

# MEMORY STUDIES

## *Should we forget forgetting?*

JEFFERSON A. SINGER, Connecticut College, USA  
MARTIN A. CONWAY, University of Leeds, UK

### Abstract

Paul Connerton's inquiry in *Memory Studies* into the seven types of forgetting highlights forgetting as an active rather than passive process in both individual and larger cultural memory. The present article suggests that 'forgetting' may be re-interpreted as a problem of relative accessibility from a larger store of available memory. Seen in this light, emotion, meaning and goal relevance are likely to affect a given memory's personal or cultural accessibility. Each of the seven types of forgetting is re-evaluated with these three critical factors' role in memory accessibility given greater attention and prominence.

### Key words

accessibility; availability; emotion; self

Paul Connerton's (2008) provocative mediation on the 'seven types of forgetting' highlights the active role that forgetting can play in both individual and cultural memory. Forgetting as a personal and/or collective response can be, at times, a necessary and adaptive reaction to the alternative of painful or destructive memory. It can also be the explicit or tacit ally of oppression and silence.

We agree with Connerton in his assertion that 'forgetting is not always a failure'. In fact, every sound model of autobiographical memory counts as a central premise the need to discriminate between encoded information that should be accessed and registered information that should be allowed to drift and fade from attentional concern. One only needs to consider how overwhelming it would be if all information that was processed were retained in a long-term store; it would be the ultimate example of useless and dysfunctional hoarding. The study of forgetting, intentional and incidental, is one of the main areas of current memory research in cognitive psychology and it is good to see a concern with forgetting emerging in the cultural study of memory. In the individual, memory filters and selects by 'forgetting' transitory impressions and encounters that are not crucial to ongoing goals, plans and life scripts that come to

define the long-term self (Conway et al., 2004) and, perhaps, something similar occurs within cultural groups.

We have, however, put the word 'forgetting' in quotation marks to address an important distinction that Connerton omits from his account. The distinction is that between *availability* and *accessibility* (Tulving and Pearlstone, 1966). Information that is encoded in long-term memory is available. This means it can potentially be retrieved and through the retrieval process might enter consciousness and so influence experience and behavior. Alternatively, the effects of this available information might be more implicit and operate outside consciousness. However, because information (memories, facts, concepts, words, etc.) is available it does not follow that it is at any given time accessible. Accessibility is determined by many factors and, in general, information in memory, and we suggest in culture, is in variable states of accessibility with some items highly accessible and others highly inaccessible (but note, still available). Thus we prefer to talk about the concept of relative degrees of accessibility than to speak in terms of information being truly lost or forgotten.<sup>1</sup> In the developing neuroscience of memory, we are increasingly finding the existence of two memory systems, a mid-brain limbic circuit, and a later evolved neo-cortical system. Although richly connected to each other, they can indeed operate independently. For example, information processed by a more sensory and perpetual mid-brain system is more likely to register incoming stimuli in iconic form and less likely to be linked to conscious and linguistic memory cues. If such episodic images are not integrated with the autobiographical memory knowledge base and the conceptual self (as mediated by the neo-cortical structures of the brain), they may persist but only in a highly inaccessible form. They are the faintest of airs for which we have no notation to recreate their melody.

In recent research, one of us has employed a highly sensitive body camera that is cued to take a picture of the immediate environment each time the body shifts or movement is detected. When participants wearing these cameras are asked to recall the specifics of locations where they have been days or weeks later, including dates, times, conversations and activities, their recall is highly flawed. However, if they are provided with visual cues produced by the body camera, then their recall for supposedly 'forgotten' details is markedly enhanced. We would suggest that these photographic mnemonics are giving access to a mid-brain episodic memory system that is normally overridden by our preference for the goal-directed and verbal dominated neo-cortical system. Silvan Tomkins, the great affect and personality theorist, anticipated this view of memory and relative accessibility when he explained childhood amnesia not in terms of sexual repression, but as a problem of accessibility to the kinds of physical and affective cues of early childhood that would revive these pre-verbal memories (Tomkins, 1971). As we learn to think in language and our physical perspective on the world changes with development, we lose access to the external and internal cues necessary to locate these memories. He fancifully suggested that if we were to rebuild the infant's nursery in dimensions that would dwarf the prodigal adult returning to it, a flood of 'forgotten' memories would suddenly return.

If we substitute the idea of relative accessibility for forgetting, then we might consider Connerton's article as a reflection on how memory accessibility may be manipulated

both within in the individual memory system and the larger cultural one. In his first type of forgetting (*repressive erasure*), totalitarian regimes remove the memorial cues that attach certain institutions and leaders to images of respect, authority and power. Yet as the former entities of influence are wiped away, what is crucial is that others are substituted and made prominent. No repressive society destroys one set of symbols without instituting a new set of memorial cues to activate similar forms of deference and obeisance to the current authority. We do not forget authority; we simply find that cues to the new order have been made more accessible. As Connerton suggests, this type of replacement can serve either malign or benign purposes. Americans who feel a pang of pride for the 'Stars and Stripes' might have trouble describing the colors or features of the 'Union Jack' that once served as the symbol of the empire of which they were part.

Yet just as the American flag derives its colors from the British standard, 'forgetting' is a statement that implies 'presence by absence'. Both repressive erasure and *prescriptive forgetting* (2) are just as notable for what is not said (what is made inaccessible), as for what is retained. In Connerton's example of prescriptive forgetting, he describes the lay-out of the Metropolitan Museum of Art with its main hallway wings of Roman, Greek and Egyptian Art, leading up to the European masterworks, and its relegation of non-western work to more distant wings and floors. By 'forgetting' these critical currents of human artistic development, we are presented with a *sub rosa* narrative of colonization, racism and marginalization of non-western peoples. Yet very often, the design of contemporary art museums tells the other side of this story. For example, the brand new Museum of Contemporary Art in the Lower Eastside of New York City, with its functional steel staircase and its emphasis on glass walls that integrate the surrounding buildings and graffiti-covered cityscape, is an 'in-your-face' commentary on the bourgeois pretensions and Euro-centric elitism that the Metropolitan represents. Presence by absence, indeed.

What prescriptive forgetting highlights is that the selective activity of long-term memory often rests on the assignment of value and meaning. The choice of the returning Athenians to forego further civil unrest in the interest of the polis, or of the Germans to leave off prosecution of their military establishment in order to allow for a functioning bureaucracy after the Second World War were deliberate decisions in favor of order over ensuing chaos. In a similar way, individuals rely on their long-term goals to dictate what memories will remain accessible and affectively-charged over the life course ((3) *construction of new identity*). Our research (Moffitt and Singer, 1994; Conway and Pleydell-Pearce, 2000) has repeatedly demonstrated that the enduring affective strength of certain self-defining memories is a function of their relevance to individuals' most prominent on-going goals and life themes. Necessarily, as our goals shift, we unloose the emotion and meaning associated with memories that were formerly of great prominence to identity. Where once one's failure to win a particular athletic contest in schoolday competitions was an open narcissistic wound of shame and self-disgust, shifting concerns over the years may seal off this episode, leaving only the slightest trace of regret, bemusement, or even humor at one's former sense of priorities.

On a cultural level ((4) *structural amnesia*), we can ask how many Americans know that a socialist candidate for President of the USA, Eugene Debs, received nearly one million votes in 1920, while in prison for obstructing the First World War effort? Or similarly, how many people in Great Britain know of its 1913 eugenics law that approved sterilization of the mentally deficient? Just as individuals re-organize their priorities and place emphasis on different aspects of their lives through the photographs and letters they save and the stories that they tell, cultures too make selections through textbooks, celebrations and educational curricula. Still, even as values and ideologies lead to shifts in our cultural remembering, we should point out that this is a re-assignment of meaning and accessibility rather than banishment from memory.

One sweeping exercise in cultural forgetting, as Connerton points out, has been modernity's obliteration of the static and hierarchical structures that previously located identity within family, religion, race and class. Yet we disagree with him that the effect of such social transmutability has been the dispensability of memory. On the contrary, contemporary theorists of identity, such as Theodore Sarbin (1986) and Dan McAdams (2001), have placed narrative and memory at the center of the endeavor that modern individuals face in attempting to create personal meaning out of a world removed from inherited and institutionally defined roles and rituals. Although the 19th-century vocabulary of 'memorious' and 'memorist' has faded, our current argot is awash with memory words borrowed from the information age – 'memory bank', 'core dump', 'data base', 'retrieval mode'. Our cinema has taken up the topic of memory as a vital concern, expressing our deep attachment to the act of remembering in a time of rapid technological change. In recent years, we have seen films such as *Total Recall*, *Groundhog Day*, *Memento*, *Fifty First Dates*, *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Finding Nemo* that point to how identity and sense of self are disrupted when memory fails to function properly. The proliferation of personal blogs and memorial websites on the internet illustrate how invested human beings are in the preservation of personal memory, even as the traditional touchstones of cultural and institutional memory are increasingly effaced. The explosion of research in cognitive, personality and social psychology related to autobiographical memory suggests that our scientific community has yet to make memory a discarded or obsolete topic of concern. In the clinical field, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and repressed/recovered memories have replaced hysteria and neurasthenia as the mental disorders that generate the most lively and interesting controversies regarding theory and treatment. Indeed, a case could be made that disorders of memory are one of the current preoccupations of western culture, and we suggest this is so because of the importance of memory for the self: memory is after all the content of the self and, of course, nobody wants to be jumbled or empty.

Connerton is wise to point out the other major threat to memory posed by modernity besides cultural transience; we live in an information age in which there is a surfeit of knowledge. We are overloaded with accessible bits of information – email, internet, cell phone, text, fax, print, television, radio, CD; each of us is a personal emperor of information. Intelligence will increasingly be measured not by the quantity of what we know, but by our skill in knowing what we need to know and how to avoid distraction

from the rest ((5) *annulment*). Productivity will be a function of the ability to inhibit distractions, irrelevant tangents and side paths of trivia and pedantry. Successful use of our memory system will be reflected in how to 'stay on message' and define a sensible narrative in a postmodern cacophony of knowledge. In an informationally rich culture, emphasis is all important for identity. Just like the bad article that gives equal coverage to everything, we avoid individual and cultural memory that is flat and featureless.

Turning to Connerton's sixth type of forgetting (*planted obsolescence*), we again feel that he is less than precise in his specification of what phenomenon is being forgotten. When capitalism markets and advertises new products in order to make current products less desirable, it is not asking us to forget or lose awareness of the old. It is asking us to replace our desire for the current with a desire for the new; we are making less accessible the emotional appeal of what we have and replacing it with passion for what we have yet to acquire. From a cognitive standpoint, we see again not a shift in the memory itself, but in its route of accessibility through affect and meaning. When the current item's meaning as a signifier of status, 'cool-ness', or sexual appeal fades, then its linkages to central categories of self-image fade, and its accessibility retreats to the margins of consciousness. By marketing these symbolic meanings to us, the purveyors of products help us to re-arrange our psychic closets and push certain items to memory's far reaches. However, we do not lose full awareness of them; they serve a vital function as the contrast to the new ('How could I ever have worn such a thing?'; 'Look at the acceleration I get compared to the older model!'). In fact, it is the contrast of what is 'hot' with what is not that gives consumers the thrill that they seek.

The last type of forgetting (*humiliated silence*) brings home our point about accessibility with a sad eloquence. Connerton is careful to say that we 'cannot, of course, infer the fact of forgetting from the fact of silence'. In the face of shame or when one feels trapped beyond reprieve (e.g. a victim of domestic abuse or a child in an alcoholic family), one simply has to go on and cope by de-coupling meaning and language from memory. In such instances, the failure to give voice to memory leaves it sequestered and perhaps denied, but never really gone from the corridors of the self. As Avshalom Margalit (2002) beautifully argued in *The Ethics of Memory*, memory of past harm is a critical ingredient that allows the individual or a society to acknowledge its authentic history and understanding of unique identity in the world. Healthy individuals and societies are not defined by or rigidly attached to their previous injury; they do learn to move forward and perhaps even forgive, but they never forget. In our view of how memory works, such true forgetting would hardly be possible, even if they tried. The past in the individual and in culture is available, the question is: Can we access it?

## Note

- 1 Indeed, according to one view, which we endorse, if information gets into memory it is always available. That is to say that in principle it could be accessed given, for example, the right cue. Perhaps the same is true for culture too? Information is only really lost, only really becomes unavailable, when the physical basis of its storage changes or degrades.

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**JEFFERSON A. SINGER** is a Professor of Psychology at Connecticut College, USA and a clinical psychologist in private practice. He has published over 70 articles, chapters, and book reviews in the fields of personality, autobiographical memory, and clinical psychology. His books include: *Personality and Psychotherapy: Treating the Whole Person* (Guilford Press, 2005); *Memories that Matter* (New Harbinger, 2005); *Message in a Bottle* (The Free Press, 1997); and *The Remembered Self: Emotion and Memory in Personality* (with Peter Salovey, The Free Press, 1993). Address: Department of Psychology, Connecticut College, New London, CT 06320, USA. [email: jasin@conncoll.edu]

**MARTIN A. CONWAY** is Professor of Cognitive Psychology at the University of Leeds, UK and Director of the Institute of Psychological Sciences, where he established the Leeds Memory Group. He is Chair of the Research Board of the British Psychological Society. He has authored and edited several books on human memory, regularly publishes in international journals and co-edits the journal *Memory* which he co-founded in 1993 with his wife Professor Susan Gathercole. His research has been funded by the ESRC, BBSRC, and the Marsden fund of New Zealand. He has collaborators in several laboratories worldwide and is a regular

keynote speaker at international conferences. He has also been a memory expert witness for several years in crown courts and in the appeal court. *Address:* The Leeds Memory Group, Institute of Psychological Sciences, The University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK. [email: M.A.Conway@leeds.ac.uk]