

**112th American Sociological Association Meeting
2017 - Montreal**

**Theoretical developments on ‘memory’ and ‘identity’: an integration
between G. Mead and M. Halbwachs in a collectivist approach¹**

Veridiana Domingos Cordeiro

Sociology Department | University of São Paulo

Abstract: Our aim is to theoretically explore the relation between “memory” and “identity”, approaching the intersection between two theories that have collectivist orientations: Maurice Halbwachs’ theory of memory and the George H Mead’s reflection about identity. At the beginning, we show how memory and identity are co-dependent phenomena. We then show a) how Halbwachs explains the formation of individual memory based on the collectivity and b) how Mead explains the formation of identity also based on collectivity. In the end, we show how both explanations could benefit from each other based on their convergent collectivist approach.

¹ This research was sponsored by FAPESP (Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo).

Introduction

As the notion of ‘culture’, the notion of ‘memory’ and ‘identity’ are very important to Human Sciences. However, the relation between both phenomena is still opaque in Sociology, although it has been explored by other adjacent areas, such as Psychology. For some time, it has already been stated the impossibility of existence of the identity without memory – certainly in its individual sense and probably in its collective sense (Reid, 2012; Locke, 1975; Candau, 2012). In this manner, the continuity and the permanence of an individual or a group depends on both *what* is remembered and on *who* remembers. Like “identity”, “memory” has also ceased to be thought as a strictly individual attribute, and is now regarded as part of a social process. In the social dimension, nevertheless, few works have considered memory and identity in an interconnected way.

After this brief overview about the relation between “memory” and “identity”, our aim is to theoretically explore the relation between memory and identity, thus approaching the intersection between two theories that have collectivist orientations: Maurice Halbwachs’ theory of memory and the George H Mead’s reflection about identity.

Identity is traditionally considered within Human Sciences from three perspectives:

a) *Who am I?* – This perspective is widely studied by the Anthropology. It understands “identity” as a belonging sense to a group. Such belonging sense also helps to define the person; moreover, it is a multiple category: ethnic identity, racial identity and gender identity.

b) *Personality* – This perspective is widely developed by Psychology, which understands that the constitutive elements of the person (as its values and temper, for example) determines his/her action in the world.

c) *Persistence and evidence* – This perspective is mainly triggered by the following philosophical question: How is it possible that a person who exists at one point in time is identical to himself/herself at another moment in time?

Memory and identity as complementary phenomena: revisiting Mead and Halbwachs

We are interested to better develop the last perspective. We believe that it is possible to understand this question about “persistence and evidence” from a sociological standpoint. Reformulating, What ensures that a child in the past is the same person as an adult after a while? This problem is called in the literature as the "problem of the personal identity" or the “problem of the self”² and it refers to the persistence of the identity through the time. In his *Essays*, John Locke was the first to develop a criterion for the existence and maintenance of the individual identity. For Locke, a person A' is the same person as A in a previous moment, if the person A' remembers what happened with A. The answer for the question about “the persistence of identity in time” was also called in the literature as “the evidence of memory in the individual identity.” There is a classical defense that the memory would be the only evidence that the identity could persist through time.

Although Thomas Reid has some caveats to Locke's argument, he also points to a direct relationship between memory and identity, stating that since personal identity is not amenable to be directly analyzed, it is through memory that we find the evidence for the personal identity.

It should be noted that the evidence of memory is not restricted to eighteenth-century philosophy, but it is one of the strongest evidences to explain the phenomenon of identity nowadays. The French anthropologist and sociologist, Joel Candau, for example, argues for the same criterion by saying that "[...] it is memory, the first faculty, which feeds identity", adding that "it is the memory [...] that comes to strengthen identity ... to restore a person's missing memory is to restore his/her identity" (Candau, 2012, p. 16). "Memory loss is therefore a loss of identity. [...] without memory the subject empties himself/herself, he/she lives only the present moment and loses his/her conceptual and cognitive capacities. The identity disappears" (Candau, 2012, p. 60).

² The word ‘*self*’ has some meanings. According to the Oxford Dictionary the word had three main meanings: a.) the first refers to “what it really is”; b.) the second refers to the “ego” and c.) the third refers to the “permanence of individual states of conscious that vary and are successive” (Oxford English Dictionary, vol. S, p. 410). The last meaning appeared in the writings of John Locke as something very close to the idea of identity -as we will see further.

Similarly, Paul Ricoeur's conception of identity (2014) argues that it is still possible to trace a continuity between B and B', if we consider the mass of retained memories between these two moments.

This relation is only possible, since we understand that both memory and identity are subsumed to a broader term: *representation*. In this way, Joel Candau (2012) states that memory and identity are subtypes of representations that have different functions: the "memory" is a faculty and the "identity" is a state. Although it is affirmed that memory and identity have the same status of subtypes of representation, what is verified, in fact, is a relation of dependence of one on the other. This relationship could be just verified from the externalization of memories that serve as evidence of the existence and persistence of an identity over time.

Once better defined the idea of identity to which we refer (the one that guarantees the existence of an individual over time), we explore how we understand the phenomenon of memory. Most theories that attempt to explain the phenomenon of memory take it as a phenomenon subjectively conditioned (psychologically or physiologically). However, if we assume, in some way, that memory is not only a strictly subjective phenomenon, how would be this conception of memory?

The conception of memory as a socially determined phenomenon is relatively new. The first great development of the idea appeared in the works of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, in 1925, in the book *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire*³. Jeffrey Olick (1999) states that, for Halbwachs, the studies about memory is a question of how minds work together in society and not merely a study of philosophical reflections or physiological experiments. That is, study "memory" is study how the operations are mediated and shaped by social dispositions. Even when we remember alone, we still do as social beings regarding the groups in which we belong. The memories of others help us with our own memories and vice versa. With this, every memory (both the long-standing memories and the recent memories) exists in relation to one or more groups to which the individual belongs and to the set of notions related to language, time and space - which are called by Halbwachs of "social frames of memory".

³ Lately, Halbwachs wrote two more book about memory: *La Topographie Légendaire des Évangiles en Terre Sainte* (1941) e the posthumous *La Mémoire Collective* (1950).

In this way, we can briefly summarize the theory of collective memory as follows: the “collective memory” is a mass of memories, the product of intersecting individual memories, coming from the recollecting individuals who are members of the same group. These individuals are designated as members of a group because they are aligned with the same “stream of collective thinking”. The “stream of collective thinking” dictates interests, opinions, concerns and even values of a group. In this way, the alignment of an individual to a stream of collective memory determines its affiliation to a group. This alignment is responsible for the formation of “perceptual schemes”. The “perceptual schemes” are given by the group and are responsible for frame the perception of those who share the same group.

Collective memories are the result of individual memories shared by members of a group at any given time. The group can be delimited as common representational contents related to the past shared by some individuals. The main distinction between group and society, for Halbwachs, is: while the group is defined by a common representational content related to the past, the society is delimited as a social structure that has a spatial form, which allows subdivisions in functional groups only. Thus, it is possible to say that society gives the form, while the *group(s)* provides the content related to the representational dimension. It would never be possible to say that a "society has memory", but only that "the groups have memories". When memory is associated to society – “a society’s memory” – it means that there is an prominent memory of a single group within a whole society.

The collective memory, as a mass of common memories, gains consistency as the members of the group recall with more vigor and constancy. Even if collective memory rests on individual consciousness to be set in motion, it would never exist alone in the mind of the individual. In the same way, the individual memory would never exist without the collective memories that surround it. The individual itself has a collective side and a subjective side: it is a union of two "beings". There is the “sensitive being” and the “interpretive being”⁴. The first one is related to the perception, the witness of an event, and the second is related to the reflection, which makes the

⁴ This idea of “sensitive being” and the “interpretative being” is an answer to a problem that came from the bergsonian philosophy (Henri Bergson was professor of Halbwachs and exerted strong influence on his early career), about the relation between the individual memory and the collective memory. Precisely the question was: how is possible a single perception within a system strictly dependent on the social?

perception intelligible. The origin of a memory would lie on the individual perception of the “sensitive being”, which provides a singular nucleus of real perceptions. However, the act of making a perception intelligible involves the “interpretative being”, which is always related to the group to which the individual belongs and consequently to its “stream of collective thinking”: Regarding this, he states that:

there would be in the base of all remembrances, the evocation of a purely individual conscious state, which, for distinguish from the perceptions where there are elements of social thinking” (Halbwachs, 1997 [1950], p. 67).

It follows that while the individual always perceives events from a single perspective, the understanding of the perception depends on the group(s) in which the individual transits (not only physically, but by thinking) throughout life, helping him to understand and highlight traces of an infinitely complex reality. Thus, the individual does not need to share the perception frameworks of the *group* that physically follows him: “we feed our perception field, a secret thought, with everything that was related to that” (Halbwachs, 1997 [1950], p. 64). Later, when an individual tries to remember something, he/she evokes these past events by reconstructing them in the light of the present. In the memory phenomena, we could have the representation (R) of an event (E) which was possible or emerged from a complex situation of variables: the social conditions (SC). What is apparently presented in the mnemonic process would be only R of E [R(e)]. Whist E is always dependent of SC, which is not always evident.

Concisely, the original conditions of any memory are set in the individual perception of an event. The perspectives of a *group* shape the perception and the repertory of the individuals. In this sense, the group supports the individual memory since its original moment.

From this conceptual architecture, we conclude that the stability and the identity of an individual depends on the state of convergence and permanence of a set of memories in time:

[...] of each epoch of our life, we keep some memories, without ceasing to reproduce them, and through them the feeling of our

identity is perpetuated through a continuous affiliation (Halbwachs, 1925 [1994], p. 89).

But what strikes us is that: in memory, the similarities pass, to the foreground. When the group considers its past feels it has remained the same and becomes aware of its identity through time (Halbwachs, 1997 [1950], 138).

If the classic criterion for personal identity was the evidence of the “individual memory” (classically constructed, without social implications), for Halbwachs, the evidence for the identity could be the groups, or more precisely the memories that arise from the relationship between individual and the stream of collective thinking.

The group cohesion occurs by sharing memories. Without this action, the group can undo over time. Halbwachs points out two groups as those that have the most stable memories and are essential for the constitution of the individual: the family group and the religious group. It is in what Halbwachs calls as "the living bond of generations" (the family memory) that the play of memory and identity can be more easily verified. For Halbwachs, the family has a special status in relation to other groups.

The perceptual schemes that the family places on its members and the adherence that the individuals have to the “stream of collective thinking” are intense. Family memories "... are, at the same time, models, examples and demonstrations. In them the general attitude of the group is expressed" (Halbwachs, 1925 [1994], 181). Beyond the intensity that the family group has, their memory also has the capacity to extend over our lives in other groups, thus converting the family into a nodal point of the coexistence that an individual has with other groups. This allows Halbwachs to "consider the family from the point of view of other groups, and at the same time combine memories with their own ways of thinking" (Halbwachs, 1925, p. 208).

If we consider an individual that does not have the familiar group, how does he/she constitute its identity?

The relationship between group and identity was also worked out by another classical sociologist: George H. Mead - contemporary of Halbwachs' main work, *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire*. In his work, Mead further developed issues related to

the formation and maintenance of identity, while Halbwachs, in turn, further developed the issues related to the formation and development of memory.

For Mead, once the self emerges and undergoes different experiences over time, the following question arises: how can it be said that one self is itself in a future time? Well, we have seen that this is the problem of identity, which is often accomplished through the phenomenon of memory. In Mead's work, it is not different. But what do we gain by considering memory as the identifying factor of the self? For Mead, most of our actions are intelligent responses to certain stimuli that arise at varying times and locations. However, intelligent behavior does not imply a behavior with self-awareness: "the body may be operating very intelligently without a self being involved in the experience" (Mead, 1932, p. 136). This implies that only a few moments in a person's life have the reflexivity of actions⁵ and, these are moments in which memories are formed. That is, just in moments of social life that the individuals form memories.

Mead states that "the individual experiences himself indirectly, from the point of view of individual members of the same social group or from the generalized point of view of a social group as a whole to which he/she belongs" (Mead, 1932, p 137), since self-consciousness is "the ability to awaken in ourselves a set of answers belonging to others in the group" (Mead, 1932, p.163).

The distinction between "I" and "me" corresponds to the two dimensions of the self. The "I" is aware in the present tense, providing intelligent responses based on previously acquired innervations - the equivalent to what Halbwachs calls the "sensitive being". The "me" is the reflexive apprehension of the "I"⁶, that is the apprehension of the past in the light of a present reflection, considering the point of

⁵ The interaction between organisms occurs within a social act. The social act, when unfolded over time, becomes a social process. The interaction between organisms can be understood by the terms "conduct" or "behavior", which can be analytically divided into two parts: Stimulus and Response. Stimulus is any type of past or present expression performed by any organism. The process of interaction is better understood by the term Gesture or Sign. The Answer is a tendency to arouse some act that produces some expression, act or gesture. Response is an organic process. In an act or in a social process, different organisms must adjust their responses to other organisms.

⁶ Emerges from the emergence of reflexivity itself in a process that presupposes that an organism or the expressions of this organism are objects for itself. The Mind is a reflective intelligence, that is, it adjusts the conduct with purpose. In this way, the emerging elements of reflexivity depend on the environment in which they were generated.

view of the group and especially of the “generalized other”- which would be equivalent to what Halbwachs calls the “interpretative being”. In Mead's terms, "me" represents an organization of the group that exists in our attitudes" (Mead, 1932, p. 178).

Therefore, memory is formed in the reflective moment of the "me", which comprises the group. Other consequence is that memory becomes a narrative because the reflective process is a communicative process for Mead. The thought itself is the internalization of the meaningful conversation of gesture that we play in the social process.

Although the term “identity” at Mead’s epoch was widely used, we can say that personal identity is equivalent to the identity of the self, that is, a self that can identify past experiences through memory. In this manner, the formation and identification of memory depend on the point of view promoted by the different groups and their conceptions of the generalized other. This also depends on the integrity of the social processes that have taken place, which also are the foundation of the self.

In this way, the self's dependence on social processes allows us to understand problems such as dissociations and traumas caused by the non-integrity or disintegration of social processes. By social processes, we understand the process of relationship that occurs within a group. Thus, "the unity and structure of the complete self reflects the unity and structure of the social process as a whole" (Mead, 1932, p. 144). For example, since the family is the main group present in childhood, its instability would reflect on the instability of the self of the children of this family.

As we said, according to Halbwachs, the family is the group that more intensely imposes the collectivity on its members, but it is also the group in which the member identity stands out. According to Halbwachs, it is within the family that “identity of each man is more relevant" (Halbwachs, 1925 [1994], p. 195).

About the family mnemonic dynamics, Halbwachs observes that despite several attempts to materialize its memory (registers, genealogical trees, coats of arms), the search for identity propel the group as a whole. This attempt of materialization is responsible for constantly reorganize the family memory. This shows how there is no individual identity suppression within the groups. Otherwise, there is a parallel operation to form memories and identities of both individuals and group (that is, individual and collective), which are codependent.

Narrative is the mean by which the individual or the group mostly expresses their memories in an organized and coherent way, thus reaffirming their identity over time. Consistency must follow a criterion which, if we assume Halbwachs, would always be the present moment.

Thus, the activity of telling memories involves the reconfiguration of past events in the light of the present. According to Mead, the reflexive apprehension of the "I" (which is the part of the self of a person responding to the stimuli of the world) is only made through the "me" (the part of the self that carries, roughly, a collective point of view, the response patterns of the groups). In this way, the apprehension of the self of a past moment depends on the point of view of the group (or of the collective group thinking). Once an autobiographical narrative organizes past experiences and events, a sense of the temporal unity of identity and the constitution of identity necessarily must pass through external expressiveness (Mead, 1932).

Partial conclusions

As we have seen, the perspective presented about Mead's theory differs from what Herbert Blumer (2003) presents: Mead as a precursor of Symbolic Interactionism. We are therefore aligned with a reading that emphasizes naturalist and collectivist aspects of the work of Mead. Similarly, Lewis and Smith (1980) claim that Mead was an anti-nominalist who took a collectivist (and not an individualistic) position. In the same way, Hans Joas (1997) points to the loss of just considering Mead as a precursor of Symbolic Interactionism, without evidencing other gains brought about by his theory, such as the assumption about the self as an individual entity that only emerges by the strict dependence with the group.

Even though Halbwachs and Mead's work might seem unrelated at first glance, they have strongly convergent assumptions. These assumptions are mostly based on an idea of collectivism. By collectivism, it was assumed here the idea that subjective phenomena, such as memory and identity, "emerges" from some specific collectivity (or a bunch of collectivities). In this sense, identity and memory are strongly dependent on a specific situation.

Halbwachs and Mead's approaches are complementary in different directions. Mead has a well-developed theory of how the "I" can only apprehend itself in past situations via the "me", an entity which is a function of the group within a social act.

So, the “me” must understand the others and the “I” is some patterns of behavior that have emerged from a specific social act, which involved a determined number of members. Mead is limited when dealing with memory, because he thinks only in terms of dispositions for actions, mistreating memory role. Because of that, Halbwachs’ approach would supplement such deficiencies, once the role of memory, for Halbwachs, is the most important factor in the construction of groups and how the members keep attached to these groups.

Bibliography

BLUMER, Herbert. **George Herbert Mead and the Social Conduct**. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2003.

CANDAU, Joel. **Memória e Identidade**. São Paulo: Ed. Contexto, 2012.

CORDEIRO, Veridiana Domingos. **Por uma Sociologia da Memória: análise e interpretação da teoria da memória coletiva de Maurice Halbwachs**. Dissertação de Mestrado. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Sociologia. Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas. Universidade de São Paulo, 2015.

HALBWACHS, Maurice. **La Mémoire Collective** [1950]. Paris: Ed. Albin Michel, 1997.

_____. **La Topographie Légendaire des Évangiles en Terre Sainte** [1941]. Paris: Ed. Quadrige/PUF, 2008.

_____. **Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire** [1925]. Paris: Ed. Albin Michel, 1994.

JOAS, Hans. **George Herbert Mead : A contemporary reexamination of his thought**. Cambridge : MIT Press, 1997.

LEWIS, David e SMITH, Richard. **American Sociology and Pragmatism : Mead, Chicago, Sociology and Simbolic Interacionism**. Chicago: Univeristy of Chicago Press, 1980.

LOCKE, John. Of Identity and Diversity. In: Essay Concerning Human Understanding. Reprinted in John Perry John, (1975), **Personal Identity**. Berkeley: University of California Press; 1694

OLICK, Jeffrey. Collective Memory: the two cultures. **Sociological Theory**, 17:3, November 1999.

_____; VINITZKY- SEROUSSI, Vered e LEVY, Daniel. **The collective memory reader**. New York: Ed. Oxford, 2011.

MARTINS, Heloísa Helena de Souza. Metodologia Qualitativa de Pesquisa. **Educação e Pesquisa**. V. 30, n.2, p. 289-300, maio/ago, 2004.

MEAD, George H. **Mind, Self & Society**: from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1932.

REID, Thomas. **Essays on the Active Powers of Man**. Edinburgh: University of Edinburg Press, 2002 (1788).