

Memory in Social Research

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Abstract. The first part of the present study refers to the way in which some memory limits negatively affect the data faithfulness in social research. Then, a distinction is made between faithfulness, trust-worthiness and reliability, arguing that memory plays a crucial role also in the other two important requirements of empirical research. Finally, the symbolic nature of memory is analyzed – i.e., its close osmosis with the dimension of meaning – and emphasized other effects on social research.

Keywords: Memory; Meaning; Social research.

In the Dialogue on science *Theaetetus* (191c8-195a9), Socrates compares the experiences etched in memory to the engravings on a wax tablet, the writing system of the time. Over time, the number of memory-related similes has grown: memory as a warehouse (Aristotle and Saint Augustine), a palace or a garden (mnemotechnics), an original *tabula rasa* (Locke), a narrowing bottle neck (Renaissance¹), a photo album, a magnetic tape, a software, etc.

The basis of these different similes is still the symbolic nature of that writings / memories etched in wax. At the same time, the idea of memory as a delimited space has stood out: a space on which the experienced reality is imprinted in an approximately faithful way, precisely according to those limits.

The first part of the present study takes the same interpretative approach. That is, it refers to how some memory limitations negatively affect empiric investigation, particularly data faithfulness in social research. Then, I will distinguish between faithfulness, trust-worthiness and reliability, – arguing that memory plays a crucial role not only in faithfulness but also in the other two important requirements of empirical research.

Finally, I will return to the symbolic nature of memory – i.e. its close osmosis with the dimension of meaning – and emphasize other effects on social research.

1. Memory and data faithfulness

“Memory errors” constitute a very complex field. Schacter (2001) classified them into seven categories. The same “magic number” (Miller 1956) is also found in the seven ways of forgetting recorded by Assman (2016). Similarly, seven are the reasons that erase, mystify, or distort memories, according to Gobo (2015, 67).

Memory (with its “errors”) can play a significant role on the researcher’s role. For instance, one could think of the empirical basis creation, the legitimacy of research (“context of justification”), the availability of results etc. For example – in the context of ethnographic research – the notes or diaries used by the researcher to jot down observations, feelings, ideas and intuitions could be distorted if he remembered events that corroborate a prior interpretation, and forgot others that contradict it.

The passage of time as well might cloud the memory. To avoid this, the Lynds (1929, 1937) would take notes immediately after any contact with the inhabitants of Middletown, and would even report on accidental conversations. However, the concept of “faithfulness” usually refers to the interviewee.

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¹ See Assmann (2016/2019, 11-3, 61-3).

They must recall the necessary information to answer, so that we could claim that memory is so crucial that it pertains to the interview as a whole².

To facilitate the task of remembering, questions in the survey should follow a logical order, since the interviewee's "ordering of ideas is conducted by topics" (Ballatori 1994, 93). This precaution is nonetheless insufficient *per se*.

The researcher should further verify how faithful is the transformation of each answer in a data matrix. Generally speaking, faithfulness is precisely concerned with the correspondence of the *datum* in the matrix to the respective status on the property³. If this correspondence is only partial or null, the datum is not faithful.

Different misinterpretations can result from the phrasing of a question. Schacter shows how the re-enactment of a past event can change depending on the phrasing of the question in the survey (1996/2001, 104-5). The use of abstract terms and /or concepts limits short-term memory, leading the interviewee to non-relevant answers (Baddeley 1982/1999, 30; Montesperelli 2003, 65 ff).

Some scholars try to offer more detailed stimuli, as in the case of "stories" and "position vignettes". The former are episodes devised by Marradi (2005), anchored to daily life and well-detailed, told to interviewees so that they will express their opinion by remembering the narrated episode.

Similarly, "position vignettes"⁴ and other iconographic stimuli answer the same concern: to help comprehension. In this case the researcher resorts to visual memory, which is more lasting than verbal.

Socio-personal events or other factual information are usually easier to remember – even after several years. This fact would constitute an important guarantee of faithfulness in surveys based on these types of information, such as longitudinal surveys, for example those on social mobility in Italy (see Cobalti and Schizzerotto 1994).

Frequently the survey is verbose; moreover, interviewees are sometimes not motivated and often in a hurry. The survey presents no interest to them, and is hence not carefully read. For instance, interviewees are asked to read a long list of possible answer to a question in just a matter of seconds, remember them all, and appropriately choose the one closest to their ideas⁵.

This will result in the interviewee only remembering a few options - usually the first or the last on the list (see Treves 1998, 23) - and only choosing among these. Some software employed in telephonic surveys allow to reorder the list for every interviewee, specifically to avoid this problem. This solution, however, does not appear to be optimal in my opinion. Notwithstanding the reordering, interviewees will at any rate only remember a few options, especially since they only hear but cannot read the questionnaire.

A number of scholars have estimated the number of options that can be remembered: according to Miller (1956) and Luce (1959, 5 ff.) they are 7, with a range of ± 2 depending on particular conditions. Other more demanding scholars advise however not to exceed 3 options in all⁶.

Similarly, also taxonomies with too many classes could escape the respondent's memory. Exceptions are the classes of a cardinal variable, each of which has a very low semantic autonomy. In this context, it is sufficient to remember the overall meaning of the variable itself, rather than each of its categories. For example, it is straightforward to classify respondents by age, even when each category includes only one year, and the set of categories is numerous.

² According to Tourangeau and Rasinski (1988), re-enactments during an interview occupy the central position in a five acts sequence, from understanding the question to communicating the answer. However, this sequence seems too rationalistic and linear to me, as instead answers come from many feedbacks and reworkings *in itinere*. Furthermore, the two scholars seem to only consider mental processes of the individual respondent, leaving aside cultural and communicative contexts around him (Fideli and Marradi 1996; Gobo 2015, 57).

³ "Property" means a characteristic of any "cognitive object" (object, subject, event). The "state" is a way in which that property is manifested.

⁴ Position vignettes are so-called to distinguish them from "salience vignettes", in which the task is to recognize a theme, as in the TAT (Russo and Vasta 1988).

⁵ For examples, see Marradi (2019, 75-83).

⁶ See Galtung (1967, 108), Marradi (1984, 56), Bernardi (2005, 176), Marradi (2019, 80-1).

Nevertheless, apart from the exception of cardinal variables classification, it is still feasible to avoid unfaithfulness stemming from an excessive number of classes by breaking the list into several semantically homogeneous parts.

Alternatively, an open question can be asked by the interviewer, who will then verify each answer against the pre-decided categories, numerous as they might be. This task is however not usually trivial.

Faced with these and other examples, we may ask ourselves how to verify data faithfulness; this question is indeed crucial, as gathering accurate information should be the main goal of any research. But this effort is time consuming and demanding since it would require a cell-by-cell examination.

In statistical and psychometric theory, the assessment of the degree of correspondence between state and data relies on two conditions: the existence and knowableness of the actual state, and the measurability of the property in question, so as to detect the amplitude of any gap between actual and recorded status.

Unfortunately, in the field of social research the possibility of knowing the actual status is limited only to a few properties: typically, socio-personal data, which are attested by official documentation (residence, educational qualifications, voting records, etc.). Contrarily, knowability of attitudes and opinions' actual state is dubious, and sometimes its existence itself is uncertain. For instance, a survey question might presuppose opinions or knowledge that the interviewee might not possess (Gobo 1997, 82).

Furthermore, the few properties that would allow such faithfulness control are often not continuous or detectable by measurement units, and therefore do not provide a measurement of the gap between state and data (Marradi 1990).

In the case of surveys on attitudes and opinions, an “in-depth” non-directive interview could be added - for each interviewee - to the survey interview. This approach could potentially capture misrepresentations hidden in the directive interview answers. This procedure - labeled “interview on the interview”⁷ - would be very useful, but it is almost never employed as it is extremely time- and money- consuming, two crucial resources in the widespread Fordist conception of social research. In any case, even if the state of the subject did exist and were knowable, it is not given that it be stable. Opinions could fluctuate, and the reconstruction of a memory could change over time (see section 3).

2. *Research trust-worthiness*

A scientific community used to sift through procedures and empirical results achieved by colleagues in the same discipline should be part of trust-worthiness assessment. That is, said community should be capable to evaluate the *trust-worthiness* of the conceptual and operational definition of the different research outputs (Marradi 1990, 85).

While faithfulness concerns - as we have just seen - the single datum in its relation with the corresponding property state, trust-worthiness is a more general estimate of the probability that a given research (in that specific space-time context, subjects, researchers and collaborators, etc.) produce data which are more or less faithful. In other words, faithfulness assessment requires direct knowledge of the relative status, while the estimate of trust-worthiness is based on experience and on explicit and tacit knowledge of those who conduct the evaluation.

In my opinion, research that requires respondents to have very detailed memories has a high probability of including unfaithful data. The study of daily behaviors using time-balances detections entails asking each sampled subject for a systematic recording of time spent in a series of activities. From this recording, the researcher reconstructs the allocation of temporal resources and - indirectly - the behavioral models or the relevant values underlying the choices.

⁷ Leader in this line of research was the Lodz research center in Poland (Lutynski 1988), which was followed by a series of fruitful and original research coordinated by Alberto Marradi (1988; Marradi-Gasperoni 1992 and 2002).

Sorokin and Berger (1939) asked for the recording of activities with a 5-minute sensitivity. For a similar research in Turin, the survey covered an entire 24-hour period: all daily activities of each family had to be self-transcribed in a specific booklet, specifying their duration; for this research as well, the minimum temporal sensitivity threshold was 5 minutes.

Since behaviors were recorded, research was believed to be more objective (Belloni 1984, 51). However, I would advise greater caution in the matter: apart from the close link between semantics and memory (par. 4), remembering all the activities carried out is a difficult task, even more so remembering each individual activity extent and its temporal allocation. Likewise, the unfortunate person is unlikely to register their ongoing activities; rather he will do it *ex post*, maybe at the end of the day, in their spare time. Thus, the recording of behaviors will not be much more "objective" than other ways of reconstructing people's opinions, values, attitudes.

The same fallacy concerns retrospective research that ask the interviewee to remember certain episodes of their biography, their temporal location and extent. This information is apparently factual, and hence less biased by subjective evaluations and value orientations. In truth, the effects on memory of both time passed and the relation between experience and memory could make the respondent's responses far from "objective" (Corbetta 1999, 228-9).

Similar observations apply to several studies concerning the report relating to household expenses. The origin dates back to the first social investigations in 1850s France. The engineer – and later sociologist – Le Play would asked families to write down income and expenses in a diary, so as to then reconstruct the choices, behavioral patterns, and daily life of each family (Serger 1970, 181). Similar tools were adopted by Rowintree who asked 35 working-class families to keep records of income and expenses, as well as expenses for daily groceries (see Gobo 1997, 17ss.).

These examples have requests that are too meticulous, which can be pedantic or useless in the eyes of many interviewees, to the point of not justifying memory efforts.

Nonetheless, these limitations can be partially overcome if respondents are highly motivated to answer. A well-known research directed by Lazarsfeld used family consumption balances to reconstruct the daily life of Marienthal's unemployed. In that context, women administered the resources, carefully spending the little money available. Hence, they proved to be extremely accurate in remembering even the most minute voices, while men were much more distracted and forgetful (Jahoda et al., 1933/1986, 97).

Nowadays, an important source of information is ISTAT's periodic survey on the consumption of Italian families. This constitutes an incredibly important survey, as it contributes to the estimation of the country's national accounts, to the definition of the incidence of poverty, the distribution of public funds, etc. Indeed it is used by institutions, political decision-makers, experts in various disciplines.

For a 14 days period, each sampled family must daily record – in a “diary” of around sixty pages which is not trivial to fill out – the expenses incurred by all family members for the purchase of food and drinks, meals and drinks out of home, ready-made food, products at vending machines and non-food consumer goods and services, the quantities of self-produced goods (either consumed or given away), the places of most frequent purchase for food and non-food items. In turn, the surveyor asks – with a direct interview of the family after one month – additional information on the main expenses incurred by the family for goods and services and for the purchase of durable goods in the last three months⁸.

This survey appears to me so articulate, based on a wide and very meticulous range of expenses, to be too demanding. It requires a significant memory effort, for instance when the interviewee must indicate yearly amount of family savings, monthly expenses for each consumption type and for the many sub-items of each type. It is possible – and perhaps plausible – that in this case as well the compilation takes place, to say the least, at the end of the day, as for time-records, relying on approximate memories.

⁸ The questionnaire is 244 pages long.

3. Reliability in the relationship between data

While faithfulness and trust-worthiness concern the relation between the scientist's observation and the domain of witnessed referents, *reliability* concerns the relationship between two (or more) observations of the same cognitive object. If they differ, an observation error occurred, and such observation is not accurate and reliable as it should.

The origins of the notion of reliability relate to the physical sciences, a domain outside the scope of the present paper. I will therefore limit myself to a few ideas within the field of human sciences. Regarding multiple measures repeated on the same subjects, the *panel* consists in detecting the evolution of some trends, for example a diachronic change of attitudes, by interviewing the same sample multiple times over a long period of time. However, finding the same sample of interviewees twice or three times is extremely difficult. For this reason, the researcher usually prefers a retrospective approach, in which interviewees are asked to report on past events. Research on Middletown adopted this solution. In Middletown III (Caplow et al. 1982), 50 years after the previous survey, the same people were not interviewed.

For some, this was a limit, because the results proved “without a sense of historical depth” (Caccamo 1992, 184), as if images of the past and the present were only two photos, which do not allow to follow the transitions, developments, traumas of the transformations under analysis. From a methodological point of view, two reports distant in time cannot be conflated into one – albeit retrospective – based on memory. Reliability structurally requires at least two surveys on the same subjects.

Hermann Ebbinghaus' studies on memory contributed greatly to the definition of the first analysis techniques to estimate precision of repeated observations. However, it was Cronbach – commonly known for its *alpha* reliability coefficient – who identified two fundamental assumptions of this estimate: (1) the state of the object does not spontaneously change during the interval between the first and last observation; 2) nor is it altered by the observation process. Cronbach himself added to this formulation several doubts and critical remarks, especially on the first assumption (1947, 1-2, 4). The second assumption, instead, is often contradicted by contemporary survey procedures in social sciences.

Developing Ebbinghaus' intuition, in the 1900s a procedure was devised to “measure” reliability of an instrument by repeating the observations: it is the so-called *test-retest*, in which the researcher submits the same stimuli to the same subjects in different times (see Anastasi 1954/1997, 164 ff.).

The procedure is as follows:

- i. a stimulus (e.g. a direct question) is administered to multiple individuals at time t ;
- ii. the responses are coded and transformed into a vector of the matrix;
- iii. phases i. and ii. are repeated at time t' with the same interviewees and method;
- iv. a correlation coefficient is calculated between the numerical vectors obtained in phases ii. and iii.

The higher this correlation is, the greater the faithfulness of the recorded: in this sense, reliability and faithfulness would be the same thing. However, it is not so.

The correspondence between two (or more) trials does not imply their faithfulness at all. This is what happens in systematic errors: two (or more data) are identical, since they are both distorted by the same cause.

Also consider the case in which – given two repeated observations – the interviewee changes opinion or modifies a memory between t and t' ⁹. When he is interviewed for the second time, instead of manifesting his new point of view, he remembers his first answer and repeats it, concerned with

⁹ «One of the main causes of transformation in our memories is represented by the phenomena of interference. The time that separates the encoding [of a memory] from its recovery is filled with other learning experiences, often similar to the first one, that compete or integrate with it (...). The interference exerted by subsequent events on the re-enactment of previous events is also at the basis of one of the most effective procedures for inducing false testimonial memories. » (Vannucci 2008, 20).

showing consistency with past positions¹⁰ even at the cost of providing unfaithful declarations. Those with a long experience of empirical research know how frequent the concern of being coherent in their beliefs is, and how much this fits into a more general picture – already defined by Nietzsche (1886/1968, 71) and called by Goffman (1959) "presentation of the self".

Going back to the *test-retest*, we could then widen the interval between t and t' , trusting that time will erase the subject's memory of their previous response (this would be part of the "oblivion of erasure" put forward by Ricoeur, as explained in the next section).

But even if the two data resulted to be different from each other, they could both still be faithful: one with respect to the interviewee's original position, and the other with respect to the subsequent point of view. Whether, on the other hand, one of the two data is unfaithful, the researcher would still have to face the arduous task of finding out which one.

In other words, two concordant data are not necessarily evidence of faithfulness, and two discordant data do not prove un-faithfulness; thus, reliability cannot be confused with faithfulness, but – at most – could represent its cue.

Confusion between faithfulness and reliability has a noble origin: Aristotle considered worthy of knowledge only what was repeated in different referents or events, precisely because their "substance" – much more important than "accidents" – would manifest itself through repetition. Although a prosaic reason was much more decisive to muddy the waters: it is much more difficult to control faithfulness than reliability. As we have seen, faithfulness requires looking at referents external to the matrix, which is incredibly tough. Instead, verifying reliability is much easier, because it only requires looking within the matrix and, perhaps, solving problems by calculating correlation between vectors. It is very complex to understand if a narrated fact really happened, while it is much easier to detect whether the interviewee has told the same thing in the first and second survey. Confusing faithfulness with reliability means choosing the easiest way, even if it leads to a completely different direction. However, it also means considering the state and the datum as the same thing, which is a blast for all objectivists.

4. *Memory and the biographical approach*

We have so far considered "standard" social research – i.e. based on data matrix, statistical processing and analysis of the co-variation between variables. On the "non-standard"¹¹ side, recent decades have seen a development of the biographical method – along the so-called "narrative turn" (see Riesman 2001 and 2007). This approach encompasses some promising substantive and methodological innovations: the narrative is seen both as cognitive process constantly actuated in everyday life (Bruner 1986), and as an empirical research tool in the social sciences ("oral history", "life histories", etc.).

Methodology wise, some stress the limits of an approach based the interviewees memories, which render correct and truthful reports difficult to obtain (Corbetta 1999, 228-229; Campelli 1990). In short, it would be a scarcely "trustworthy" method (par. 2).

In fact, if it is rather problematic to verify the faithfulness of a datum in the "standard" co-variation method, it is even more so in the "non-standard" approach. Indeed, the correspondence between state and *datum* is lost in the absence of a matrix, and therefore the very notion of "faithfulness" collapses (par. 1). It is replaced by the more nuanced concept of "conformity", which in turn concerns the correspondence of the narrative to both the narrated event and the intention, memory of the narrator.

Let us begin with the conformity of the story to the events which are object of the story. In reconstructing how an event has "actually" unfolded, it is sometimes possible to triangulate sources,

¹⁰ Precisely repetition and its effects on memory can distort knowledge (Schacter 1996/2001, 114). «One of the contexts in which the need for stability emerges most is that of attitudes and beliefs. The majority of people has expectations of stability over time in their attitudes and beliefs (...). We tend to perceive ourselves to be consistent over time and therefore to think that we have firm and not easily modifiable attitudes and beliefs "(Vannucci 2008, 79; cf. Gobo 2015, 90).

¹¹ For a clear outline of the distinction between standard / non-standard, see Marradi (1996).

i.e. to compare interviews, audiovisuals, archives, other documents, etc. This is enabled by the “democratization of memory”, that is, by the fact that the possibilities of accessing the past are manifold, through biographies or archives not only of well-known personalities, but also of ordinary people, unknown to official sources.

The recurrence criterion is another way to try to control conformity of a story to the narrated event. If multiple interviews describe it in the same way, it is reasonable to believe that it really happened accordingly: «in my opinion, repetition is the salt of any serious research. I was happy every time a story was repeated because it meant that the various pieces, all equal and at the same time all different, would start to fit, finding the right place. The mosaic was taking shape and growing” (Revelli 1989, 48).

We could consider recurrence as the “non-standard” equivalence of reliability (par. 3): both are only cues, traces of objectivity of the collected information. In fact, it is not clear how many repeated occurrences it takes to render the trace credible, nor how many discrepancies to invalidate it. In addition, the same event told twice by the same interviewee in two different interviews is sometimes told differently: this happens not only because two interviewers will never ask identical questions, and not only when the two surveys are separated by a long period of time that could affect memories. It happens above all because a single interview will never exhaust the whole biographical and historical memory of the interviewees. Therefore, their story will only be an extract resulting from a selection also made interacting with the interviewer (Portelli 2007, 18; see Montesperelli 2003, 129). As Gadamer writes, experience can certainly be remembered, but it does not exhaust itself in any specific memory (1960/1983, 94)¹².

It is even more difficult to verify the conformity of a narrative to the narrator's memory and representations: the interviewee could be telling what he does not really think, moved by acquiescence towards the interviewer, social desirability, the intention of implying something, etc. These are frequent distortions in “non-standard” as much as in “standard” research (see Marradi 2019).

Both sides of conformity – with respect to factual events and to subjective representations – are affected by the adaptive, dynamic, symbolic and interpretative nature of memory¹³. Far from being a simple wax surface or an inanimate commodity placed on the mind's shelves, memories are active and transform, much like living organisms (Musatti 1931).

Also testimony of a past event, even in the witness' best intentions, can be swayed by many factors: previous or subsequent experiences, mental patterns, hierarchies of relevance and plausibility, expectations, stereotypes, typifications, others' memories. In addition, we could also list many unfathomable reasons (Mastrobernardino 2011, 29-35), or latently deriving from the intersubjective dimensions of either collective memory (Halbwachs 1924 and 1949), historical-linguistic preconceptions (Gadamer 1960), or proximity among people (Ricoeur 2000/2003, 175-176).

Especially from the Seventies, studies on “false memories” have been growing, to the point of constituting an autonomous disciplinary field, characterized by specific cognitive objectives and detection methods. Nevertheless, what the social researcher most often encounters are not “false memories”, but stories halfway between reality and imagination. In these accounts, « “invention” and “information” interchange and overlap, rendering the boundary between outside and inside the narrator exceedingly unclear» (Portelli 2007, 10).

The interview can make the interviewee remember what was hitherto forgotten, silent, unquestionable, and therefore not worthwhile of thought nor speech. As has happened to me and many other researchers multiple times, interviewees often thanks the researcher at the end of the interview because the survey was an opportunity to reflect on themselves and their life story, and because it allowed them to problematize what they used to take for granted.

¹² «No autobiography is complete, no autobiographer can escape the question: what Self is the autobiography about, from which perspective is it composed, and for whom? The autobiography that we actually write is but one *version*, a way of achieving consistency » (Bruner 2002, 84; cf. Bruner 1986).

¹³ In this regard, Arendt (1978) offers a beautiful image: memory is like the slow and unceasing work of transformation of wrecks left on the bottom of the sea, modified by the continuous flows of life.

Hence a subject's "narrative identity"¹⁴ is always partial and in-progress for the subject itself, as well as in its communication with others (Ricoeur 1983-1985: see Bichi 2002).

The interviewee narrates themselves as if their current situation is the coherent, logical effect of past events. Perhaps, their story exaggerates similarities between now and then, to impose a sense of coherence and connection between facts that would be unrelated in themselves. Other circumstances are instead discarded, in order to maintain this idea of continuity, and *vice versa* others are strongly underlined, almost as if episodes of a personal epic to which all other circumstances deemed secondary can be traced. Finally, some events are remembered and told as a metaphor of implicit meanings, which the interlocutor must find.

Like memory, so its limits, distortions, gaps often originate from meanings of interest for the researcher. Facts can be narrated differently from their actual occurrence but in accordance with the meaning given to them by the narrator. Hence the "mistakes" of memory can sometimes be more important than the "truth". For this reason as well, "conformity" is different from "faithfulness", precisely because the former consists in its adherence not only to facts, but also to its distance from them. In this sense, memory – rather than a warehouse to store "goods" in, and subsequently recover them intact (par. 1) – is a matrix of meanings (Portelli 1985, 18).

The ample and diversified classic literature on memory confirms the concept of memory not as a simple depository. Rather, memory consists in an active re-elaboration of memories, as a use of time based on criteria of likelihood and relevance, on classifications, representations, even based on relations with the memory of others. When Halbwachs describes "collective memory", he considers it a creation on the basis of social change and of mediations between meanings inherent of individual memories. Furthermore, for Halbwachs social differentiation corresponds to a plurality of collective memories in dynamic relationship between them (1949). For Bartlett (1932) remembering, like any cognitive activity, is an effort towards meaning creation. That is, it does not proceed from past to present, but it also makes the reverse itinerary. In fact, its ultimate aim is to find a meaning that agrees with the current needs of the individual. Hence, memory contributes in a crucial way not only to the preservation of what *has been*, but also to the construction of what *is*. Precisely by virtue of "what is", Benjamin writes that "a lived event is concluded, or at least locked in the sole sphere of lived experience, while a remembered event is limitless, because it is only the key to access everything which happened before and after it" (1955/1973, 28). Still on the Frankfurt side, Marcuse (1955) extends memory to the unconscious, to its fantasies and meanings marginalized by the "principle of performance", prevailing in today's repressive society.

Going back to empirical research, in order to try to trace the meanings which shape memories, the researcher must draw on his own technical skills, but also on the "art of listening", on hermeneutic sensitivity, on his explicit and tacit personal knowledge. All precious qualities, but difficult to encode. All of this is even more vital when the interpretation wants to include oblivion as well. Oblivion should be conceptualised not only as a limitation, as a mere memory gap, but as a crack on its surface, full of meanings of its own. This happens indirectly: to remember something one has to forget something else. For a subject to recall and give meaning to a clipping of their own experience, another part of it must remain in the shadow.¹⁵

For Gadamer (1960) we think, speak, act, and in general are situated into history thanks to tradition, which is in fact composed by re-enactment but above all by oblivion: "I consider as one of the greatest intuitions passed to me by others the fact that Heidegger once, decades ago, explained to us that the past is not eminently in remembrance, but in forgetting" (Gadamer 1986-1993 / 1995, 9).

¹⁴ "Narrative identity" can be conceived as a unit formed "narratively", through consecutive identifications with and departures from socio-cultural objectifications. It is also the subjects' ability to reflect on themselves, to establish a narrative continuity across different experiences.

¹⁵ "Imagine a man who did not possess the power of forgetting at all and who was thus condemned to see everywhere a state of becoming: such a man would no longer believe in his own being, would no longer believe in himself, would see all things flow from one another in moving dots and he would lose himself in this river of becoming. In the end, as a true disciple of Heraclitus, he would hardly dare to raise his finger anymore. For every action we need oblivion: as for the life of every organic being we need not only light, but also darkness" (Nietzsche 1874/2001, 8). Similarly, Ricoeur considers a memory that forgets nothing (2000/2003, 590) ghostly and monstrous.

This also applies directly: oblivion in itself has multiple meanings and functions, so much so that Ricoeur (2000) identifies various types of oblivion. There is a “cancellation oblivion”, where memories are buried. There is also a “happy oblivion”, which preserves the memory and then makes it resurface. There is the oblivion induced by forgiveness, or the one that tends to forget our historical condition of finite beings, to tend instead towards an almost eschatological opening.

The inherent meanings of oblivion can also surface in social research. When a subject does not remember something in a conversation or in a narrative interview, their forgetfulness could constitute a censorship made by unconscious, or the effect of a personal trauma or a cultural taboo. The subject may forget an event also because collective culture or personal predispositions attribute a low degree of relevance to it. Sometimes the fractures, the caesuras that interrupt the biographical continuum, the turning points in personal life are mitigated or forgotten. This usually happens because the interviewee intends to communicate – to himself and others – a more coherent and continuous image of his own identity. Other “silences of memory” can express extraneousness, difference, with respect to objectified meanings. Let us think of when the interviewee does not remember having said what he finds written in the transcript of the interview: this can happen not only because he is “forgetful”, but because the translation from spoken to written, like any other translation, is always also a “betrayal” (Gadamer 1960/1983, 444 ff.; see Ricoeur 2001).

In short, we must consider not only the engraved signs in the wax tablet, but also the only apparently empty spaces between signs. Just like those gaps emphasize the sign, in the same way oblivion can better define memory. In its function of expressing meanings (albeit in an oblique, indirect way), oblivion is not opposed to memory, but part of it. Both converge in giving a sense to the sense-less, an order to chaos, a history to the past.

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