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Themes for future research on memory, mind and media

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Abstract

We describe three areas of inquiry that we foresee as being important in future studies of collective memory, mind, and media. The first is the power of narratives, usually provided by collectives, which can be explicit and conscious or implicit and unconscious. A second important theme during this period of populism and nationalism is the study of the self-centredness (or egocentricity) of groups, especially nations believing their past is special. Such egocentricity can feed conflict among nations as well as groups within nations. The third important direction for research is future thinking, or studies of how people anticipate events they expect to unroll in their future and whether these events are mostly positive or negative. A puzzle of future thinking relative to collective memory is why people readily argue about and even fight over events from the past, but find it much more difficult to mobilise groups about life-threatening future events such as global warming or nuclear war. We look forward to studies in these crucial topics and others as they appear in *Memory, Mind & Media*.

Keywords: Collective memory; Narrative arc; Group self-centredness; Collective future thinking; Fast thinking

The appearance of *Memory Studies* in 2008 was a milestone for interdisciplinary research. In our contribution to the first issue of that journal (Roediger and Wertsch 2008), we outlined what we saw as future opportunities, and in some cases, we were right. But in others, our ideas about where memory research might be headed have not panned out, reminding us of historians' quip about being better at predicting the past than the future.

Yet when Andrew Hoskins and Amanda Barnier invited us to reflect on the present and speculate on the future in their exciting new journal *Memory, Mind & Media*, we jumped at the chance to give it another go. This publication with its renewed emphasis on media will enrich discussions of memory and mind, and we applaud the editors for taking a leadership role in the effort. Our contribution shares, and indeed draws, on issues raised by others, but our focus is somewhat different.

What follows is a discussion focused on three issues that we view as important not only for scholarship, but for dealing with pressing challenges in today's troubled world. These issues are listed as follows: (1) the power of narrative tools in implicit and explicit

collective memory, (2) the self-centred nature of collective memory, and (3) collective future thinking and mental time travel.

Throughout, we will emphasise synergies in an effort to overcome the disciplinary siloes that impede collaboration.

The power of narrative in implicit and explicit collective memory

Not all forms of individual or collective memory involve narrative, but its pervasive and often hidden nature makes it worth discussing. The constant effort to find the narrative arc in media productions and to control the narrative in political discourse are just a couple of contemporary indicators of this, but ever since Aristotle explored these issues in *Poetics*, we have recognised that humans are storytelling animals. This is a claim that is constantly recycled in ever-changing media environments, which often focus on the explicit uses of narrative, but we argue that narratives can also have deeply embedded implicit influences (Erll 2022).

Our approach to narratives emphasises their role as cultural tools or symbolic mediation (Wertsch 2021). This has several implications. First, it is one way to foster what Barnier and Hoskins (2018) have called the study memory 'in the wild'. This is an issue further examined by Tim Fawns (2022), who has called on scholars to avoid the temptation to 'locate memory entirely within the head' (1). The study of symbolic mediation can contribute to this effort by providing insights into what Hoskins (2016) calls 'memory ecologies', which involve 'an "expanded view" of memory that sees remembering and forgetting as the outcome of interactional trajectories of experience' (1).

As Fawns notes, 'we have always incorporated elements from the world around us into our remembering activity ... [including] landmarks, cave paintings, post-it notes, conversations, photographs, or web pages' (3). Among other things, this raises the issue of how these elements are shaped by institutional, cultural, and historical forces, often with unforeseen consequences. For example, we often speak of the power that the internet provides to mental and social life, but as Daniel Schacter (2022) notes, the internet can also contribute to 'sins of memory' such as absent-mindedness. In this regard, he observes that 'media multitasking is associated with poor memory for a target task (e.g., a lecture) because of attentional lapses' and this suggests that 'chronic media multitasking could be associated with broader memory problems' (1).

If we wish to understand the forces behind such consequences that stem from the use of symbolic mediation, we need to examine what leads to the reliance – perhaps overreliance – on new cultural tools such as IT, and this requires delving into the incentives that shape IT in today's world. In this case, these incentives stem the drive to keep as many eyes on the screen for as long as possible, which in turn can have negative unforeseen consequences such as absent-mindedness. Thus, including symbolic mediation in the study of memory in the wild provides a means for examining both the production and the use of cultural tools in ever-changing sociocultural settings.

The inclusion of symbolic mediation in memory studies also provides a reminder that cultural tools are seldom, if ever inventions of those using them. This applies nowhere more clearly than in the case of narratives. These are shared cultural tools provided by the sociocultural context – a sort of off-the-shelf-technology used by members of a group, and these tools can shape what we say and think to such a degree that they can be said to co-author our utterances (Erll 2022; Wertsch 2021). At the same time, narratives do not *make* us say or do anything. Instead, they are tools, or cognitive instruments (Mink 1978), used by active agents who have some degree of choice and can be held responsible for what they say and think. Even the 'prison house of language' envisioned by Frederic Jameson (1975) leaves room for active, responsible agency.

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This agency is relatively obvious in the case of narratives that appear in surface form. When Donald Trump told his stories about how enemies stole an election from him, others can directly and overtly confront him over his lies. Or when Vladimir Putin came up with a bogus account of how Ukrainians have actually always been Russians, historians can challenge him for bending, if not disregarding, the facts. But surface narratives with information about concrete actors and events are not where much of the power of narrative tools lies. Instead, their power depends heavily on 'underlying semiotic codes' shared among a group (Ivanov 1976). And at least since Frederic Bartlett's pioneering work in psychology, these have been examined as unconscious *schemas* (Bartlett 1995; Roediger 2000).

In this connection, Wertsch (2002, 2021) has pointed to the importance of a 'schematic narrative template' used to give meaning to numerous episodes in Russia's past. This generic story line starts with a peaceful, nonaggressive Russia that is then wantonly and viciously attacked by an alien enemy who almost destroys Russian civilisation, and it concludes with Russia, acting heroically and alone, crushing and expelling the alien enemy. This 'Expulsion-of-Alien-Enemies' narrative template (Wertsch 2022) is used to make sense of episodes such as the Mongolian invasion in the thirteenth century, the Napoleonic wars of the nineteenth century, the German invasion of the Great Patriotic War, and the perceived threat from NATO today. These are all instances of the same story with different characters who have invaded Russia in the past, a story that is also used to warn of contemporary threats in the form of alien ideas such as democracy and communism.

Narrative templates underpin explicit surface narratives, whose ubiquitous use gives rise to narrative habits (Wertsch and Jäggi 2022). As users of narrative templates, we often fail to recognise the power they have over our understanding of events; instead, we believe that we are simply reporting what really happened and not what the narrative has encouraged us to believe. In this regard, Alexander Luria (1976) spoke of transparency, where a symbolic tool such as a narrative template is like a clear pane of glass when we look right through it without realising it is there. Perhaps an even better metaphor is that narrative templates are similar to a prism through which we see the world without recognising that the prism bends or shapes our view of what we are seeing.

Narrative tools have an internal organisation that shapes, distorts, and sometimes even blinds us to truths about characters, and other elements of a story. At a very general level, this organisation can take the form of epic, tragedy, romance, or comedy as Hayden White (1981) proposed, and at lesser levels of abstraction these can take particular forms such as the Expulsion-of-Alien-Enemies used in Russia to emplot multiple episodes from history. Unless held up to effortful, conscious reflection, these schematic forms serve to emplot (Ricoeur 1984) an event in unconscious ways, making the process a kind of fast thinking (Kahneman 2011) that yields rapid decisions about how to size up a situation (Burke 1998).

As already noted, narrative tools are seldom the product of independent invention. Instead, they are semiotic technologies provided by cultural, historical, and institutional context, which brings political forces and power into the picture. Schools in Russia and America, for example, have very different ways of emplotting World War II, with next to no overlap in what counts as the main events. In a survey of participants from 11 nations, Abel et al (2019) showed striking differences in this regard. When asked about the source of their knowledge about the war, many say it comes from instruction in schools, but history curricula themselves reflect longstanding narrative templates that existed long before the history textbooks were published. This reflects a bidirectional, top-down, as well as bottom-up system of knowledge production. The latter takes the form of implicit collective memory as discussed by Erll (2022), and in combination with the cultural, institutional, and political forces behind textbooks, can make national memory very

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resistant to change. This is consistent with the widespread recognition that propaganda is most effective when it accords with existing belief systems.

Self-centredness in collective memory

In his classic *Principles of Psychology*, William James (1890) wrote that memory in the individual is not just about the past, but about *my* past. Similarly, it might be said that collective memory is not just about the past, but about *our* past, and this points to a larger set of phenomena we discuss under the heading of self-centredness.

The self-centredness of collective memory has been noted in one way or another since Maurice Halbwachs's (1980) writings nearly a century ago, but in today's world of the new nationalism (Roediger and Wertsch 2022; Rose 2019), the topic takes on greater – and more ominous importance. We are still at the first stages of understanding how self-centredness in collective memory can be conceptualised and empirically studied, and among the many issues to be considered is the appropriate terms to be used. We have considered terms such as national narcissism (Roediger et al 2022), which we operationalised through a measure of overclaiming of responsibility, but at this point, we believe that the more neutral terms self-centredness or egocentrism might be more useful. We leave it to future discussions to iron out these terminological issues.

Our research on the self-centredness of collective memory began by harnessing techniques used in social, personality, and cognitive psychology. These include techniques for assessing: (1) knowledge and memory and (2) the tendency to the overclaim a group's contribution to historic events.

Under the heading of knowledge and memory, Abel et al (2019) conducted a study in which they asked participants in 11 countries to list the 10 most important events of World War II (or fewer if they could not produce 10). They were asked to list the events in any order and simply provide the name or a short label, and they could provide the name of the event in their native or primary language if they did not know the English term. The overall sample of 1332 participants listed a total of 11,024 identifiable events for World War II, so on average each person nominated just over 8 events. The mean number of events nominated differed across countries, with Russian participants providing the most events on average (9.3) and Japanese participants providing the fewest (6.9).

Summing across all participants from all 11 countries, a set of 4 core events – events shared by 50 per cent or more of all the participants in the study – emerged. These were the attack on Pearl Harbor (listed by 68% of participants), the atomic bombings of Japan (67%), D-Day (64%), and the Holocaust (54%). As discussed by Abel et al, this sounds very much like an American list, and this raises questions about the influence of American media – an obvious topic for further study. An additional six events were frequently mentioned, but by less than half of the participants. These were the German invasion of Poland (40%), the Battle of Stalingrad (30%), the German invasion of the USSR (23%), the Battle of Britain (22%), Victory in Europe Day (21%), and the fall of France (18%).

Turning to core events for individual countries – as opposed to the entire sample – Abel et al (2019, 2022) reported that the German invasion of Poland was included by four countries (Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and Germany), De Gaulle's 1940 radio address to the French nation (a core event for France), the Battle of Britain (a core event for the UK), the Warsaw Uprising (a core event for Poland), and six unique core events for Russian participants (the Battles of Stalingrad, Kursk, Moscow, and Berlin; the Siege of Leningrad; the 1941 German invasion of the USSR). The list of core events provided by Russian participants showed virtually no overlap with the list provided by any other country. In sum, Abel et al (2019) reported a few core events common to

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many countries, but also differences in the list of core events for countries when taken separately. The latter provides one indication of the self-centredness of national memory.

We may ask why all ten countries provided some core events different from those of the other ten countries in the survey, while also listing core events that resembled those of the UK and the US. This is a pattern that held even for China and Germany, the latter whose forces fought and were defeated by those of the Soviet Union. Abel et al (2022) speculated that the huge influence of American media – particularly movies and television shows – may have spread the US version of the war around the globe, except of course to the Soviet Union (also see Roediger and Zerr 2022).

Roediger et al (2019) employed another method to examine the self-centredness of collective memory. It was designed to measure a group's tendency to overclaim its contribution to historic events. This approach draws on a body of research begun by social psychologists Michael Ross and Fiore Sicoly (1979), who studied married couples and people in other small groups. These researchers asked each member of a couple, separately, questions such as 'How often do you take out the trash?' or 'How often do you care for the children?' The totals routinely added up to more than 100 per cent when the contributions of the two were summed, leading the authors to conclude, 'individuals tend to accept more responsibility for a joint product than other contributors attribute to them' (p. 322).

Ross and Sicoly (1979) also asked members of college basketball teams to name a turning point in their most recent game, with the prediction being that players would ascribe the turning point to their own team. The players attributed 80 per cent of the change to their own team and only 11 per cent to the other team (with the other 9% of the players saying both teams). The authors also asked the players to explain the outcome of the game regardless of whether it was a win or a loss. Only 8 per cent of the players invoked properties of the other team in their answer whereas 92 per cent credited or blamed the win or loss on their own team's play. In short, Ross and Sicoly's work has reliably shown that people tend to claim more responsibility for themselves and for their group than is warranted. Furthermore, other researchers showed that the larger the group, the greater the overclaiming of responsibility (Schroeder et al 2016).

We expanded on this line of reasoning by participating in a cross-national study led by James Liu of how people in 35 countries perceived world history (Zaromb et al 2018). We included one item in this survey concerning the level of responsibility citizens attribute to their country in accounting for world history. Specifically, the item was: 'What contribution do you think the country you are living in has made to world history?' The 6831 college students in the sample provided an estimate on a scale from 0 to 100 where 0 per cent indicated that the country made no contribution to world history and 100 per cent indicated that all contributions came from the country.

Our question may appear to be an odd one, because there is no correct answer. Psychologists distinguish between objective tests (like the SAT or GRE) that have correct answers and projective tests such as the one we used that have no correct answer. Thus, people from Fiji, in answering how much their country has contributed to world history, tell us nothing objective about world history but rather tell us what the people believe about their country and its role in world history. Of course, for most countries, the percentage should be vanishingly small. 'World history', after all, covers a huge timespan, and most modern countries did not exist for most of that time. Furthermore, today's UN counts almost 200 members of the General Assembly, suggesting again that realistic estimates of each country's contribution should be quite small. Because people in the US constantly hear about American exceptionalism, we predicted that they would score high on the overclaiming of responsibility for world history relative to people from other countries (despite the fact that written US history is relatively short compared with China, India, Russia, and many other countries). We were wrong.

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The data from our one-question study were published in Zaromb et al (2018). Despite surveying students from only 35 countries, the total amount of responsibility claimed across the surveyed countries was 1156 per cent. Students from four countries claimed more than 50 per cent responsibility: Russians, 60 per cent; British, 55 per cent; Indians, 54 per cent; and Hong Kong Chinese (perhaps identifying as British and/or Chinese for this purpose), 51 per cent. The US came in 22nd, with a relatively modest (but still ludicrous) 30 per cent, behind Canada (40%), Portugal (38%) and Fiji (36%). We see from the data that students in all countries greatly inflate their country's impact on world affairs. This outcome occurred despite the fact that the participants were college students whose general knowledge of world history is probably greater than the general population. Furthermore, the question was placed at the end of a lengthy survey that included references to many events and names from world history, which could remind participants that most of world history was not part of their own country's history. As noted, Schroeder et al (2016) showed that the larger the group, the greater the overclaiming of responsibility, and this is reflected in the estimates of the claimed impact of countries.

The overclaiming of credit for a group is a phenomenon that applies to collectives other than nations. Putnam et al (2018), for example, examined the self-centredness of residents of states in the US and found that individuals show excessively high regard for their own group. In their study, they asked Americans from the 50 US states (N = 2898), 'In terms of percentage, what do you think was your home state's contribution to the history of the United States?' The mean state estimates ranged from 9 per cent (Iowa) to 41 per cent (Virginia), with the total contribution for all states equalling 907 per cent. When participants answered many questions about US history before they made their judgment, they surprisingly did not lower their estimate relative to answering the question early in the survey. Putnam et al explored several factors that might help explain their findings. For example, people know more about their own state's (or nation's) history than that of other states and so it comes to mind easily when asked about its influence. But in the end, they viewed ethnocentric bias as a major force of collective memory for citizens of states as well as those of nations.

In sum, self-centredness in collective memory remains understudied and in search of appropriate terminology. To date, the research reports reliable findings that beg for a conceptual framework that could bring some order to the topic. It remains, however, an important topic to explore because of its outsized importance in today's world of nationalism and conflict (Roediger and Wertsch 2022). In and of itself, understanding the dynamics at work may not resolve these issues, but we are unlikely to resolve them in the absence of solid conceptual and empirical studies in memory studies.

Collective future thinking and mental time travel

The field of memory studies obviously focuses on the past, but scholars have recently argued that the time horizon for research needs to be broadened to consider the past as one point on a continuum that extends through the present and into the future. Notions about 'mental time travel' (MTT) have long been a staple of popular fiction, but they are now part of a vibrant debate in psychology and neuroscience.

In the 1980s, Endel Tulving (1985) outlined an account of consciousness that 'mediates an individual's awareness of his or her existence and identity in subjective time extending from the personal past through the present to the personal future' (p. 1). He developed this claim partly on the basis of clinical observations, when he found that a patient with global amnesia (who could not remember any event from his past) also could not envision specific future episodes. Tulving went on to suggest that a single core capacity enabled both types of this mental time travel, the ability to remember the past (episodic

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memory) and the ability to envision specific future events (future thinking). Thus, episodic memory and episodic future thinking seem to be inherently related.

A couple of decades later, these observations were taken up and extended by psychologists and cognitive neuroscientists such as Karl Szpunar and Kathleen McDermott (2008) and Donna Addis et al (2007). Using functional magnetic resonance imaging techniques, they found profound similarities in the neural signatures of remembering life events and envisioning potential future events. Some of these early findings have been qualified in light of subsequent studies. For example, there are regions of the brain that are somewhat more active during future thought than during remembering, which is perphaps to be expected, given that future thought is more generative and requires assembling the pieces more than does remembering a coherent, single event. Conversely, other regions are more active during remembering than during future thought, which probably reflects that fact that there is a vivid phenomenological sense of 'I remember' that is not part of just imagining a future event (Gilmore et al 2016). Nonetheless, these differences occur against a backdrop of profound similarities between the neural networks involved in episodic memory and episodic future thinking, making all of this consistent with what Tulving had predicted when he observed that the deficits seemed to co-occur in amnesia.[1] A large body of work has grown up about psychological similarities and differences in episodic remembering and episodic future thinking (see Szpunar 2010, for an early review; see also Conway et al 2016).

There are no obvious direct parallels between these findings about individuals, on the one hand, and collective memory and collective future thinking, on the other. However, the findings in psychology and neuroscience spurred social scientists to ask what the counterparts might be at the collective level. In place of neural networks, these studies have focused on the content and structure of symbolic mediation to examine relationships between collective and collective future thinking.

In their formulation of how future thinking can be part of memory studies, Piotr Szpunar and Karl Szpunar (2016) defined collective future thought as 'imagining an event that has yet to transpire on behalf of, or by, a group' (p. 376), and they went on to emphasise that future thought must be considered as part of a system in which past, present, and future interact. This system is a two-way street in that 'collective future thought is simultaneously dependent on the past and itself acts as a catalyst for the (re)construction of the past' (p. 376).

As Szpunar and Szpunar note, a presentist focus has long been part of our understanding of collective memory. This extends back to Halbwachs (1992) and continues to be part of recent thinking by figures such as Olick and Robbins (1998) and Lewis Coser (1992), who noted that for Halbwachs, 'collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present' (34). Halbwachs even gave a nod to the role of future thought in the formation of collective memory when he observed that a 'new family turns from the start toward the future' (77) by creating their own memories in order to 'avoid [the] inevitable conflict' that would be created if each over-identified with their previous families.

For Szpunar and Szpunar (2016), then, collective future thought is a 'driving force of collective memory' (382) and shapes how the past is reconstructed. Much of this has to do with the crucial function that collective memory serves in identity projects of groups ranging from couples to families, social movements, and nations. Instead of remembering simply for the sake of remembering, collective future thought guides it in the service of group identity. Indeed, 'collective future thought is essential to the persistence of collective identity and also highlights how group identity is malleable and changing – how its continuity depends on its ability to adapt and change rather than simply persevere – in relation to its projections of the future' (384).

[1] We are grateful to Kathleen McDermott for her help in formulating these points.

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In a review article, Meymune Topcu and William Hirst (2022) provide a summary of much of the existing research on mental time travel (or MTT). With regard to the content and structure of symbolic mediation involved in collective memory and collective future thinking, they note that the contents of events envisioned in a national future often fall into categories such as war, terrorism, and science/technology that figure in collective memory for past national events. Thus, 'if a participant remembered a science related event for the national past, s/he was also likely to imagine a science-related event for the future' (Topcu and Hirst 2022). One exception to this concerns environmental events: 'For both beginnings and transition narratives, there was almost no mention of environmental events, whereas for the future it was the third most frequently mentioned event category (14%)' (6). They also note the crucial role of narratives and other cultural tools linking memory with future thinking.

These ideas can be further elaborated by drawing on research about 'cultural life scripts'. These are schematic life stories that include normative events such as marriage, finding a first job, having children, and so forth (Berntsen and Rubin 2004) that are expected to happen in a typical life in Western cultures. Dorthe Berntsen and Annette Bohn (2010) analysed the content of important personal past and future events and found that the majority of events (71%) came from the category of cultural life scripts both for individuals' past and the future. This research on individual future thought raises the question of how its findings might play out at the collective level, an issue yet to be examined in detail.

Another important line of research on MTT concerns positive or negative orientations towards the past and future. Studies of individual MTT has generally shown a positivity bias for both past and future events (Berntsen and Bohn 2010; Kahneman et al 2009). In contrast, research on collective memory has often revealed a strong negativity bias for the collective past: people tend to remember negative events for the world's or the nation's past (Liu et al 2005).

But focusing on origin stories of America, Yamashiro et al (2022) found that a different pattern sometimes emerges. Their analysis revealed a positive, idealised view of the foundational past with the top three most mentioned events among Americans being the Revolutionary War, the Declaration of Independence, and the Columbus's so-called discovery of the Americas – all deemed as positive events by the majority of participants (Yamashiro et al 2022). This idealised outlook leaves little room for negative events such as slavery in the US (Ionescu et al 2022), which may account for the strong negative reaction by many American commentators to the idea that the true origin story should be the arrival of African slaves, as proposed in *The 1619 Project* (Hannah-Jones et al 2021).

Yamashiro et al (2022) were able to document further relationships of collective memory and collective future thought during the COVID-19 pandemic by American and British subjects. They reported that at the beginning of COVID restrictions, both individual and collective future thinking showed negative trajectories, with future thought being less positive than memory. This contrasts with the usual positivity bias in personal future thinking and suggests that it may be modified by major public events. After the lifting of the COVID restrictions, this negative trajectory decreased in personal future thinking, but measures of collective memory and collective future thinking showed a pervasive negativity bias across both points in the COVID pandemic, with collective future thinking more strongly negative than collective memory. Perhaps this outcome occurs because the COVID pandemic is not over as of time of these studies.

Yamashiro et al (2022) frame these and other findings in terms of 'implicit intertemporal trajectories – progress, decline, or stasis'. Like national narrative templates, these are implicit because they are 'inferred from common patterns in the way people tell personal or collective stories' rather than made explicit in their narratives. Yamashiro et al (2022) report that personal and collective patterns often do not show parallels, leading

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them to conclude that with regard to 'the question of the extent to which personal and collective trajectories track with one another, the answer seems to be that although there is some relation, the relation is quite weak'. This aligns with other research in Western countries indicating that personal and collective temporal thought are largely dissociable domains of thought (Shrikanth and Szpunar 2021; Shrikanth et al 2018; Yamashiro and Roediger 2019).

In another study of individual and collective MTT, Shrikanth et al (2018) used a fluency task to study whether a similar negativity bias exists for imagining individual and collective futures. This task assesses how quickly items come to mind when subjects are asked about events. Their study included participants from Canada and the US, who were asked to list things that their country or they as individuals are excited or worried about in the future (e.g., next week, 5–10 years, etc.). The main finding across these studies is that people have a more negative perception of the collective future than the personal future. This is consistent with the finding that people routinely remember negative events for the collective past (Liu et al 2005; see also Cyr and Hirst 2019), but contrasts with the fact that they remember mostly positive events for the personal past (Kahneman et al 2009). Another study obtained somewhat different results with Chinese students, who showed roughly equal rates of positivity for the past and the future (Deng et al 2022). We look forward to future research that will explore similarities and differences in individual and collective remembering and future thinking across nations and cultures.

Closing reflections

We have organised our article in terms of three themes that we think might play a role in the future of memory studies: the power of narrative tools as forms of mediation in implicit and explicit collective memory, the self-centred nature of collective memory, and collective future thinking and mental time travel. There undoubtedly will be other important issues that arise as well, but we are especially interested in watching discussions of these three because we see them as having special potential.

Along with fostering scholarly inquiry, *Memory, Mind & Media* can also be expected to be a forum for exploring issues that shape public discourse about the global future. There are many challenges in this respect, but we see the existential threats of climate change and nuclear war as being particularly important. To be sure, these threats involve political and social forces that go well beyond the purview of memory studies, but memory studies might be able to provide crucial insights about our continuing inability to mobilise populations to deal with the future.

In a time of rising nationalism and populism, the power of the past, shaped by slow-to-change, self-centred narrative tools, is obvious. It is all too easy to mobilise populations to engage in conflict and violence over events from previous decades or centuries, but this raises the question of why it is so difficult to mobilise groups against future global threats, some of which are already starting to unfold in the present. Studies of MTT and other topics in memory studies can hardly solve all these issues, but they can make a contribution. We hope and anticipate that issues such as those we have outlined will be part of the effort.

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