

# To which past do we belong? Self and narrative in a Brazilian mnemonic community of former institutionalized children

Memory Studies

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## Abstract

This article analyzes the processes of remembering and identity formation in a present-day mnemonic community consisting of former inmates of a total government institution for abandoned juveniles in Brazil's countryside during the Dictatorship Regime. Through the sharing of their remembrances, they mutually shaped their life's stories in narratives of triumph. For dealing with the empirical data, we acknowledged that memory is a complex phenomenon which must be approached in an interdisciplinary way, considering concepts drawn from Cognitive Sciences to Sociology. First, we have collected their remembrances on Social Media, in-depth interviews, and fieldwork over 4 years. Second, we analyzed the *dynamics of validation*; the *network of authorities*; and the *emotional regimes* among the former inmates that determined what is selected and interpreted as collective *understandings* of the past. We took a relational and processual sociological approach for analyzing how collaborative identity-mnemonic processes are also triggered, supported, and built by the material and cultural surrounding within mnemonic communities. For that, we assume a "distributed memory", and "distributed self" conceptions. Finally, we show how divergent *understandings* of their past are not validated within their community and consequently dismissed from their narratives of triumph.

## Keywords

total institution, digital memories, distributed mind, sociology of memory, temporal and narrative self

## Introduction

This paper aims to analyze the processes of memory and identity formation of former inmates of a governmental institution for abandoned minors in Brazil's countryside. Today, they are adults and elders, who reunited and established a community to weave together stories about their past. Their reunion happened through social media networking and annual face-to-face gatherings where they interact, share pictures, and tell stories to make sense of their tough childhoods filled with experiences of rural life, institutionalized coercion, discipline, uncertain futures, forced labor, and male socialization in a disciplinary "total institution" (Goffman, 1986). We examine how these former inmates interact with each other and engage with artifacts (such as photos, videos, documents and

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