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Conflict and Memory: The Past in the Present

Brady Wagoner and Ignacio Brescó
Aalborg University

This introduction to the special issue on conflict and memory aims to underscore the importance of memory (whether individual and collective) in relation to intergroup conflicts. We argue that the way in which societies reconstruct and bring the past into the present—especially, the historical past—is crucial when it comes to the study of intergroup conflict dynamics. In this regard, we also highlight the growing importance of memory studies within the area of social sciences as well as the multiple ways of approaching memory. Drawing from this wide theoretical framework, we introduce the articles of this issue, eight articles that tackle the role of memory in different conflicts, whether currently under way, in progress of being resolved, in postwar settings, or in contexts where conflicts expected to happen do not arise.

Keywords: memory, intergroup conflicts, historical past

Conflict and memory are often two sides of the same coin, which seamlessly feed into each other. On one hand, conflicts deeply mark the memories of both individuals and collectives, thereby hampering future reconciliation. On the other hand, memory is behind many conflicts, insofar as certain ways of remembering dramatic episodes (whether recent or remote) imply bringing the past into the present and with it the old scars, grievances, resentments, hatreds, and senses of revenge. Taking memory into account can therefore help us to better understand how certain uses of the past may reignite, perpetuate, or originate conflicts. But, at the same time, it can show us how societies use memory to learn from history, to heal old scars, to remember and compensate the victims, or to promote more reflexive ways of dealing with the past in order to avoid future conflicts. All in all, the study of memory is important inasmuch as "the past becomes a tool for creating change or stability as well as promoting or inhibiting conflicts" (Wagoner, 2014, p. 189).

In this regard, memory studies have attracted a growing interest within the area of social sciences over the past decades (Olick & Robbins, 1998). In psychology, this memory boom has opened a fertile field in which the classical cognitive viewpoint—characterized by an individual and decontextualized conception of memory—has given way to a more contextualized (Brescó & Wagoner, 2016) and sociocultural one (Boyer & Wertsch, 2009), as well as to multiple ways of approaching memory centered on the role of narratives (László, 2008), identity (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001), social representations (Liu & Hilton, 2005), collective memory (Wertsch, 2002), emotions (Scheve & Salmela, 2014), and history teaching (Carretero, 2011), to name a few. Moving within this framework, the eight articles of this issue tackle the role of memory in conflicts currently under way (such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the Mapuche and Tehuelche demands in Argentina), in progress of being resolved (such as the Basque conflict in Spain and the internal conflict in Colombia), in postwar settings (such as Serbia, Cyprus, or the Nagorno-Karabakh region in Azerbaijan), and in countries affected by the economic crisis and the subsequent austerity measures, as is the case of Ireland.

Social representations theory (SRT; Moscovici, 2000) is used in the first three articles to account for the way groups represent their past and define their selves in opposition to other groups against the backdrop of what are called intractable conflicts (Bar-Tal, 2000). Nicholson (2016) combines SRT with a narrative approach in analyzing the way in which Jewish Israelis and Palestinians in the diaspora use certain historical events as a means for justifying their respective positioning on the conflict. Obradović's article (2016) explores the present-day representations of the Yugoslav Wars in Serbia by contrasting history textbooks with intergenerational focus group data in order to account for both reified and lay representations of the past. In a similar vein, Psaltis (2016) discusses the impact of official historical narratives on the social representations of the Cyprus conflict on the part of the Greek and Turkish community by combining some results of a large-scale representative survey with some oral history accounts of former inhabitants of mixed villages.

BRADY WAGONER received his PhD from the University of Cambridge, where he was a Gates Cambridge Scholar and co-creator of the F. C. Bartlett Internet Archive and journal *Psychology and Society*. He is Professor and Director of the MA and PhD programs in *Cultural Psychology*, Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University. He is also Associate Editor of *Culture and Psychology* and *Peace and Conflict*. His books include *Symbolic Transformation* (Routledge, 2010), *Dialogicality in Focus* (Nova, 2011), *Culture and Social Change* (Info Age, 2012), *Development as a Social Process* (Routledge, 2013), *Cultural Psychology and Its Future* (Info Age, 2014) and *Integrating Experiences* (Info Age, 2015). He is currently working on a single authored book titled *The Constructive Mind*: *Frederic Bartlett's Psychology in Reconstruction* (Cambridge University Press) and editing the *Oxford Handbook of Culture and Memory*. His research interests include individual and collective memory, social change, creativity, dynamic methodologies.

IGNACIO BRESCÓ received his PhD from the Autonomous University of Madrid, where he worked as an associate professor until 2014. He is currently working as a postdoctoral fellow at the Centre for Cultural Psychology, Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University. His research interests revolve around collective memory and identity, the teaching of history, positioning theory, and the narrative mediation of remembering.

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CORRESPONDENCE CONCERNING THIS ARTICLE should be addressed to Brady Wagoner, Department of Communication and Psychology, Aalborg University, Kroghstræde, 3, 9220 Aalborg, Denmark. E-mail: wagoner@hum.aau.dk

Although these three articles emphasize the importance of official narratives in shaping the social representations of the past in relation to conflicts, they also highlight the dynamic nature of such representations, thus opening the possibility of resistance and transformation.

The access to collective memory through narrative is also central to the second three articles. Garagozov's (2016) article examines the relationship between collective memory and emotions in the Nagorno Karabakh ethnonational conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This author shows how narratives—as cultural tools that mediate collective remembering—can generate strong emotions and painful memories even in people who have not had any particular painful experiences during the conflict. This mediational role of narratives is also tackled in Brescó's (2016) article, in which different accounts of the 2006 ceasefire in the Basque conflict are analyzed vis-à-vis the positioning theory framework (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Results show that participants identified with the main actors involved in the conflict tend to reproduce their respective version of the episode, whereas the adoption of a more personal positioning yields more complex and dialogical accounts, whereby a dialogue between voices linked to different social positions is established. Barreiro, Wainryb, and Carretero (2016) also examine the role of narratives in analyzing the way in which the so-called "Conquest of Desert" in Argentina is remembered by different social actors. Drawing on the notion of cognitive polyphasia (Jovchelovitch, 2008), these authors account for the coexistence of two contradictory narratives on this episode, which permit celebrating the actions of the Argentine military against the indigenous population in the late 19th century and at the same time holding a politically correct view on the genocide of indigenous groups.

The present special issue concludes with two articles tackling two different social settings—the postconflict scenario in Colombia and the unexpected absence of conflict in Ireland despite the austerity measures adopted since the economic recession. Drawing on sociology and anthropological theory notions of passing and stigma (Goffman, 1963), McFee's (2016) ethnographic study tackles the problem concerning the transition of ex-combatants into Colombian society by showing how these groups, while participating in the government-sponsored agency for the reintegration of demobilized people, must simultaneously hide their past identity as ex-combatants to avoid social stigma. If in the Colombian case the violent past stands as a potential pitfall to reduce social unrest within a postconflict setting, Power's (2016) article accounts for how the collective memories of a violent past in Ireland might be behind the peaceful response of Irish society to austerity and hardship. This last article shows us therefore that, far from always fuelling conflicts, memory can become sometimes an important tool for inhibiting them. In this respect, we hope that the works gathered in this issue can contribute to broaden our view on the uses of memory and, hence, our understanding of the mechanisms involved in the construction of peace and conflict.

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