

Your Father Would Be So Proud:

A Study on Family Collective Memory of a Deceased Parent

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The aim of this paper is to explore how a family creates a collective memory of a parent when that parent passes away. Families pass on stories from generation to generation. These stories become a part of and shape a family's collective memory. When a family member dies, the family creates a memory of the deceased. Additionally, when that family member has a young child, that child becomes a form of collected memory, and serves as a mnemonic trigger for other family members to remember and commemorate the deceased. This remembrance can occur through storytelling, photograph sharing, and explaining of personality and physical traits that the child possesses that may be similar to the deceased. These types of commemoration create a collective memory for the child of the deceased parent. Using the theory presented by Schudson in "Lives, Laws, and Language: Commemorative versus Non-Commemorative Forms of Effective Public Memory," I will explore both intentional commemorative activities like the sharing of photographs and letters and unintentional non-commemorative collective memory through the telling of family stories. When a parent of a young child dies, the family, together, creates a collective memory of the deceased through the aide of both commemorative and non-commemorative forms of collective memory; this phenomenon occurs differently than that of the deaths of people without children because the child serves as a mnemonic trigger for adult survivors.

Background

This paper has a personal background for me, and I will be tying my personal experience and interviews with my family members into the paper to supplement my arguments. My interest in writing this paper was sparked early on in my collective memory studies by this quote:

“exiting a community often involves forgetting its past. Children who are abandoned by one of their parents, for example, rarely carry on the memories of his or her family” (Zerubavel 1996).

Though Zerubavel could have been solely referring to parents who leave the family by choice, I immediately thought about my own experience with my dad leaving our family through his death and I thought about the collective memory of him that my family has formed.

Personal Experience

I have been hearing stories about my dad every since I can remember. In early November of 1990, my dad was diagnosed with colon cancer. I was born on November 20th of the same year, and two and a half months later, in mid-February of 1991, he passed away. My older brother, Matt, was eight at the time. Because we are half-siblings, we are lucky that we have remained close despite growing up over 1,500 miles away from each other and our only connection being severed when we were both young. We are also fortunate enough to have retained tight bonds with my dad’s side of the family, primarily his two younger brothers, my Uncle Bruce and my Uncle Robin. My mom and I have a very special relationship, which I think has grown out of her being a single mom, and she is a large factor in why these family connections have remained solid over the past 22 years.

The Blunts, my father’s family, love to tell stories. Throughout my childhood, we all spent a week in August together every summer. As my cousins and I got older, this summer tradition became increasingly difficult to accomplish, so we now celebrate every Thanksgiving together. It would be impossible for one of these vacations to pass without the story of Great Aunt Winne being told or the house on Long Island being talked about. My Uncles are extremely charismatic and really know how to have a good time and tell a good story. The stories that they have passed down to my cousins, my brother, and I give us all a great sense of

the family's recent, and sometimes not so recent, history. We are all connected through this shared sense of history; these memories that have been passed down to us.

Interviews and Personal Research

In order to gain a broader perspective on my own personal experience and be able to tie this experience into the work, I conducted interviews with members of my close family. The five family members that I interviewed, through phone conversation and through e-mail correspondence, were all influential in shaping my collective memory of my dad. I spoke with my mother, who has shared many photographs and happy memories with me. I also interviewed my dad's two younger brothers, whom I have kept in good contact with, living for an extended period with each: my Uncle Robin in New York and my Uncle Bruce's ex-wife in California. I asked my Aunt Ruth several questions pertaining to a book, which she and my Uncle Al compiled that contains various stories and remembrances of my dad. I interviewed my older brother, Matt, whose experience with collective memory has been quite different from my own, and illuminated some of the structures that need to be in place for collective memory to succeed. Additionally, I interviewed Joe, good friend of my dad's, whom I spent a considerable amount of time with throughout my middle school years. This friend of the family does not share a collective memory with my family, but nonetheless was influential in shaping my own collective memory of my dad. I also interviewed Emma, a friend of mine, who has a similar situation. Emma's father passed away when she was five years old, so she has had an experience similar to that of my brother; she has some memories which she considers her own.

Collective Memory Studies

In order to fully understand my argument, it is important to give a background on collective memory studies and identify some of the major theories that are at work in the field.

In 1925, Maurice Halbwachs, a student of sociologist Émile Durkhem, published a study on “the social frameworks of memory” (Olick 2007). In this work, Halbwachs presented the first theory of collective memory. In another volume, he states that, “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (Halbwachs 1952,1992). It was Halbwach’s work that set the course for collective memory studies becoming its own, separate research field (Schwartz). Collective memory is the theory that communities remember together and commonly share a certain set of memories (Zerubavel 1996). These groups of people (families, nations, etc.) are mnemonic communities in that members can even remember an event that they “did not experience personally” (Zerubavel 1996). Historical events and people, for example, are shaped by the way we, as a society, remember them. We, as a nation, have a collective memory of the civil war; every individual has a memory of what the civil war was like even though nobody alive today was there. It is important to note that collective memory is different from history. “Both history and collective memory are publicly available social facts—the former ‘dead,’ the later ‘living’” (Olick 2007). This metaphor establishes that history is solely about the facts of the past (it is dead), while collective memory of the past is always changing depending on the situation in the present (it is living).

In order to discuss the limited amount of family collective memory studies, it is import to establish the foundation that Halbwachs laid in his book. In his book, *On Collective Memory*, he dedicates a chapter to family memory. Halbwachs begins this chapter by recognizing that the majority of his book “raised the question of collective memory and its framework without considering the matter from the point of view of the group or groups in which this memory performs a most important function,” the family (1952,1992). He argues that, because the family

is the social group we spend the majority of our lives within, family thoughts and memories become the components to most of our individual memories and thoughts. Along similar lines, Halbwachs maintains that any event or person a family encounters is remembered by each individual both through his or her own personal experience and through the perspective of the family as a whole. Halbwachs concludes his discussion on family collective memory by demonstrating the relationship between the family's collective memory and that of society. He states that, "each family ends up with its own logic and traditions, which resemble those of the general society [. . .]. But this logic and these traditions are nevertheless distinct because [. . .] their role is increasingly to insure the family's cohesion and to guarantee its continuity" (Halbwachs 1952/1992). The family's collective memory, therefore, reflects the collective memory of the society within which it resides, but this memory additionally serves to unite the family and separate them from other members of society. Though Halbwachs asserts the importance of family collective memory within memory studies, it has mostly been forgotten in recent years, with the majority of research and theorizing being conducted on societal memory within countries and large groups of people.

Family Collective Memory - Gap in Collective Memory Studies

The gap in collective memory studies, the lack of family memory being studied, seems odd, considering that in sociology, the family is typically thought of as "the first, and often most important, social frameworks for a child" (Erl1 2011). The lack of family collective memory studies could stem back to Halbwachs, who despite arguing that individuals memory depends on group membership, mostly studied larger public commemorative symbols (Olick 2007). Another reason could be the recent "memory boom" in Western societies, which has increased the public's interest in issues of the nation's past (Olick 2007). If the public is concerned with

remembering events like the holocaust and slavery, then it seems reasonable that collective memory scholars want to study these topics over topics dealing with the family.

Some studies on family collective memory do exist, though many of these studies are more concerned with a family's memory of societal events and do not discuss the memory of family events and histories. Shore, for example, studies four working class families' interactions about current societal events and how the family talks about and remembers these events. He finds that families remember large-scale events in the context of their daily lives through their discussions (Shore 2009). Bietti conducts a similar study of family memory in Argentina. Bietti aims to show how a shared past is communicated through everyday family interactions, by prompting an Argentinian family to converse about five different politically significant dates in Argentina's history.

While these studies on family collective memory cover the family memory's relation to societies, they do provide the framework with which I will base my argument. Erll makes a similar argument that, "refocusing [collective memory scholar's] ideas through the lens of family memory may give rise to new perspectives" (Erll 2011). In this manner, I will use and refocus other studies in collective memory, like those done by Schudson (1997) and Ghoshal, which do have a more societal approach. Though these studies are not directly related to family collective memory, they do build a foundation in general collective memory studies with which I will build my argument.

How We Remember

In "Lives, Laws, and Language: Commemorative versus Non-Commemorative Forms of Effective Public Memory," Schudson provides much of the framework for which this discussion is based. Schudson makes the argument that similar to the family memory studies gap in

collective memory, “the contemporary study of collective memory has focused primarily on intentional commemorative activities” (Schudson 1997). This focus has left out studies on collective memory that have been created unintentionally. Intentional commemorative activities include “monuments, museums, theme parks, historical films, textbooks, public oratory, and other domains” (Schudson 1997). This kind of remembrance of a deceased family member includes memorial services, displaying photographs, and sharing specific mnemonic items like letters and writings about the deceased. This type of intentional activity is correlated with physical objects because of the time and energy that go into creating and displaying physical representations of memory. Non-commemorative collective memory, on the other hand, “is an investment in the past without necessarily an invocation of it” (Schudson 1997). This sort of reminiscence of a family member who has died includes sharing stories or even generally speaking of the deceased.

Intentional Collective Memory: Objects

The majority of day-to-day interactions with intentional forms of collective memory are through physical objects. Photographs are one example of this kind of memory that can portray a deceased parent and thus transmit the memory of what they look like. In her book *Family Frames*, Marianne Hirsch examines the use of family photographs as a form of memory (Erll 2011). Erll quotes Hirsch saying, “family photos depend on ‘a narrative act of adoption that transforms rectangular images of cardboard into telling details connecting lives and stories across continents and generations’” (2011). Growing up, I gained a memory of what my dad looked like through the photographs exhibited in our home. “We had pictures always around” (A. Blunt, personal communication December 7, 2012), my mother said in our phone interview. This showing of photographs was intentional in that my mother had to physically place the

photos in certain places, make decisions about which photos to display, and decide when it was time to take them down. Having the photographs displayed during all of my childhood has enabled me to put a face to the name I hear in stories. Emma shared a slightly different experience with photographs with me: “in recent years, I have been able to uncover a few more memories, but still most are from when he was sick, or I’ll think I’m remembering an event that I’ve really just seen a photo of and I’m not sure if it’s actually my memory” (E. Trisolini, personal communication , December 8, 2012). Here, because Emma was older and has some memories she thinks of as her own, it is more difficult for her to differentiate between her memories and those that are presented in photographs that are intentionally placed. While for me, photographs act as a way to help me picture the memories that are shared with me through stories, for Emma, pictures actually shape her memory and create memories that she did not have herself.

Another example of a physical object that transfers intentional memory is written documents: letters and memories of close survivors. One of the greatest impacts on the collective memory of my dad has been a book compiled by my Aunt Ruth and my Uncle Al, which presents memories, letters written by him, an epilogue, several newspaper articles from the school he taught at that followed his death, and the words said at his memorial service. The book was entitled “Memories of Barrie E. M. Blunt.” My Aunt Ruth said, in reference to why they made the book, “we didn’t want the memories of a special person to get lost throughout the years. The book was written ONLY because we wanted you and Matt to know him, if only through that book” (R. Blunt, personalcommunication , December 7, 2012). Because my Aunt and Uncle felt it was important and necessary for my brother and I to have a stronger collective memory of our father, they intentionally created the book. The book was also shared with some

of the other people who contributed. It strengthened the collective memory of my father for not only my brother and I, but also anybody else who the book was shared with and my uncle and aunt who compiled all of the information in the first place. The book was shared with me when I was ten, and my brother was 18. At this time, I did not really understand what the book represented nor did I have a drive to create my own collective memory, as I had later in life (this drive will be explored later in the paper).

Though the most common sources of intentional collective memory for me have been physical objects, there are cases where memories have been purposefully shared or withheld. Sales and Fivush discuss the role that a parent plays in developing a child's memory in their article, "Social and Emotional functions of Mother-Child Reminiscing about Stressful Events." They state that, "early autobiographical memory is co-constructed in the context of parent-child reminiscing and the focus of this reminiscing influences both the organization and content of children's memories" (2005). They continue by saying that parents have the ability to help their children understand how and why a negative event occurred (2005). The way a surviving parent talks with a child about the death of the other parent has a profound impact on the child's understanding of the event. This is especially salient for older children, like my brother and Emma, who have memories of the event itself.

Both Emma and my brother also described a certain desire for memory sharing to be on their own terms. Emma spoke of how her mother avoids talking about her father, except in very intentional circumstances: "[my mother] was always very cautious about not making us feel a certain way about our dad, and also not bringing it up when we didn't want to talk about it" (E. Trisolini, personal communication, December 7, 2012). In this case, Emma's mom is intentionally withholding stories in order for them to be told when Emma wants to hear them and

is emotionally prepared to do so. Though these conversations may at times be spontaneous, when the conversation does occur, Emma's mom intentionally shares that Emma's dad would be very proud of her and "would have loved to see [her] doing everything that [she's] doing" (E. Trisolini, personal communication, December 7, 2012).

Intentional sharing and withholding of stories and memories occurs in everyday life through objects like photographs displayed in the home and occurs less frequently through interactions between family members. Additionally, while these memories that are being shared are important in shaping the child's collective memory of the parent, they also affect the person who is performing the intentional sharing. Important to note, if the child did not exist, the reasons for remembering the deceased would be fewer, and in many of these cases would not happen, or would not occur to the same extent. It also seems that when the child is older, they have a greater desire to be in control of when memories are shared.

Unintentional Collective Memory: Stories

As previously mentioned, Schudson creates a framework for studying the unintentional collective memory, or what he calls, "non-commemorative memory." He makes the case that, "we should be trying to understand how people live in time, live inside a sequence of events, not simply how they honor, enhance, restore, commemorate, repress, or falsify the meaning of events" (Schudson 1997). Though much of Schudson's concept is difficult to apply to this topic, the general idea provides a solid basis for talking about story telling. Analyzing and looking at the stories that are being told will help us to understand how and why people tell stories. These stories provide the foundation for the collective memory of the family, especially when it comes to transmitting collective memory to the next generation. Erll posits that, "through the repeated recall of the family's past—usually via oral stories which are told at family get-togethers—those

who did not experience past events first hand can also share in the memory” (2011). This idea is key in understanding how the memory of a deceased relative is transferred through the generations.

Though certain people and events may trigger stories, they are typically told unintentionally. Rosenblatt and Eide (1990) studied what they called “shared reminiscence,” or storytelling, of a deceased parent. Though their study looks at adults who lost a parent, their findings can be applicable here. Rosenblatt and Eide found that, “even when a shared reminiscence was predictable (for example, a person might know that she and her siblings always reminisce about their parents at thanksgiving dinner), people said that shared reminiscence ‘just happens’” (1990). Even though the shared reminiscence, or storytelling, was predictable and would tend to occur around the holidays or when siblings were together, it still was not consciously planned (Rosenblatt & Eide 1990). Additionally, all of the 16 families interviewed reported that they had engaged in shared reminiscence and all of the respondents said that this reminiscence occurred repeatedly. My experience is similar to that presented by Rosenblatt and Eide. I am much more likely to hear stories about my dad when I am with my dad’s side of the family and during the holidays. It never seems planned; these stories always occur naturally, for example we might be having a conversation about some random topic like sunburns and one of my uncles will say, “remember that time that Barrie...” or to me, “one time your dad...”

These kinds of stories about the past and about my dad are the best way to transmit the collective memory about him. When I hear stories about him, it makes me feel closer to him and like I know him and who he was. Shore (2009) argues that a shared memory being discussed in conversation builds a common identity among family members. “Family continuity depends

upon the construction and transmission of joint memory structures” (2009). Through storytelling, or the transmissions of joint memory structures, families are able to develop continuity and collective memory. Even though collective memory is being transmitted through the stories, it seems like Emma and Matt both still need these unintentional sharings to be more intentional. While I feel closer when I hear stories, both Matt and Emma expressed different views. For both of them, they feel some resentment towards the fact that they do not know all of the stories. Matt expressed that “in some ways [hearing stories] makes me feel farther” (M. Blunt, personalcommunication , December 10, 2012). This is because, he said, it makes him realize how much he did not know. Emma expressed a similar sentiment: “I used to get mad because they got to know him for so much longer than I did and that just felt so unfair” (E. Trisolini, personalcommunication , December 7, 2012). Though both of them felt that at first, they also said that as they have grown older, it has been much easier to hear stories and they are grateful for the sharing. Matt and Emma both have resisted having a collective memory of their fathers through story telling when they were younger, because especially then, there was a certain amount of grief that would surface in not knowing everything about their dads that maybe they did not want to deal with. What is different for me, though, is that I have never had my own memories. All of the memories I have, have come to me through the stories that are being told. I do not have any of my own memories that I am trying to hold on to, or any memories to compare to the stories that are being told. I do not feel like I am missing a piece of the puzzle when a story is told, because I started out with nothing.

In addition to telling stories, there are several other unintentional methods of transferring collective memory verbally that I discovered through my interviews and personal experience. One of those ways is just generally talking about the deceased parent: what they were like, what

personality traits they have, ect. Another way to remember and build collective memory, without telling stories is through casting the deceased into a situation. My Uncle Robin described this when talking about story telling: “When sharing stories with family, it helps me keep a torch going, so when Bruce and I are talking and your dad comes up, we can immediately cast him in the circumstance we are in. ‘If Barrie were here... or Barrie would have loved this’” (R. Blunt, personalcommunication , December 6, 2012). These kinds of communications in some ways keep the deceased alive. Instead of talking about them in the past tense, my Uncle Robin is setting him in the present. My mom also unintentionally transmitted collective memory to me, though not always through stories. When I asked her about telling stories, she answered that, “maybe I didn’t always tell you stories, but I would say ‘your dad would be so proud of you. If your dad could see you he would... Oh, that would make your dad smile’” (A. Blunt, personal correspondence , December 7, 2012). These kinds of messages helped me, at an early age, to know that there was somebody else who was there for me; that this person may not be around anymore, but he did exist at one point and that he was a caring person.

Conclusion

While much of this work makes a lot of sense for my experience, it is important to note that many circumstances had to be in place for me to receive a collective memory as strong as I did. I have already discussed the differences in age when the parent dies in this paper, but I really do not have a sample size with which to make stronger findings. I also did not explore how gender, race, education, and socio-economics play into this phenomenon. I am sure that the story could be very different for different families.

One question that I do raise though, is why there are not more studies on family collective memory. It seems to me that this is a rather large gap in collective memory studies.

The family, after all, is the site at which the majority of our collective memory is transferred, whether that collective memory is societal or family related. It would be interesting to see more studies on family collective memory be conducted in the future. We should look into not only how collective memory is transferred within families, but also what kinds of collective memory families are more likely to transfer and maybe what kinds of family situations provide a stronger base for collective memory.

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