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What is This?

Influences on memory

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The study of remembering is both compelling and challenging, in part, because of the multiplicity and the complexity of influences on memory. Whatever their interests, memory researchers are always aware of the many different factors that can drive the processes they care about. A search for the phrase 'influences on memory' confirms this daunting and exhilarating array of influences, of many different kinds, operating at many different timescales, and presumably often interacting in ways that we can't yet imagine, let alone model. There are hormonal and neuromodulatory, genetic and pharmacological, developmental and age-related influences; there are influences of arousal, stress, gender, mood, emotion, sleep and personality; there are unconscious, schematic or semantic influences, and there are influences of context, situation, task and environment. There are many aspects of 'media influence on memory' (Loftus and Banaji, 1989; Strange and Garry, 2007), and, of course, there are both 'social influences on memory' (Echterhoff and Hirst, 2009) and 'cultural influences on memory' (Gutchess and Indeck, 2009). Notoriously, there are numerous 'suggestive influences' on memory (Loftus, 2003): influences of misinformation (Seifert, 2002; Wright and Loftus, 1998), or of 'memory conformity' (Gabbert et al., 2006) and 'memory contagion' (Roediger et al., 2002). People who know each other well, such as intimate couples, 'may be well practised in yielding to each other's influence and incorporating their partner's information into their own memories of the past' (French et al., 2008: 264).

This range of influences underpins the dramatic causal holism with which memory studies must deal: many such influences are mutually modulatory, exhibiting forms of continuous reciprocal causation across distinctive parts of dynamical systems (Clark, 1997:163). Such radical interactivity of influence poses tough methodological challenges to the experimental ideal of the cognitive psychological traditions that I've cited so far, that of separating out distinct causal factors under controlled experimental conditions so as to pinpoint the unique contributions of each. But that's not my topic here. I want to ask a simpler question about this pervasive language of influence in memory studies, about what's implied when we talk about the ways in which we, or our memories, yield or are susceptible to influences of one kind or another. As we identify all these diverse and pervasive influences on memory, what exactly is it that is being influenced? What lies there behind or before influence? How do we theorize the separation that is tacitly assumed in such descriptions, the separation between these influences and what they influence?

The language of influences on memory sits nicely with our modern consensus about the constructive nature of remembering. In a remarkably cross-disciplinary vision, historians, cultural

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theorists, philosophers, clinicians and neuroscientists alike have converged, over perhaps the last 20 years, on the view that remembering is an active and multifaceted process, that either subtle or dramatic changes in both the content and the significance of what is remembered can emerge at any stage between experience and recollection, and in particular that memory retrieval is often a compilation out of materials oriented to present goals and future plans, rather than a clean reproduction of an untarnished original.

In worrying at the link between construction and influence, I'm continuing to deal with implications of the work of the Canadian philosopher Sue Campbell, who died in February 2011, aged 54. Sue was a great supporter of this journal and its integrative aims or dreams, serving on its editorial board and contributing a powerful paper, 'The Second Voice', to our first issue (Campbell, 2008). In *Relational Remembering: Rethinking the Memory Wars* (2003), Campbell rightly identified a tendency in memory literature across the disciplines simply to equate or conflate construction and distortion. Theorists slip from describing memory's plasticity or malleability to warning of its unreliability. It is too easy to be entranced by the seductions of confusion, caught up in the righteous rejection of misguided archival models of memory as extraction of untainted materials from an inner storehouse. The cost, Campbell argued, was that in belabouring only the inventive or fictional outcomes of constructive processes, and the negative contamination resulting from external influence in particular, we can lose sight of the virtues of authenticity and of fidelity to the past.

Sure, remembering is fallible, partial and imperfect, and we can ascribe these features to its constructive nature. But what is the contrast? What would pure or uninfluenced memory ever be? Certainly, psychologists officially remember that the mechanisms of memory distortion are also the very means of generalization, abstraction, understanding, and creativity (McClelland, 1995; Schacter, 1999). But, as Campbell demonstrated, discussion in the wake of the controversies over recovered memory and false memory had the 'disturbing feature' that 'the crucial selectivity to memory, its usefulness, becomes redescribed as its tendency to distortion' (Campbell, 2004: 131). Despite our principled rejection of archival and storehouse models, we still tend to draw overly sharp contrasts between our fallible condition, trapped in the present behind a veil of ideas or traces, and an impossibly pristine alternative form of direct access to the past.

We might note, for example, that children come to grasp that 'memories are *representations* rather than veridical copies of past events' (Fivush et al., 2008: 133, original emphasis). But while this catches nicely the selectivity and perspectival nature of remembering, it neglects the possibility that (fallible, partial, selective) representations can still be true. To be consistently constructivist in a more thoroughgoing way, then, we must remember that not only *false* memories are multiply influenced and reconstructed. If we constantly point only to the *failures* of remembering and the contagion introduced by social or other forms of influence, we implicitly still assume a pure ideal of what truth in memory would have to be. Likewise, we can query the generality of the forensic fantasy that memory of specific events and experiences should be a direct connection between two well-defined (past and present) moments of consciousness. To be consistently constructivist, again, we can acknowledge that personal or experiential memories are operating perfectly well even when they 'smooth over the boundaries between the different moments in our lives' (Schechtman, 1994: 13). References to extended and recurring events, or more or less schematized abstractions that incorporate or pull together all kinds of materials from semantic memory or from other people's related experiences, may be effective means of thematizing, finding perspective on, and renegotiating the significance of one's own personal or shared past experience (Goldie, forthcoming; Shore, 2009).

So even as we acknowledge the multiplicity of social and directive functions of, for example, autobiographical remembering in everyday life, we are also exporting from legal contexts a pervasive scepticism about memory reports. The expectation that a listener will and should challenge such reports is alien to the ordinary sociality of our practices of remembering together, and as Campbell showed can be exploited, often implicitly, by dominant groups or institutions so as to discredit the memorial testimony of particular individuals or peoples. We need to hold on to the possibility of authentic, 'good remembering' (Campbell 2006), while accepting its complexity and difficulty. Respectful challenges to memory are appropriate within a shared 'attempt to capture the significance of the past to the present' (Campbell 2008: 45), precisely because we care about integrating narrative truth with historical truth, rather than happily holding them apart. In developing a positive picture of good remembering, Campbell asked us to see the influences of others as potentially enabling, as beneficial for our individual and shared capacities to track the past and its themes and meanings. Building on work in moral psychology and feminist philosophy on self and autonomy as 'relational' (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000), she argued that in certain circumstances bodily, social and interactional influences can build and maintain the integrity of remembering, rather than compromising it. Remembering is 'relational' not only in its development but in its ongoing active role in the weave of our lives. Sharing memories is more than a process of triggering and cueing, more than the external uptake of fully formed contents. It is often exactly by incorporating, working through, and transforming the influences on our own memory that we come more effectively to renegotiate, thematize and own our past: influence is not intrinsically malign. Personal and shared remembering is so complex and multicausal that it demands a constant 'methodological interrogation of boundaries – of the individual, of the collective, and of the disciplinary preoccupations that have delivered them to us intact': for Campbell, the work of memory studies is to acknowledge that 'somehow the integrity of the self as a record of its own history has given way and is giving way all the time and in ways that we cannot even track' (2008: 43). Her own trajectory led to the study of forms of resistance to dominant narratives in communal remembering as resistance, or as the performance of oppositional memory in Canada and Argentina (Campbell, 2006, 2009), and into ordinary activities of collective archiving and of the multiple uses of memory objects (2004). Most recently, in sustained interventions in applied memory, Campbell wrote two discussion papers for the Indian Residential Schools Resolution Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada, covering topics such as reparation, suspicions about narrative contagion, the devaluing of oral history, forward-looking conceptions of remembering, and the intergenerational transmission of skills and practices as well as stories in rich relational networks.

It is not enough, then, to acknowledge that there's no single, unified, unsullied 'memory' that is so strikingly open to influence. Among all the interconnected component processes and activities of personal and shared remembering, the successful coordination of disparate resources – neural, affective, bodily, technological, interpersonal, environmental, political, and so on – positively *requires* influence. Rather than thinking of an intrinsic vulnerability or susceptibility to influence, we might imagine an alternative account. Good remembering itself *is* the shifting and fragile resultant or vector of multiple inner and outer influences operating and interacting at distinct levels and timescales. There need be no user or consumer of these influences: it could be influences all the way down (cf. Clark, 2002; Dennett, 2000, 2003). Different cognitive ecologies of memory distribute and balance distinctive influences in characteristic, context-dependent ways. An enduring message of Sue Campbell's work on memory is that to acknowledge this complexity of influence is not to give up on the difficult task of achieving fidelity to the past.

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