

# 1 Conceptualizing Social Memories with Phenomenology

## The Problem

Memory research is an important topic in social and cultural sciences at least since the 1880s (**Edgell1924; Olicketal2011b**). In the 19th century rapid social changes, in economics, in technology, in transport, in media surely have triggered the interest in the handling of the past. It is necessary for understanding change to understand the past and the relation of the past to the present. Darwin's evolutionary biology, the development of psychology and psychoanalysis, and also the appearance of pragmatism and phenomenology could all be seen as reflections of that processes of rapid social change in the sphere of science. No wonder then, that we can find in phenomenological writings a lot of references to the phenomenon of memory.

Edmund Husserl developed his famous phenomenology of inner time consciousness, wherein he conceptualizes references to the past as retention and reproduction. For him it never was a problem to get back to the past or better: to past phenomena in the process of consciousness. The problem was, similar to Paul Ricœur later, the difference of phantasy and remembering (see Husserliana vol XXIII). Only in his late fragment »The Origin of Geometry« he questions the durability of a socially traditioned past. Again, the problem is solved with a retreat to ideal objectivities, which in every reproduction gain their original meaning.

For Alfred Schütz, the past as the world of predecessors »does not present undue problems«. Either »total recall« (schlichten Zugreifen) or step-by-step »retracing« (der Wiederaufbau des Erlebnisses in seinem vollständigen Ablauf) is possible. What is changed in remembering is that there is no future horizon, no openness in the world of the past.

All is settled and done. And the attitude towards the remembered, the »interest in the situation« is changed. Knowledge of the world of the past is gained on the one hand through acts of communication and on the other through signs »anonymous and detached from any stream of consciousness« (anonym und jeder Dauer entrückt). These signs have to be interpreted, but as past social experiences are very different to actual ones, every interpretation of the past based on signs remains problematic and vague.

Edward S. Casey developed an own phenomenological account of memory. In addition to the intentional modes of remembering he develops (with Merleau-Ponty) the body as an agent of memory, and he is able to open up the social dimensions of remembering as he conceptualizes body to be in-between mind and place, the spatial and situational dimension of memory.

Memory in the sketched phenomenological perspectives is primarily the explicit, intentional recollection of the past. Schutz adds the social dimension of memories, when he integrates communication about the past and signs as remnants as remnants of the past, that have to be interpreted. Casey additionally offers the possibility to include body and place into phenomenological considerations.

But still, the past in its formative power for the present and the future as it is to be seen in social changes remains vague, when remembering is reduced to explicit individual references to the past. I think, the potential of conceptualizing memory as the ways of dealing with the past for understanding and explaining social processes is much greater. Therefore I would like to propose an integrating framework for a theory of social memories based mainly on phenomenological considerations.

In a first step

## 1.1 Basic considerations

Memories are an integral part of every activity, every operation and every social (f)act, therefore a theory of social memories is a fundamental part of social theories. Memories are not only part of the game, when the past is explicitly remembered, in personal remembrances, in discursive reconstructions, in museums or memorials. Such a conception would miss most of our permanent contacts with the processed past. To be sure, intentional or explicit evocation is an important way of dealing with the remnants of past events. But there are other, less obvious ways; ways, which are just as important for societal processes as the explicit forms: the forms of body memory as analyzed on a social level by Paul Connerton, the ways higher level societal processes, such as organizations or discourses, using the results of past processes of meaning.

In spite of their being »of the past«, as Aristotle put it, Memories always and only work in the present. They offer the results of processed past to present processes. And they process present experiences for future operations. Then, social memories are socially processed past or processed social past. That means, even individual memories, even bodies can function as *social* memories and do it quite often. As Schutz in a letter to Gurwitsch (April 20th 1952) once put it: »The natural world is social in the core and social is our knowledge of it.« But there are also other »locations« of social memories, the signs, that Schutz called our attention to: media in their detachedness from individual streams of consciousness.

When asked for the function of memories, most theories ranging from Halbwachs to Hobsbawm, from Assmann to Zerubavel would answer: Identity. That's right, but that's not enough. Memories in their references to the past also produce difference. Only against a horizon of former states, of former conditions the non-identical, the different, the new is visible.

Therefore, Niklas Luhmann has named forgetting as the primary function of memory, to free capacities for information processing. That's also a way to focus on identities, formulated in his usual ironic and provoking style.

But what does it mean to remember identities and to forget the non-identical? It enables, as Luhmann states, evolution and learning. To emphasize it differently: what memories actually produce is stability *and* change.

The or at least one of the basic problems of sociology is: how is social order possible? Or formulated from the other side of the distinction: How is social change possible? The answer to both questions then is: through social memories. Therefore, I would name the basic function of social memories as the enabling of the social process itself, either emphasizing stability or change.

What becomes visible in change and what is reproduced in stabilities are structures. Memories are structuring social processes and society.

## 1.2 Generalization

Does this mean then, that the past is structuring the present and the future? Yes and no.

To make the indifference more clear: The past is not structuring the present as itself, in the event-character it has had. It is a processed form of the past, that structures the present: to be even more precise; a generalized form, generalized in repeated processes. As Umberto Eco puts it: »One forgets not by cancellation but by superimposition, not by producing absence but by multiplying presences.« **Eco1988** So what memories do, is to remember the General and to forget the specific: they typify.

Typifications are the basic form of human experience, as especially the phenomenological tradition states.

For Edmund Husserl (and also for Alfred Schütz) experience is a passive and active operation of the consciousness. Experiences take place against a horizon of typified experiences made before. If a new experience is made, it is explicated with elements of that horizon. These types are used as explicats in a way of association when »something reminds of something« (**Husserl1948**). It is association according to similarity.<sup>1</sup> The ground for any association between constituted objects is the common time within a stream of consciousness. On this ground of time the different is unified, »Auseinanderliegendes geeinigt« (§42b).

What happens then is that some typified remnants of past experiences are connected to explicate a present and new experience. A specific relation between homogenous *or* heterogenous types is constituted.

This means that typification has two temporal flanks: one in which the actual experience is typified, processed with available types. What remains then is a generalized remnant of the passed present. Therefore, forgetting (the specific) is a constitutive element of all experience. On the other temporal flank there is the actual use of the types in a present situation. This new context demands a specification of the generalized type, its application to the actual circumstances. Every specification involves a more or less intensive change in the used types. These typifications in their cumulative *and* oblivional potential open up a horizontal structure for every new experience.

To be careful: there is the danger of equivocation: the processes of typification seem to be different depending on the »materiality« of the memory: there are at least three kinds 1) bodily types, habits, implicit knowledge 2) language types or semantics 3) formalizations produced in and through media. That's the first point, where the theory

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<sup>1</sup>Husserl mentions also »mittelbare Assoziation«, where the Zwischenglieder are left out.

of memory has to transgress the phenomenological theory of typification. These different forms of generalizations cannot be transformed in each other without problems. Processes of transfiguration, transformation and translation are necessary, which in itself have oblivional and cumulative potentials.

Generalization and specification are the basic forms in memories, and enable the past to be in the present and the present to be in the past, as Michael Schudson once put it.

## **Meaning**

What is produced and constructed in the specification of generalizations? Here we are at the core of every theory of memory (and of society). Produced and constructed is meaning, Sinn in German. In starting from the assumption that meaning is the form in which all forms of sociality are happening, the temporal aspects of meaning are important: there is one first temporal aspect: presence. Meaning is always processed or constructed in presence. The present situation, the present context are formative elements for the actual meaning.

Meaning as the mode of every access to the world is temporal in two more ways: First meaning is temporal as it relies on the actually available stock of generalizations, of generalized remnants of past processes of meaning constructions. Second, it is retroactive (*nachträglich*) in a specific way: it is actually never completely determined, but depends on the subsequent connections, the possible future actions, expectations, operations or events, connecting to the present construction.

Then, meaning has three temporal horizons: the present past, sedimented in typified structures of generalizations, the present presence, the actual situation and context, the present future, the prevailing expectations, possible connections so on. And there is another horizon: the future-to-be, the connection that is to be made to the present

process of meaning, the succeeding meaning. That means, meaning is genuinely unstable. To give an example: the meaning of my presentation here is not fixed. It is different now, in half an hour after the discussion, on Thursday evening at the end of the meeting, when being published and so on.

Here I would propose to transgress the egological phenomenological perspective, the methodological individualism of Schutz: The form Meaning has to be decoupled from its exclusive fixation to individuals, to subjects. Subjective generation of meaning is just one mode of processing meaning. Other modes occur on the intersubjective level of situations in the lifeworld, of interactions, and furthermore on the transsubjective levels of the social. All three of these levels develop autological, auto-nomous (with own rules and norms), with own relevances, in a certain way detached from intentions of subjects, but not totally cut off from the subjective actions. The important point is: processing of meaning on the intersubjective and transsubjective level is decoupled from subjective forms of meaning generation. Subjective actions and communications are taken detached from their intentions (and therefore from their subjective meaning) and get different meaning in the chains of intersubjective or transsubjective processing of meaning. But still, there is no intersubjectivity and no transsubjectivity without subjective action.

For the intersubjective level this autological functioning has been shown by Aron Gurwitsch in »Human Encounters in the Social World«, where the situation, the milieu, prevails over subjective intentions. It has been shown in a lot of ethnomethodological studies, in Erving Goffmans concept of »interaction order«. For the transsubjective level I would name language (as distinguished from the intersubjective forms of speaking, the actual practice), semantics as stable generalizations of meaning, the »universes of discourse« (as Alfred Schutz mentioned them in »Multiple Realities«), organizations and last but not for from being the least those »finite provinces of meaning«, which

could be a departing point for a phenomenological theory of social differentiation.

My point here is, that there are autonomous ways of processing meaning on each level, depending in part on the generalizations that are placed at the disposal, provided for the actual process by social memories. That means, there is no unified meaning for any event, for any action. for any communication. There are different ways of processing meaning, that come across each other, that take effects on each other, inform and control themselves reciprocally. They have to be transformed, transfigured, transposed or translated into each other, if they are integrated in a specific process of meaning.

In complexly differentiated societies meaning processes have to be taken into account on all three levels. In taking the example of the present presentation again: the meaning of it is not only different at different points of time, it is also different on the different levels of sociality: for me, for each of you, at the intersubjective level of the conference here, for Schutzian Research as a specific universe of discourse, for memory studies and so on. The meaning depends on the social memories involved and furthermore, if it is taken into account, it alters, changes and develops those social memories involved.

The important point in the last sentence is »if it is taken into account«, because it leads us to another characteristic of meaning processes: selectivity.

### **1.3 Selectivity**

What is done, when meaning is processed? Experiences are selected or better: treated selectively, interpreted, and arranged. So selectivity is an important, maybe the most important feature in this process. Selectivity is a decisive element for most sociological theories of meaning, be it Weber, Schütz, Parsons or Luhmann. For Schutz the »reflective glance



singles out an elapsed lived experience and constitutes it as meaningful« (Schutz 1967: 71)

Selectivity is the mechanism with which each unit of meaning processing is reducing complexity. This involves the problem of choice and motivation on the subjective level, the problem of connections, rules and arrangement on the inter- and transsubjective levels. Husserl already describes the problem in his *Cartesian Meditations*:

»The multiplicity of intentionality [...] is a theme not exhausted with the consideration of cogitations as *actual* subjective processes. On the contrary, *every actuality involves its potentialities*, which are not empty possibilities but rather intentionally predelineated in respect of content« (Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, § 19, p. 44)

Alfred Schutz took up considerations concerning selectivity from Henri Bergson, Max Weber, whose concept of culture rests upon selectivity according to values, and Max Scheler, who began to reflect on the selective capacities of emotions. So, Schutz began as early as 1929 in the Vienna manuscripts, parallel to the start of his reception of Husserl's phenomenology, to name the problem of selectivity as one of the basic problems:

»Basic problem of relevance: Selection out of the totality of the world pregiven to live and thought.« (ASW VI.1, p. 51) »Grundproblem der R[elevanz]: Auswahl aus der Totalität der Welt, die sowohl [dem] Leben als [auch dem] Denken vorgegeben ist.«

In the *Phenomenology of the Social World* he recurs to the Bergsonian concept of »attention a la vie« and to attentional modifications to denote selectivity in the processes of meaning generation and names the problem of relevance as one lying ahead for sociology. He developed it further in his »Reflections on the Problem of Relevance«. Relevance

for him designates dynamic patterns of selections. They structure everyday actions and thought *and* they adjust in every selection to new situations. They develop and change in the constant pragmatic interactions with the surrounding world. Selectivity is also a temporal process. It is an operation in the present, but it refers in its operating to former selections and it depends on expected selections.

Again, I propose to decouple relevance from subjectivity. Schutz himself writes in »Equality and the Meaning Structure of the Social World« about relevance-structures of groups, on the intersubjective level, built up in the processes of interaction and being in a certain way independent of subjective structures of relevance, as they can be imposed on individuals, which then have to adjust themselves. But even on a transsubjective level, like for example a discourse, there are patterns of selectivity, which can be reconstructed. Quoting again Schutz: »We are less and less masters in our own right to define what is, and what is not, relevant to us. Politically, economically, and socially imposed relevances beyond our control have to be taken into account by us as they are.« (**SchuetzWiC**) On each level of sociality, of processing of meaning, dynamic structures of relevances are developing and operating. They are operating not as determining specific selections, but rather in paving ways, cutting pathes, channel actions, and always leave the option to leave the path or the channel. In a certain situation something is marked as relevant out of wide horizons of possibilities, with recurrence to differing, overlapping, even conflicting structures of relevances on all levels of sociality.

While relevances reduce complexity for the unit of meaning processing, they are a very complex phenomenon for research. There seems to be no way to get to the structures of relevance than reconstructing empirically the respective selections. That means: only a theory of the constitution or the formation of social memories is possible. The reconstruction of any single social memory can only be done in empirical research.

## 1.4 Situations

Therefore, I propose with Aron Gurwitsch to use situations as basic units of theoretical and empirical research, as basic frames of reference in sociology. Social memories just as all processing of meaning operate in the present. But in the present there is never an isolated unit of meaning processing, an isolated memory. There is always a material and social environment, a situation as a specific composition of orders and practices. In taking situations as analytical units of sociality actors and actions aren't reduced to their peculiar specificity, but seen in the context, they're (re-)acting to. It opens up the possibility of taking into account the implicit forms of knowledge, generalizations sedimented mostly in bodily memories, habitual remembering as Casey put it. Especially this knowledge is bound to situations in its availableness, its being-at-hand (»Zuhandenheit«), as Heidegger named it, which is found in the pragmatic interactions with the equipmental whole (»Zeugumwelt«).

Situations allow to separate the stream of practices and communications flowing through them from the involved intentions, plans and subjective colouring. The autonomous interaction order gets into perspective without losing subjectivity out of sight. The different rules, relevances and autological meaning processings on different levels can be taken into account.

And situations as basic frames of reference open up the possibility of integrating transsubjective social phenomena in their actual appearance and impact. On the one hand situations are socially structured, ordered temporally, spatially by bodies and architectures and socially by rules and norms. And on the other hand, situations offer in their material order horizons of references to the transsubjective level: semantics, discourses, organizational given things (Gegebenheiten), formalizations and so on.

So, situations are the field, where units from all levels of society actually get together, where particular selections are made and others not, where social memories of all levels are operating and get or get not actualized.

## **1.5 Closing: The formation of social memories**

It's time to sum up my considerations concerning social memories on phenomenological grounds.

1. Social Memories do more than intentionally and explicitly remember the past. Every form of dealing with the past, of referring to or integrating the past in presence is a form of memory.
2. The past itself in its character as an event is never accessible. The past is only available in forms of generalizations, of processed experiences. These generalizations have to be distinguished according to their »place« of processing: body, mind and media. As such they are presented by social memories to actual processes of meaning construction.
3. These processes have to be differentiated on behalf of their temporal structure and of their level of sociality. On all levels there occur processes of meaning construction in an autologic and autonomous way, that means, selection, interpretation and arrangement of meaning happens according to discrete selective patterns, rules and logic.
4. In every process of meaning construction potentially all levels are involved. This means that different meaning is constructed on every level, and that different generalizations from different social memories have their impact on every level. This involves complex forms of transformation, transfiguration, or translation.

5. As the central frames of analysis I propose situations, as therein all levels of social memories are pragmatically interacted with each other.

If the delineated propositions are acceptable they open up an integrating way of conceiving the impact of all forms of processed past on actual social processes. Therewith stability and change of social structures can be caught theoretically and empirically, at least I hope so.

## **Literatur**