. The twanging of the springs extended Lance's range of actions and gave him the means of showing pleasure and involvement in the world around him. Middleton & Brown (2005), using the vocabulary of sociocultural psychology, observe that, as an artefact, the chair appears to have created a new form of mediated action that allowed for expanded psychological capacities.

The father then goes on to describe how ten years later and many miles away from Australia, Lance encountered a similar chair. He once again sought to twang the springs. Although this was unsuccessful, the chair again allowed for expanded psychological capacities, this time demonstrating through his explicit act of recall that 'he wasn't a cabbage', that there 'was something in there ... that was functioning'. It is the displacement of the chair across time and space that makes these expanded psychological capacities present. In this sense, Lance's psychological abilities – including memory – are interdependent with the chair. He is performed as an individual by virtue of his attachment to the chair across both episodes. At the same time, the family relationships between Father and Son are facilitated and marked out by their joint relationship to the chair. The artefact mediates what the family members are to each other. This mediation extends temporally – it is the material similarity of the chairs over the two episodes that serves as the basis for the emotional and psychological continuity which is performed in this extract. As Middleton & Brown put it 'the displacement of the artefact is precisely what enables a linkage between two otherwise remote points in time. The chair opens up a kind of 'envelope' of time where a continuity which was absent is now immediately present' (2005: 156).

Middleton & Brown's broader claim is that remembering is the means by which we turn around on the interdependencies in our temporally structured experience (i.e. overlapping durations). And whilst remembering happens partly through talk, analysis cannot be limited to a strict focus on conversational interaction because of the importance of material mediation through artefacts and settings, along with our embodied participation in the worlds (or 'zones of personal relations') that are made actual through recollection. However, Middleton & Brown do not distinguish particularly between different types of settings or communities. The philosopher Sue Campbell (2009) observes that Middleton & Brown concentrate on examples where participants affirm the values and meanings in the 'habitable worlds' of the past they jointly construct. But in many cases, she argues, 'the very intent of drawing someone into the past may be to encourage the contesting rather than the affirmation of values' (2009: 223). If we follow Campbell's argument then this suggests that far greater attention needs to be given to the nature of both the setting and the activity through which recollection is performed than Middleton & Brown are prepared to allow. Moreover, that the content and meanings of what are being recollected

are of paramount importance. It really matters whether the world that is being performed through memory is one in which we can live and whose values we share or, conversely, is one that is difficult, distressing and conflicted.

### **Vital Memories**

Over the past few years, we have worked across a series of studies with groups of participants who have 'trouble' with some aspect of their past or that of others they care for – these include adult survivors of child sexual abuse (Reavey, 1998; Reavey & Brown, 2006; 2009); parents conducting life story work with their adopted children (Brookfield et al, 2008; Brown et al, 2013); persons affected by the 2005 London Bombings (Allen & Brown, 2011); elderly users of a reminiscence museum (Bendien et al, 2010) and forensic mental health service users in medium-secure settings (Brown, Reavey et al, in press). In each case, the groups involved have very specific 'memory problems'. Survivors of child sexual abuse, for example, have to manage conflicts and ambiguities in their recollections of past events, along with the potential significance this has for their current sense of agency. Conversely, elderly residents in care home settings may have difficulty in reconciling their present limitations around personal autonomy with self-identity, and may draw upon autobiographical memories as resources to 'turn around' on their current situation.

Despite the clear difference, there are a number of common issues that run across these distinct memory problems. First, they concern a distinct sub-set of autobiographical memories. These are typically structured as a series of episodic memories, often concerning a key personal relationship, which have an ongoing and intractable relevance to a current sense of self. We use the term 'vital memories' to indicate that these particular autobiographical memories are difficult to manage, often threatening and destabilising, whilst at the same time felt to be utterly necessary and self-defining. Second, there are usually strong normative constraints that need to be oriented towards when recollecting vital memories. These can range from cultural expectations around the meaning and significance of what is remembered – such as a 'victim' status around memories of abuse – to ethical norms about what ought and ought not to be recalled – as with the responsibilities that adoptive parents feel in protecting adopted children from prematurely hearing the full details of difficult events that have occurred their early life. Third, particular settings and practices tend to mediate remembering along defined lines. For example, the prior personal and sexual relationships of patients in secure forensic mental health care settings are taken to be not relevant to their current situation, meaning that patients are effectively required to 'park' or 'amputate' their sexual history until such time as they exit secure care.

These three issues can all be seen at work in the following extract, where adoptive parents are together discussing their approach to 'life story work'. This involves maintaining a document in which the life of an adopted child, including that part of it that pre-dates the point where they were adopted by the current parent(s), is documented, typically the form of a physical book which includes narratives and photographs (see Brookfield et al, 2008). Life story work crystallises a particular memory problem for adoptive parents. It can be difficult

to ensure that the life story book is sufficiently comprehensive, since this may require negotiating with or at the very least relating to former carers or biological parents in order to source or verify images and stories. There may be periods of a child's life where there is little or no documentary evidence, or where, if it does exist, it is in a form that makes it highly problematic for inclusion in the life story book (e.g. photographs taken for official purposes which clearly depict the child as in a state of neglect or worse). This raises a dilemma – how are these gaps to be filled? Is it better to 'tell things as they were' or find an alternative way of managing the past?

Extract 5 gives an illustration of such a dilemma. Here, three adoptive parents and a facilitator are discussing toys that adoptive children have brought with them from previous care settings. At the start of the extract, C describes a play costume currently favoured by her adopted daughter:

Extract 5 (from Brown, Reavey & Brookfield, 2013)

- C. My daughter's obsessed with fire and um, we don't talk, we don't um, she's actually got a fireman's costume, a firefighter's costume, a firefighter's kit you know, age appropriate children's things but I don't talk about fires and there was, you now the New Town fire. Of course we haven't mentioned it, haven't shown her pictures but, um, today she was out visiting a friend who has a younger child and doesn't realize how big ears she's got and talking about, you know, those explosions there and the sky so she's heard about it and we ... and then um M had promised to show her a newspaper picture because she's obsessed with it it. She just...
- B. Amazing what they take in, isn't it you know?
- A. Its amazing ... when she's three
- C. Yeah
- W. It's quite unsettling
- C. Oh, but also you sort of think its alright because there's this huge picture of like, like a mushroom and there's three um firefighters in the picture and the main interest was one didn't have his hat on! (Laughter) You have to think, you know
- A. You're building this up, yeah
- C. Well, it's like, well it's like, you know what do I do when she's, you know, talking to her about this, this sort of thing about what her mum did you know, I suppose it's quite hard to talk to her without having an example apart from the drugs, having pictures and things like that, you know that sort of thing, other sorts of scenarios but um, she will hear about that because siblings, you know will, will tell her. Anytime really, but anytime and it is so, and I know that I'm doing it myself, I'm sort of visualizing it and I know I have to talk it down, the fact that she wasn't an arsonist she had started a fire by mistake, you know, um it was the fact that she went much longer into distress, you know but the flat got burned down and the fact was she went to prison because of it and had a



long sentence, so that's unfortunate but you have to sort of try to work out

C is concerned about her daughter dressing in the firefighter costume since she sees it as evidence of an 'obsession' with fire. There are good reasons for C to be concerned. What her daughter apparently does not (yet) know is that her birth mother served a prison sentence for arson. Whilst there is a complex story to be told around these circumstances, it is not a discussion C is currently prepared to have with her daughter, despite its obvious relevance for her understanding of her early life and current circumstances. Allowing her to play with the costume is then a risk. In one sense it normalizes the past, by channelling the daughter's interest in fire along age-appropriate and manageable routes. This strategy appears to be working – when shown pictures of firefighters, the daughter was primarily concerned with the state of their uniforms rather than the nature of their work. Nevertheless, children have 'big ears' and are exposed to influences and sources of information beyond the family home. At some point, the story of the birth mother will come out (most likely from other siblings). C is already anticipating this moment, she has 'visualised' it and rehearsed possible accounts she might offer to her daughter-in-the-future.

As with extracts 3 & 4, we would point to the significance of the material artefact that is quite literally in play – the firefighter costume. This artefact is the locus of family pleasure and anxieties. The 'secret' of the fire setting by the birth mother is in a sense contained in the folds of the costume. At any moment it may be articulated by siblings, or even perhaps remembered by the daughter herself. We have named these particular kinds of artefacts as 'spectral objects' (Brown et al, 2013). Spectral objects are not objects in the usual sense of the term in that they appear to have a kind of agency of their own, which arises in part because of the residue of absent or phantom subjectivity left upon by the form by the actions or choices of former carers or biological parents (e.g. as with toys or clothes that have travelled with the child from previous care settings). What gives these objects their power is the very fact of their endurance across time. They make for material links to the past, which gives them unsettling holding power. Given this, C might very well be tempted to dispose of the firefighter costume. But in doing so she would render herself accountable at some future point for this decision to deny her daughter-in-the-future this material resource for making sense of her past. It is better then to allow her daughter to have the costume, because this will allow C to claim at a later point that she did not in fact keep anything from her daughter. The story of the birth mother was right there all along, simply hidden in plain sight.

In summary, whilst our own work has its roots in the kind of analysis developed within Discursive Psychology, we feel that it is impossible to retain a purist focus on conversational pragmatics. To develop a properly 'expanded view' of memory it is necessary to return to the longstanding concern in psychology with 'turning around' on experience. Whilst we can show this being done 'live' in social interaction through discursive analysis, situating these acts in relation to ongoing experience, to lived autobiographical memory, means turning towards

theory. And the more we do so, the more points of convergence we find with cognitive-experimental tradition, coming from its own very different direction of travel.

### **Moving On?**

It is salutary to recognise that much of what concerns contemporary psychological approaches to memory can be seen 'in a nutshell' in the scaffolding experiments. Two people approach a task together. There is a knowledge asymmetry between them. They have a common set of material resources in play. One facilitates the other in 'turning around' on their experience. The instruction that is provided by one to the other draws on broader norms, and is embedded in a particular social practice. They are aware of a possible wider audience, that what they say now might have relevance to themselves and these others at a later date. Now change the set-up slightly. The parent and child are no longer in a laboratory, they are telling bed-time stories at home. Or perhaps the child is now adopted, and the parent is carefully negotiating the issue of their early life. Switch again, and this time we have a politician presenting their version of some past event to the media, conscious of the documents or other records that might be miraculously produced at any moment. Or yet again, we have elderly care home residents talking to their adult child about 'the old days', invoking artefacts and places that have not been seen in years. Once more, an adult is recalling a painful episode from their childhood with their therapist, or perhaps they are doing so in court, under cross-examination.

At the heart of this endlessly re-iterated scene are matters that are of deep and abiding concern to both the cognitive-experimental and discursive traditions. It is clear that that the vast majority of our actions are oriented both forwards and backwards across our unfolding experience. We seek to mobilise some version of our past in the present, and we anticipate what the future relevance might be of having done so, of what might be made of our present actions at some later point. The cognitive-experimental approach has quite properly made this ongoing work of stitching our lives together – the 'critical developmental skill' of autobiographical memory – its key object. For its part, the discursive tradition has shown the fine details of how this can be interactionally accomplished. However, we would argue that what is lacking is a treatment of experience that is properly sensitive to temporal flow (Bergson's 'duration'; Dewey's 'longitude and latitude of experience'), to the manner in which the present is continuously stretched forwards and backwards. Both traditions appear to isolate the act of recollection from this flow, whereas a cursory reflection on our own lives tell us that we have an emotional, embodied participation in this endless back and forth movement.

There is little debate now that remembering is at base an activity of reconstruction. The cognitive-experimental approach has nevertheless sometimes found it necessary to insist that, in principle, it is possible to establish the veridicality of a given recollection (see Fivush & Neisser, 1994). For its part, the discursive tradition has at times appeared to be unconcerned to defend itself against the charge that in all cases, including memory, truth is no more than a matter of perspective (see Edwards et al, 1995). But in practice, work in both

traditions has demonstrated that recollection is shaped by the constraints and affordances of the contexts where it is enacted, particularly when one party is more 'in the know' than the other. We think the way forward here is, following Singer & Conway (2008), to focus on the accessibility rather than the availability of autobiographical memory, and further to see accessibility as something that is collectively worked out, that may involve vicarious as well as direct experiences of the past, and that involves ethical and political dilemmas (as in the case of adoptive parents having to manage the future accessibility of the past for their adoptive children). To do so will also mean working with a far broader concept of context than either tradition currently allows, since any claim about the past, however trivial, may potentially come of relevance to wide range of social actors and hence result in a set of normative considerations being invoked during the course of recollection. We see this very clearly in all examples that involve adults and children remembering together.

The broader concept of context leads us towards an intriguing proposition. Psychologists have long struggled with the questions of how best to define memory processes and the set of activities that constitute remembering. The socio-cultural insight that our capacity to remember is shaped by the kinds of cultural and material resources that are available to us casts these questions in a new light. The discursive tradition has shown that joint recall and conversational pragmatics blur the relation between 'mind' and 'communication'. But the debates around extended cognition raise the stakes yet further - if what is loosely called 'mind' is really a name for some of the properties of an extended system in which the person is but one component (Michaelian & Sutton, 2013), then this invites speculation that autobiographical memory might not be a singular property. Our memorial capacities might, in a strong sense, be different as function of the settings and practices in which we engage. What we can do with our relationship to our personal past might then be radically different across settings such as classrooms, courts of law, therapeutic encounters, laboratories, art galleries and social media. Some hundred or so years ago, Bergson wondered if our ongoing flow of experience was better grasped as a set of intersecting, overlapping flows or durations. We are not a 'thing' that moves through time, but rather an ongoing pattern or series of knots made of diverse materials that repeats and reiterates as our life unfolds. What we are is the endless activity of scaffolding, rather than some structure buried underneath. The challenge is to produce a psychology of memory that can engage with this proposition.

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<sup>i</sup> Roediger & Wheeler's frustration was not entirely misplaced. Edwards & Potter had grudgingly formulated the 'Discursive Action Model' (DAM) in order to secure a publication with the prestigious journal *Psychological Review* (Edwards & Potter, 1993), following the demands of initial reviewers for an explicit statement of theory. As the ironic title makes pretty clear ('here's your damn model!'), this was never really a model in any formal sense, being instead a set of analytic guidelines for analysing naturalistic discourse.

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<sup>ii</sup> One of the student participants at the time was our colleague, the critical psychologist John Cromby.