

## Book review

*Vital memory and affect: Living with a difficult past*, edited by Steven D Brown and Paula Reavey. London: Routledge, 2015. 258 pages. ISBN: 978-0415684019, \$49.95, (pbk)

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How can memories of past experiences define so much who we are, or bound us to a place, or cause eternal grief, or suddenly lose their grip on our lives and vanish in the limbo of our past?

In “Vital memory and affect,” Steven D Brown and Paula Reavey (2015) propose an original reconceptualization of memory that allows to account for what they call “vital memories,” that is, “memory that are in some way fundamental to a sense of who we are as persons” (p. xiii). They propose a model of memory as located in the flow of time and as complex configuration of affects, relationships, images and material things, socioculturally situated. Because this model has much to do with current attempts to account for complex modalities of experiencing from a cultural psychological perspective, I wish to briefly summarize that work, before showing its possible prolongations.

### **A topological understanding of expanded memory**

Brown and Reavey propose a thorough examination of what they call “restricted” approaches to memory – approaches that consider memory as something individual, intracranial, and that can be subjected to biases and forgetting. Instead, drawing on James, Spinoza, Lewin as well as Serres and Gattari, they develop an understanding of what they call an “expanded memory.” According to this view, “remembering is performed by a system, a functional mixture of people and things in a particular material environment, rather than isolated individuals. Put more blandly, remembering is a setting-specific operation” (p. 43). To ground this idea, they propose to consider the life-spaces of remembering, in a topological sense. Inspired by Lewin, they consider that the given life-space is made of everything that counts in the constitution of the present experience of the person, “a space of relations (...) with respect to the future significance of our actions” (p. 51). An implication of this is that specific settings enable or afford different types of remembering. The interest of this conception in topological terms is that it invites us to consider the property of an experience not in its details, but as constituted from its

relations; these can be distorted and transformed, but some essential features make us say that it is still “the same.”

Such topological understanding of the life-space is then conceived as part of the flow of our consciousness; memories appear as elements that create “chreods” in Serres’ terms, that is, that shape the very bed of the river in which we experience the world. A memory is such, as long as it shapes the present – but may vanish if with time the bed has been transformed, and does not guide the present or the future anymore. Hence, following Bergson, the authors can also theorize forgetting, as “selective canalization of the past, such that only those aspects of our past that may inform our current actions are retained at any given point” (p.71).

In addition, the authors draw on Spinoza both to highlight the affective nature of these memories and the way in which they can expand our capacity to experience the world, and the ethical implications that follow. In effect, according to them, Spinoza’s core ethical principle is to maximize our endeavor to exist; and “the way to increasing our powers is via the ordering of our relations with the world in such a way that we maximize successful encounters and minimize unsuccessful encounters” (p. 79).

With these few principles highlighted, Brown and Reavey examine a series of situations in which vital memories are experienced, challenged, created or contained. Doing so, they show many implications of the basic grammar they propose. In effect, one of the dynamic they highlight is the “unfolding” of life-spaces: life-spaces can expand from a specific setting, with their specific “arrangements” or “assemblages,” and open up in different directions, touching many situations in the past (or future or elsewhere) deeply connected as part of comparable assemblages. In this unfolding, distal and past experiences are explored and they come to enrich the present; these unfolding and expansion are triggered or afforded by the topological properties of the setting. However, these unfolding can also be encouraged or supported by the setting, or not recognized if not deliberately ignored, by individual people, institutional agents, group dynamics and the media, or institutions.

## Five case studies

These ideas are put to work in a series of case studies that can be read as variations of the work of the various aspects just highlighted.

The first example considered is that of adults who had been victims of abuse during their childhood. Here, the authors show how specific arrangements constitute or contain these vital memories. Hence, the memory of a former child sitting on a wall helped by an adult to go down can contain a memory of abuse. These, however, reread through time, can also evoke contradictory meanings – the pleasure of the child being helped by an adult vs. the abusive touch of the adult doing so. The vital memory is connected precisely to the tipping experience and the array of contradictory feelings, mainly connected to the contradictory experience of being a child with agency vs. being dependent to the adults’ will. The authors’ proposition is that the invariant constitution of that situation (wall/adult/child) remains active in the present and can awake this whole set of past experiences upon the present:

any situation in which a child is on a height and helped by an adult can become a trigger to unfold these layers of experience. However, the same place or space can also be experienced in the present, and so can its affordances. The now-adult might see the wall from his or her grown-up perspective, and access other affects, or experiences. What the authors suggest is thus that going back to these experiences, afforded by such time-spaces, can also allow exploring and enriching these ambivalences and contradictory feelings in new ways.

The second example regards the relations of adoptive children and to their parents. Foster and adoptive parents in the UK are encouraged by placement agencies to build “memory books” for the children, so that these can have material to build up memories and establish a sense of continuity beyond multiple placements. The authors show how much these albums, as well as objects or pictures in children’s room, constitute the life-space of these children in their families, yet also can unfold in various directions. Notably, adopted children can unfold these times-spaces so as to incorporate past foster parents or biological parents as significant to them, for instance by adding their pictures in their rooms. Although these expose adoptive parents to ambivalent feelings and experiences, the authors highlight here the importance for adopted children of these deployment of time-spaces in various distal experiences, which can, however, be more or less recognized, or silenced by adoptive parents, often with the intention to protect the child.

The next example opens up the question of remembering at a collective level. Here, the memories of survivors of the London bombings are explored. The authors show the complex mutual constitution of private recollections and the media, and the performative power of these memories once fixated in public discourses. Hence, they show how, for individuals having been for instance in the metro in which a bomb exploded, reading about the events and seeing maps of the tube allows to re-explore the time-space configurations of their experience – where I was seated, who was next to me, how it smelled, what was the noise on my side. They show how individual discourses, made public via the newspapers or other media, were used by each person to make sense of their own experiences, yes also at times orienting them in directions they refused – for instance, being seen as victims seeking revenge. For these whose discourses had made public, Brown and Reavey also show the difficulty of becoming again agents of their memories, and not imprisoned by the collective version of that memory or their role in this remembering. Finally, they demonstrate how these events, and their intensity, both privately and amplified by the public discourses and the media, became turning points in the life of many – a point from which life cannot be read similarly again.

The weight of institution is even stronger in the next example, which concerns a psychiatric prison ward. Brown and Reavey show how a total institutions’ policy consisting in “ignoring” the inmates’ past, together with the heavy physical transformations caused by chemical medication, affect these persons. The inmates are trying to reestablish a sense of continuity and connect to their own past memories, at times through their constrained bodies. Paradoxically, inmates are also very aware of the fact that the time-space of the ward, that excludes their past and

forces them to an immobile present, contains the expanded life-spaces of the caregivers – trouble at home affects their conduct toward them. The chapter interestingly raises the question of the misbalance between these un/authorized expanded time-spaces, and the ethical implication of such deprivation for the inmates.

In contrast, the last example concerns a memory museum in the Netherlands, in which older people are exposed to rooms, daily objects and pieces of furniture corresponding to these of their own past. Brown and Reavey show that these arrangements of objects have the power to open and expand the present life-space in a wide variety of directions, and people convoke many layers of experiences, in which they have different perspective – as a child using a glass bottle, as a mother, or as a grandmother – thus revitalizing present experiences. Such observation underlines the role of materiality and all senses in deploying time-space in older people, beyond narratives.

Hence, in these five cases, Brown and Reavey work with the idea that vital memories are embodied and affective configurations, partly distributed and refracted through relational spaces and places, with topological properties. These become relevant in the present when topological properties demand their unfolding, thus expanding the present, revisiting the past and guiding futures. Yet, this also implies that social dynamics are actively facilitating or constraining this expansive work, and thus, shape a person's present, past and future experiences.

### **From vital memories to theorizing human experience in society**

In their conclusive chapter, Brown and Reavey propose a series of schema to describe or represent the various models involved. My only regret is that this schematization is not offered to start with and in support of the many case studies. The task of constructing the common thread or model through the cases and their variations through the chapters falls on the side of the reader. However, this opening also allows me to come back to the authors propositions and highlight what I see as main contributions to a sociocultural understanding of human development.

First, the understanding of memory proposed Brown and Reavey, grounded in a wide diversity of theoretical sources, is very consonant with current approaches in sociocultural psychology. In his work, Wagoner (2017) proposes re-readings of Bartlett that show the work of remembering through time, shaped by emotions and cultural means. De Saint-Laurent is elaborating a model of remembering along the lifecourse which sees the memory act as relational, situated, mediated by symbolic and material tools, both a means and a product of recalls, supported or constrained in the settings of recall, and linked to dynamics of imagination – as such, connecting proximal to distal experiences (de Saint-Laurent, 2017; de Saint-Laurent & Zittoun, in press).

Second, the more general theoretical underlying model here needs to be highlighted. The authors indeed admit a deeply dynamic understanding of human lives in society. They ground their proposition in a careful rereading of the work of

Lewin; its relevance to current studies is worth highlighting. His proposition to study a person's life-space at some point in time and space is still highly relevant; as few theories do, it allows indeed both to have a rich understanding of human experience of time, and of the deep interrelation of the real and unreality. For Lewin, indeed, count as part of the life-space any past or future, proximal or distal experience that is meaningful and participates to a person's experience in a certain situation. A second point worth underlying is that of the topological understanding of human experience: it is configurations, or patterns of emotional experiences that have stability through time, and that it is configurations, or patterns, that can remain active in shaping experiences, or that can be reactivated, transformed or vanish through time. Such configurations are at the same time psychological realities, and related to beings-in-the world, that is, with an emotional, embodied, material quality. Now, how to combine life-worlds – as general evolving fields – and specific configurations?

In our own work, reading both Lewin and Schuetz (Schuetz, 1944, 1945; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015c), we have proposed the notion of “sphere of experience” to go beyond this tension. We have defined these as stable configurations of situated acting, with specific others, identity aspects, emotional qualities, intentions – that is, configuration of experiences. These can be recognized as they “feel the same” to the person – and thus, as in the cases reported here, people might connect situations or social setting which may be apparently different or disjoint, but because they feel “the same”, or demand the same action, or demand a certain posture or contain a specific object – because, for any reason, a relation can be establish between an experience and another one. Hence, a person has not one life-world or life-space with different zones; rather, we see the life-world of the person as continuous reconfiguration of spheres of experiences and of the relations between them. At any moment in time, some come to the fore, and other needs to be revised, disappear or created. At any moment, one sphere of experience is proximal and the others are distal, if these have a relevance at that moment for the person. This model allows us to conceptualize tensions, experiences of contradictions, but also, learning, imagination and remembering, as dynamics of linking of spheres of experiences, and transformations of these through specific processes (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2015; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015a, 2015b). Finally, such a model, developed as theory of imagination, allows us to see remembering as an expansion of experience oriented towards the past – distal experiences thus entering in dialogue with present proximal experiences (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016). Such work is always mediated through the use of various social and semiotic resources, is deeply embodied as it often takes place below or beyond language, and deeply affective; thus, imagining and remembering are always dynamics and mutually constitutive (Zittoun et al., 2013). Brown and Reavey, however, allow us to emphasize the relational and embodied nature of the spheres of experiences, and the institutional constrains.

In effect, third, the authors try to account for not only the person's experiences, but social and institutional guidance in that experience. It might be recalled here

that Lewin (2000) tried to go beyond the problem of a purely idiosyncratic or solipsistic psychology by including the role of the social world “at the boundary” of the person’s life-space- again, what count for him or her. However, in the light of the data presented here, and from the evidences brought in cultural psychology, seeing culture just “at the boundary” of self and the world is limiting. Rather, the mutual constitution of social and material arrangements becomes part of the configuration of mind. In their case analyses, Brown and Reavey include elements of these social dynamics, showing how that interpersonal recognition, social networks, the circulation of knowledge through the media, material and spatial arrangements, and institutions, guide and constrain – or more generally, participate to the making of vital memories. Beyond that scope, how to theorize and integrate a full reading of the social space and its guidance of mind and experience is, however, yet to be done. It seems that sociocultural psychology (as well as other societal or social psychologies, see for instance Holzkamp, 2015) still is lacking a full articulation of these two level of dynamics and their variations. We have proposed elsewhere to examine how social situations propose positions, and artifacts that can be translated in certain modes of semiotic guidance (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2013; Zittoun, 2011; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2015a, 2015b). Yet, this is only a partial solution to a more general question to which we don’t have fully satisfying solutions.

Finally, fourth, Brown and Reavey ground their work in a specific philosophical tradition, finding its origin in Spinoza. Although Spinoza was also in the background of Vygotsky’s work, the implications of his propositions for current sociocultural psychology are often neglected, despite the careful reading of some critical authors (Bronckart, 2008; Stenner & Brown, 2009; van der Veer, 1984). Here, Brown and Reavey use it to ground their ethical concern and give an explicit line to their own normative choices. One can only, if not share that particular choice, be inspired by their responsible posture.

As a whole, thus, “Vital memory and affect” is a refreshing, deep and inspiring work, and one can only hope that it will inspire more dialogues between that line of reflection and current developments in sociocultural psychology.

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