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## **Rethinking function, self and culture, in ‘Difficult’ Autobiographical Memories.**

Steven D. Brown & Paula Reavey

### **Introduction**

The psychology of memory appears to be entering a phase of transformation, with regards to autobiographical memory (AM), at least. The role of others, of the cultural landscape, is no longer confined to the peculiar interests of the social psychologist, cultural theorist, or anthropologist. And in contemporary AM work, the individual and culture are now to become ever more conceptually and empirically unified (Boyer & Wertsch, 2009), and there are now greater numbers of psychologists wishing to conceptually and empirically demonstrate the link between private mentation and the collective cultural landscape out of which such memorial activities emerge (Nelson & Fivush, 2004, Conway & Jobson, 2012).

As social psychologists, it is perhaps unsurprising that we welcome this move towards examining remembering in cultural context, with unreserved enthusiasm. Understanding the social and cultural processes that ‘make’ remembering, is at the centre of our work on how people experience, and make sense of, difficult memories (e.g. sexual, physical and emotional abuse, adoption, incarceration, disasters) (Brown & Reavey, 2015). It is with these ‘vital memories’ (in that we argue they are ‘vital’ to a sense of self in the present) in mind that our aim in this chapter is to open up a dialogue, regarding the manner in which certain key aspects of autobiographical memory have been conceptualised. In particular, we provide an alternative way in which to conceptualise three key elements – memory function, culture and self. More specifically, we draw on the idea of what we call the *expanded* model of memory (Brown & Reavey, 2014; 2015), to explore how memory function, culture and self, require situating beyond the boundaries of private mentations (even if influenced by culture), and are threaded into, and afforded by, the material world (see Ingold, 1996; 2013). We also wish to explore the idea that discrepancies or ambiguities in memory can serve *productive* purposes for the ongoing negotiation of self, as it unfolds in the present. The self, thus, is never fully complete, but involved in constant negotiation and meaning making. This approach will, we hope, assist in illustrating further the productive links between memory function, culture and self that currently circulate in the autobiographical memory literature.

### **The Origins of Autobiographical Memory: function, culture and self**

Work on Autobiographical Memory (AM) is increasingly concerned with how recollections of the past are shaped by the ongoing needs and projects of the present self and with the cultural communities that shape its emergence and development (Berntsen, 2012; Nelson, 2009; Conway & Loveday, 2015). This focus on the *functional significance of memory*, that is, the role of the past in creating and/or maintaining current self and identity, treats memory as a reflexive activity, that moves with the concerns of the present. As Bluck (2003: 113) summarises it: ‘the primary concern is not with how much or how well humans remember their personal past (although those features often play some role), but instead with *why and how* humans remember both mundane and significant life events. What functions does it serve people to remember, reflect on, and share with others, the experiences of their lives?’.

One answer to the ‘how’ question comes from Martin Conway’s influential cognitive psychological model of AM and the self-memory system (SMS). This posits that our memories of particular events are shaped by our current concerns as they are cognitively organised by the ‘working self’ (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). The working self is responsible for organising event specific, as well as general knowledge, and is functionally oriented towards current goals and identity maintenance. In short, we typically recall events and feelings that help to support our present views about who and what we are, and which also help us to solve problems that are relevant to us in the present time, and help to anticipate likely futures (Pasupathi, 2012).

This functional approach builds upon evidence from developmental studies that AM emerges as a critical developmental skill, somewhere around the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year of life (Fivush et al, 2011). Early interactions can lead to the shaping of recollections in a number of significant ways, including, for example, enduring gendered styles of remembering, in both children and adults (Fivush, 1998). Conversational exchanges have been examined in detail to look at the instructional and pedagogical cues delivered by parents that direct the meaning focus of children’s recollections (Nelson, 2004), assist children in distinguishing their own private memories from the memories of others, as well as identifying themselves as the directive agent in their recollections. In childhood, ‘reality monitoring’ can be subject to error, with recurrent source confusions, including the confusion between self-memory or episodic memory and general episode memory. This suggests that how we come to learn about ourselves over time, mainly through the medium of recollection, can be entangled with the stories of others (Roberts and Blades, 2000) and with broader cultural narratives (Nelson, 2003).

#### *Function in relation to the (cultural) self*

The embedding of the psychological in sociocultural frameworks seems crucial to addressing how AM emerges as a human capacity (see Nelson & Fivush 2004). But it further seems to be of central importance to understanding the ‘why’ question. Pillemer (1998) points to the value of recounting autobiographical memories for maintaining social ties. Telling stories of one’s involvement in past events ‘serves a significant social-cultural function; the acquisition of such sharing means that the child can enter into the social and cultural history of the family and community’ (Nelson, 1993: 178). AM provides the means for offering a self-narrative of belonging and membership with the people and groups around us.

But the implications of the functionality of AM can be pushed still further. Perhaps our very sense of ‘self’ is bound up in an emergent capacity to tell stories of our personal past. Katherine Nelson and Robyn Fivush have argued for a social constructivist approach to AM where self and memory become entwined through the construction of a ‘life narrative’ (see Nelson & Fivush, 2004). This involves both the kind of autoegetic awareness (mentally placing ourselves or travelling back in time) described by Tulving, and the reflexive ability to do what Bartlett (1932) described as ‘turning around on one’s own schemas’, or simply put, telling stories from memory about ourselves to others. This principle of *constructing* meaning via interrelationships with others does not only hold sway for children, but also plays a role in identity formation in adulthood. Memories are thus a result of both actual experience and the social construction of those experiences, through joint interaction with others (Pasupathi, 2001).

Remembering thus becomes an act of self and meaning making for the individual. It serves as a foundation for identity across time (Baddeley, 1988). If this is so, then as Conway (2005) observes, the strict accuracy, or ‘correspondence’ of a given recollection needs to be considered in relation to its ‘coherence’ with other recollections and the rememberer’s self-beliefs. In many cases then, coherence is more important than correspondence. In a remarkable statement, Conway & Loveday argue for what they call a *modern view of human memory*, where what is remembered as AM is a selective construction that may compress time, mix together events and engage with imaginative leaps:

In the modern view of human memory memories are ... transient constructions and although they many to some degree accurately represent the past they are time-compressed and contain many details that are inferred, consciously and non-consciously, at the time of their construction. Thus, all memories are to some degree false in the sense that they do not represent past experience literally ... One of the main functions of memories is to generate meanings, personal meanings that allow us to make sense of the world and operate on it adaptively. Memories are, perhaps, most important in supporting a wide range of social interactions where coherence is predominant and correspondence often less central. (Conway & Loveday, 2015: 7)

Critics of the cognitive-experimental psychology of memory have often accused its practitioners of being obsessed with matters of accuracy and of being ignorant of the wider social practices in which remembering is enacted (for example, Edwards & Potter, 1992; Middleton & Brown, 2005). Conway & Loveday’s summary of the modern view of memory dramatically closes the supposed gap between cognitive and social-discursive approaches. Both, we can belatedly recognize, are principally concerned with the constructive nature of remembering, the social functions it performs, and the generation of personal meanings that allows for the enactment of self identity.

We welcome entirely the acknowledgement of the convergence of cognitive and social approaches upon a shared set of problems. Going forward the task will be, we believe, to develop these mutual problems without lapsing back into distracting debate around methodological or epistemological differences. There are three principal issues, which, for us, seem to define the cognitive-sociocultural problem space of AM. We outline these, whilst speaking to a set of issues that inform our work on vital memories, more specifically.

The *first* concerns the functionality of memory. If AM is functionally oriented – that is, remembering personal memories accomplishes something in the here and now – then how are we to understand the recollection of ‘difficult’ or ‘painful’ events that are disruptive of current self and actions? The common position taken is that certain kinds of experience are so extreme (i.e. childhood abuse, witnessing violence or catastrophic events) that memory distortions arise to protect the working self from subsequently having to engage with them, or that the working self may itself be disrupted due to some deficit (i.e. an underlying psychiatric disorder) such that it becomes unconstrained by the need to create coherence or correspondence in AM (Conway & Loveday, 2015)<sup>1</sup>. However this is to assume a prior normative set of values by which different kinds of recollections might be distinguished. One of the characteristics of distressing memories is often that the person recollecting finds it difficult to arrive at judgments as to whether they are wholly ‘bad’ or may, perhaps, contain elements that are of value. Establishing

the meaning and value of a difficult memory is part of the process of recollection, and may indicate that complex sociocultural functions are being enacted.

This leads us immediately into the *second* issue. It is difficult to establish exactly what functions may be served by a given recollection, however incoherent or lacking in veridicality it may be, without first analyzing the practical contexts in which it is produced (e.g. in a therapy session, at a family meeting). Our relationship to distressing aspects of our personal past often ambiguous and shaped considerably by the practices and setting in which it is recollected. Moreover, even recollections that have good fit with 'normative' life stories (e.g. starting a new job, getting married) may be told in very different ways depending on the interactional contexts in which they become relevant (conversations between either a present, or past partner). Setting and practice are then crucial sites where the relationship between culture and the individual is mediated.

*Thirdly*, the useful distinction made by Conway (2005) between correspondence and congruency in AM, shifts attention to the nature of the 'self' processes through which the congruency of a given recollection is established. The 'conceptual self' described by Conway et al 2004 is comprised of culturally prescribed self-images, beliefs and life stories. But if these memories that inform these representations and narratives are 'transient constructions', then how stable is the conceptual self through and around which they cluster? Is it appropriate to speak of a self as a 'thing' at all (however schematically) rather than as ongoing process or project? In what ways is it best to conceive of stability and change in relation to self? We will address some of these issues by turning to what we refer to as an expanded model of memory, to examine the link between function, culture and self further, and its emergence in material settings.

### **Expanding the Domain of Autobiographical Memory**

Conway and Jobson (2015) offer the following as an example of what they call 'broken memories' to differentiate between individuals who possess stability (and thus coherence) and those who do not. Largely their differentiation appears to be based upon a separation of those who experience trauma or those diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder, and the remainder of the population. According to Conway & Jobson then, broken memories (belonging largely to the former) are instances where there is disruption to AM processes, brought about by extreme events or extant underlying pathologies. The examples they provide are meant to analytically frame the normal functioning of AM by illustrating its potential malfunctions (what is usually called a 'deviant case'). They describe the following:

One patient, for example, had been sexually abused by his grandfather from ages of 4 to 12. He had a persistent and intrusive flashback in which he was naked in a bathroom being pushed against the radiator by his naked grandfather. In this intrusive fragment he saw himself from an observer perspective as he was now, a balding 35-year old, and saw in the memory his grandfather as a frail 70 year old. In fact it became clear during therapy that he had been 6 at the time and his grandfather was in his 40s. The false (coherence) memory served the function of obscuring the fact that he had been a helpless victim. (Conway & Jobson, 2015: 7)

For Conway & Jobson, there are two issues with this memory. It is seen from the position of the observer, rather than as the one who experienced the event, and it transposes the patient's<sup>2</sup> and the abuser's current ages with their chronological ages at the time the event was thought to have occurred. The shift in perspective is treated as a normal distortion, but the swapping around of ages is taken to indicate the falseness of the memory in terms of its overall coherence. It worth noting that contra to the way that 'false memory' scholars such as Elizabeth Loftus might deal with such an example, Conway and Jobson do not question the overall correspondence of the recollection (i.e. that it refers to something that actually occurred), nor doubt that the recollection may have some function for the patient – namely that of masking his victimhood – and do not seize upon the context in which it was produced as further evidence of the malfeasance of therapeutic professionals in co-producing false memories. That said, we would see the function of the memory in slightly different terms. The substitution of the ages, for example, might be seen as not so much masking victimhood, but an explicit (though not necessarily deliberate) turning around on it. The recollection renders the original event ambiguous in a number of ways. There is a reversal of power. The powerful adult becomes a weak, elderly man. The powerless child is transformed into as the man the patient is now. This may reflect the contemporary relationship between the patient and the abuser – perhaps it is the grandfather who is now vulnerable and unable to defend himself. In transforming the event in this way, the recollection proposes that powerlessness in the past need not determine relations of power in the present. In fact, in the original account of the case in Conway et al (2005), we learn that the patient had continuously 'updated' their age in the recollection throughout their adult life to 'make him seem as adult as he could be' (p. 529).

Questions of agency can be also posed differently through the substitution of ages. Victims of child sexual abuse can experience difficulties in separating their adult conceptions of what constitutes agency from those of a child when they reflect back on their experiences (Haaken, 1999; Lamb, 2000; Reavey & Brown, 2006; Reavey, 2009). It is common in most therapeutic practices to encourage survivors not to mis-attribute adult notions of choice to their child self. This appears to be what was done in the course of the cognitive therapy in which the patient participated, and which resulted in what were deemed to be good therapeutic outcomes (see Conway et al, 2005). But settling matters of agency, arriving at a clear sense that one did not have a choice over what happened, can also be very problematic, since it carries with it the implication that past victimhood may determine one's current sense of agency (see Reavey & Brown, 2006; 2009). Moreover it can mean denying ambiguous feelings – albeit ones that are often challenging and threatening – that were part of the experience. In the original account, it is stated that the patient recollects feelings of sexual arousal during the later years of the abuse, which led him believe that he was 'at fault and an equal participant in the activity' (Conway et al, 2005: 529). Whilst we can be utterly clear that legally and morally this was not the case, there may nevertheless be some value in exploring these feelings further (this might have been a starting point had the patient been enrolled in a different kind of therapeutic practice), because they offer an alternative to what Janice Haaken (1999) calls a 'master narrative of abuse'. Substituting the ages in the recollection potentially keeps questions of choice open, which may be of some benefit to the patient in their long-term struggles to accommodate the experience into their changing version of self (i.e. not simply in terms of the short-term goals of the cognitive therapy, important as they are) (see also Reavey, 2010). Responsibility and accountability are thus rendered ongoing, rather than complete and finite.

Finally, from the details given in both papers it is not clear whether or not the abuse has been subsequently acknowledged by the grandfather or others, or subject to legal measures (although, as in the vast majority of cases, the abuser silenced the child at the time with threats of the consequences of disclosure). Responsibility for what happened may not have been either informally or formally addressed. The recollection thematises some of the key issues that might have been 'live' for the patient at the time of its production – Is my grandfather in his current state still culpable for his actions? What might it say about me, as an adult, that I need this elderly man, who is close to death, to be punished? Are we different, as middle aged men, him, then and me, now? A very important detail here is that it was the patient, as a 12 year old, who ultimately, put a stop to the abuse when he was 'physically strong enough to retaliate' (Conway et al, 2005: 529), rather than any of the adult carers who were present during his childhood. Perhaps the switching of selves is speaking to a very powerful idea – this is someone who has always had to be 'the grown up', and take responsibility for his own fate, whilst being let down by the adults around who have so woefully neglected or abused their own duties of care.

Overall, we think this example offers some very different suggestions about how to treat functionality in AM. It is very difficult to establish which functions a given recollection of personal experience may be serving in isolation from other details of the person's life. In the example above, the current relationship between the patient and their family, including the grandfather, is highly relevant to understanding what this recollection may be doing. The swapping of ages could be a way of resisting a victim narrative, or it could be a vivid way of thematising an ongoing sense of injustice. Indeed there may be several identity-relevant functions being performed simultaneously. Functions can also 'mis-fire'. They can accomplish some social acts, but also have significant unintended consequences. In the example, the patient's continuous updating of his age in the recollection seems to have brought with it a sense of being active rather than passive as a child, which may have been of value to him in his struggles in adult life. But over time, this has come at the colossal cost of increasingly attributing agency to his past self, which has become increasingly problematic. We cannot then treat the potential functions of AM in any clear-cut way – they are likely to be multiple, sometimes contradictory, contextually bound, and rarely unitary in their effects (Reavey & Brown, 2009).

### *Expanding cultural selves*

Many contemporary accounts of AM hold that social conventions, in the form of culturally generated life scripts (e.g. marriage, going to college, being a house, having a child), help organise autobiographical memories by providing the basis for life narratives, beliefs and values (Conway & Jobson, 2012; Berntsen & Bohn, 2009). These in turn influence the structuring of goals, which are organized hierarchically (Conway, 2005). One of the difficulties that the patient in Conway & Jobson's example doubtless confronts is that their experiences of childhood sexual abuse do not map onto the kinds of cultural life scripts that are normatively valued. They face the challenge of trying to produce a coherent life story using sociocultural narrative resources that do not help to articulate their lived experiences. It is not then surprising that the outcome is what Conway and Jobson call a 'false (coherence) memory'.

But is coherence – the sense of there being an order, stability and meaning to our recollected past experiences – an achievable goal, not just for this particular patient, but more generally within AM? As Katherine Nelson (2003) observes, the very idea that we have unique life histories to narrate is a comparatively recent historical construction, and

is subject to considerable cultural variation and social change. What constitutes 'coherence' depends greatly on local sociocultural standards and practices. There are, for example, cultural representations and life narratives of 'survivorship' following child abuse and neglect that have emerged in the past two decades, which the patient in the example above may or may not have been able to access. However, to see coherence as the outcome of applying external representational frameworks to one's own experiences is reach for a quite static conception of culture, as a stockpile of pre-existing narrative themes, norms and collective representations. This contrasts with the view of culture typically expressed in contemporary social anthropology and related disciplines such as archaeology, where culture is treated not as a 'thing' that is transmitted *to us* from on high, it is rather a process, in continual negotiation, with attendant contradictions and potential resistance by members of that culture (Cole, 2005). Meaning and value are outcomes rather than inputs into the sociocultural work of mobilizing the past in the present. Our personal pasts are, to some degree, interpretively open and that the cultural resources we may draw upon to engage in the work of establishing current significance very rarely offer the means of clearly fixing what a given event means right now. The term 'culture' names this live, contextually bound process of mobilising the past *on the ground*, so to speak, in our interactions with others, and in our relations with the settings of the material world. Materiality thus, is as integral to function, culture and self, as language or script. And it is out of these diverse settings that the function of memories shift accordingly.

#### *The relevance of setting*

What this suggests is the need for the analysis of the specific settings, persons and materials that are involved in the personal work of recollection. It really matters that the recollection in the example was given during the course of a therapeutic encounter, and that this therapy was provided following the patient's engagement with an 'educational group workshop on borderline personality disorder' (Conway et al, 2005: 529). Remembering is shaped by the nature of the practice and setting through which it occurs. For instance, if the patient had been making a legal witness statement about the same event, it is likely that matters of correspondence and coherence would have been jointly managed with the professional concerned very differently. We recollect stories about our personal experiences differently, depending on the interlocutors to whom the story is told and with an awareness of what the likely implications could be of how the story might subsequently be acted upon. In this case, the outcome of telling the event with ages transposed in cognitive therapy was that the patient was encouraged to reformulate their recollection to restore correspondence with likely ages at the time. A different kind of therapy might have sought to work on the memory in another way. And if the process has been legal, rather than therapeutic it is likely that in the time between initial statement and court proceeding, the patient would have been guided to refine their recollection to fit with the requirements of clear evidence.

Both correspondence and coherence in personal memory is not just up to us, as individuals, to constitute and sustain. It is jointly accomplished with others in the settings where it relevant, drawing on the sociocultural and material resources that are to hand. Questions of bias are not really relevant here. If, as Conway & Jobson (2005) assert, there is no literal representation of past experience, then what is available for analysis are occasioned, setting-specific acts of recollection that are fashioned in the moment from available cultural resources. From this it follows that cognition has to be treated as a set of processes that are embedded in the world. As John Sutton and colleagues argue,



remembering engages both ‘internal’ and ‘external’ resources in a relation of complementarity (Sutton et al, 2010; 2011). Their ‘distributed-scaffolded’ approach is richly suggestive of possible ways of thinking about relationships between ‘in-the-head’ and ‘environmental’ resources. Or as Clark (1997) has it, cognition comprises a ‘heterogeneous assembly of brains, bodies, artifacts and other external structures’ (p. 77). In the Conway and Jobson example, the patient draws upon neural resources whilst recollecting (as indeed we all do in all forms of cognition!), and it may or may not be relevant that their deployment of their neural resources is mediated by a prior history of ‘smoking large amounts of cannabis’ and possibly also by use of prescription psychoactive medication. But these neural resources constitute but one component of a broader, distributed set of loosely coupled resources that are brought together within the setting-specific production of their recollection.

Expanding the meaning of the term cognition in this way offers an interesting challenge for conceptualizing AM: if remembering is the outcome of distributed processes, then in what sense do our memories *belong* to us? In Conway’s work, it is the role of the ‘working self’ to organise episodic memory through threading together its contents with culturally derived knowledge. This model draws upon classic work in social-cognitive approaches to memory, such as that of Neisser (1993), in positing distinctions within self-knowledge. Neisser (1994) distinguished no less than five sources of self-knowledge, ranging from information provided by direct perception (the ‘ecological self’) to higher-level material such as internalized cultural beliefs (the ‘conceptual self’). But this kind of theorizing arguably leans too far on the assumptions of early cognitive science, where the problem to be explained is how information from the environment gets ‘inside’ the cognitive system. By contrast, contemporary cognitive science that builds upon Clark’s ‘extended mind’ hypothesis (see Clark & Chalmers, 1998) expands the cognitive system beyond the boundary of the brain and skin into communicative and material relations. Consequently what counts as ‘the self’ or ‘self knowledge’ includes relations with others, material artefacts and external cognitive technologies.

The shift from early to contemporary cognitive approaches implies that the basic premise of AM requires rethinking. Instead of attempting to understand the way that culture ‘gets inside’ the person to form the conceptual self, the problem is rather that of explaining how a sense of selfhood and personal continuity emerges from the shifting arrangement of materials (e.g. brain, bodies, artefacts, settings) that make up the distributed cognitive system. For instance, when Conway & Jobson (2015) place the example under the heading ‘broken memories’, they are suggesting that continuity in selfhood is the default, which is compromised by memories associated with extreme events, against the ‘working self’ seeks to protect itself. But if the ‘self-memory system’ is a distributed system, along the lines suggested by Clark, then the problem is reversed: how is the felt continuity of self extracted from the diverse materials out of which it is constituted?

There are extant philosophical resources that may assist in developing this problem. The writing of Alfred North Whitehead (1978), for instance, offers a whole conceptual framework for treating personal experience as an ongoing process that gathers together varied materials to create ‘actual occasions’ or ‘drops’ of experience. Whitehead argued that the flow of awareness is composed of continuously forming ‘events’, which fold together diverse entities into a ‘feeling’. Each drop of experience conditions the next, in such a way that whilst we can speak of our ‘self’ as being composed of the kind of heterogeneous assembly that Clark describes, there is nevertheless a form of continuity that emerges as the conditioning of successive drops creates a pathway or general

tendency over time. Whitehead then allows us to conceive the way in which ‘your personal experience does not happen ‘in’ your mind; your mind simply *is* the flow of your experience’ (Mesle, 2008: 96). Autobiographical memories could then be treated as ‘chreods’ or emergent patterns that persist through the successive conditioning of experience, rather than as internally generated mental representations.

## **Vital Memories**

Our work has explored personal memories concerning distressing or painful events (see Brown & Reavey, 2015). We have treated these as a subset of autobiographical memory, that we refer to as ‘vital memories’. The principal characteristics of these memories are that they offer consider challenges for accommodation into a coherent life narrative since they often refer to life-changing events. As such, they cannot be readily dismissed and are often treated as central to self-definition. It is important to state whilst many of the participants in our studies have engaged with therapeutic practices, we avoid recourse to notions of trauma or pathology. Rather than draw upon some kind of ‘deficit’ model that conceptualises painful pasts as necessarily resulting in psychological disturbance, we prefer to treat as participants as ordinary people who have undergone extraordinary events, either directly or vicariously, and who have developed, with the assistance of others, ways of living with the past that are, for the most part, fit for purpose (though without discounting the sometimes high levels of distress associated with them).

Theoretically, our work was initially derived from the social remembering framework developed in discursive approaches to psychology (e.g. Middleton & Edwards, 1990). This treatment of memory emphasizes that remembering is a social act that is interactionally performed to mobilise a version of the past to accomplish some purpose in the present. Function rather than correspondence is the dominant concern in this work (see Edwards & Potter, 1992). Memories are descriptions or accounts that are constructed and offered to ‘do things’ in the present. This line of thinking has led contemporary researchers in Discursive Psychology to dismiss the idea of inner mentation as being relevant to analyzing the public performance of psychological phenomenon (e.g. remembering, feeling, arguing) (Tileaga & Stokoe, 2015). According this perspective, experience is the lived engagement with the world around us, primarily enacted in talk-in-interaction, with all its richness and complexity, rather than some inner kernel of being (Potter, 2012).

Whilst there is much in this work that continues to inspire us, the notion that all that is worth saying about the psychological can be found in empirical analysis of interaction seems overly restrictive. At the core of experience is a felt sense of continuity, that we have a personal history and are living at a particular time within specific places. Now this continuity is subject continuous variation. We are not stable ‘things’ that *endure* through time, but rather collections of changing personal qualities whose unique temporal trajectories of activity, or *perdurance*, defines our being (see Ingold, 2013). We are not made of talk alone. The psychological is constituted through the material world, by way of the artefacts and features of the settings in which dwell. And also by the complex biochemical constitution of the bodies by means of which we feel and act. The rethinking of ‘cognition’ in terms of distributed arrangements of resources and capacities to act seems to us offer a productive way forward.

We can briefly state what we see as points of connection with Conway’s model of Autobiographical Memory. The resources out of which personal recollections are built

(i.e. the autobiographical knowledge base) are distributed within a given setting, across persons, materials and practices, and typically offer the possibilities for a number of versions of the past, some of which are contradictory. In this sense all autobiographical remembering is collectively enacted, although it is typically attached to us as persons (i.e. we are taken to be the authors of the recollected experience). Correspondence is a setting-specific accomplishment that draws on the practices and norms that operant within the setting (e.g. courts of law, therapy, family conversations). Coherence is an aspiration rather than a settled matter, and reflects our ongoing, situated efforts, to turn around on our personal past. Our sense of self (i.e. the conceptual self) is both spatially and temporally extended. What we think we are depends on others, and the resources of the settings we inhabit. We are also never, in a strict sense, existing in the present moment, since our current concerns reach back into the past, seeking meaning, and push forward into likely futures, exploring possible implications (Pasupathi, 2012). The self is then best thought of as an ongoing project that consists of a shifting array of elements (Ingold, 2013). We will now illustrate this further by describing how some of our work relates to the three themes of function, culture and self.

### *The Functionality of Ambiguity*

All autobiographical recollections have some function; they are remembered in the course of social structured activity (even if that activity is solitary). The functions served by vital memories tend to somewhat ambiguous. Difficult or painful experiences may contain multiple layers of contradictory meaning and a range of complex feelings. This is particularly so in autobiographical memories of child sexual abuse (see Haaken, 1999). There can be considerable time compression, with multiple episodes of abuse condensed into particularly vivid scenes, shifts in perspective and ambivalence around feelings and intentions (see Reavey & Brown, 2006). Over time, these features of vital memories are likely to become more rather than less diffuse, as they are turned around upon in re-telling. Sorting out ‘what happened’ and ‘what it means now’ can remain lifelong concerns.

In one example, Lorna described a recollection of being sexually abused by her older brother in a room in their family home. Lorna described how the ambivalent feelings that she recalls from that event, which included some elements of pleasure, have been an ongoing source of distress to her throughout her adult life. For her, a crucial aspect of the abuse is whether her brother was acting on the basis of naïve curiosity or with the active intention to sexually abuse his much younger sister. Here she recalls how during several episodes, he removed the handle from the door to the room in which the abuse occurred, thereby ensuring it was locked from inside. Lorna takes the act of locking the door to be an indicator of his active intentions, which leaves her unable to excuse her brother for what he did (for further details see Reavey & Brown, 2009).

Here we can see Lorna turning around on her memory to establish correspondence and infer motives. The scene she recollects with the arrangement of the siblings around the door seems to suggest or ‘propose’ two very different statements – the brother either acted with or without conscious awareness of what he was doing. As long as the door remains unlocked, then both statements can be in play, and Lorna does not have to ‘settle’ either her relationship to her brother, nor the meaning of the contradictory feelings she experienced. But if she chooses to believe that the detail of the door being locked is correct, then the brother is an abuser, she is a victim, and her feelings are a source of guilt – because in cultural terms, real victims should never enjoy aspects of their abuse.

In this recollection, it seems that it is the ambivalence over correspondence that it is functional. As long as Lorna does not have to settle ‘what actually happened’, she can accommodate the vital memory into her sense of adult self in different ways. To use Conway & Jobson’s terms, maintaining uncertain correspondence enables higher and more flexible coherence. On this basis, we would suggest that the switching of ages by the patient in their example may have accomplished something similar, up until a certain point. The broader point here is that the ‘propositions’ that emerge from vital memories (i.e. statements about what happened and their significance for the present) are inherently neither true nor false, but are realized as such in how we dispose of ambiguity and thereby settle on how we ought to orient to the recollection in question (e.g. ‘He meant to do it’, ‘I am victim’, ‘I cannot forgive him’).

Most often, the work of either maintaining or settling ambivalence in vital memories is done in concert with others. For example, in a study of the strategies which adoptive parents maintained to preserve the early memories of their adopted children (see Brown, Reavey & Brookfield, 2013), a parent C described a dilemma she was faced with in relation to her young adopted daughter. In the recent past the daughter had developed what C refers to as an ‘obsession’ with fire. She and her partner had addressed this by buying her age appropriate toys such as a firefighters play costume. But C is concerned by her daughter’s ‘pyromanic’ interest, because what she knows – and she believes her daughter does not yet know – is that her adoption came about because her birth mother set fire to their family flat whilst under the influence of alcohol and drugs, for which she subsequently received prison committal. The dilemma here is that if C attempts to steer her daughter away from pursuing her fascination with fire, she may be accused by the daughter, at some point later in life, of trying to hide or dispose of her early life. But by colluding in this interest, she risks premature disclosure of the personal history at an age when she judges her daughter to be insufficiently equipped to manage the details.

The example is a little unusual because it concerns what Marianne Hirsch (1997) calls a ‘vicarious memory’. The daughter appears not to remember the fire, at present, however there is good reason to suppose that in later life the account of the fire – which C is adamant that her daughter has the right to know about when she appears to be ready to hear the details – will form part of her life story, and the retellings will constitute autobiographical memories in their own right. At present, C is acting as custodian of the potential memories, in effect managing her daughters access to her own personal past. The way that she does this is through maintaining ambivalence. The daughter can explore her ‘obsession’ with fire within the safety of the relations of care of the adoptive family. We might say that the story of the fire is ‘hidden in plain sight’, awaiting the time of its eventual discovery by the daughter, who will then find a place for that episode in her life story, which has already been anticipated by its careful management by C.

### *Setting Specificity*

The example of C and her daughter demonstrates that the knowledge that we draw upon in constituting autobiographical memory is distributed across our relationships with others (see also Harris et al’s studies of older couples joint autobiographical recollections, Harris et al, 2014). This raises ethical questions about what our memorial responsibilities are to one another. For example, what are our duties in relation to what we hold of the personal experiences of others? Do they obtain merely within close personal relationships, or do they extend to broader social and professional relationships?

Conversely are we entitled to refuse to speak of or even to dispose of what we know of other's lives as and when we see fit? These kinds of questions indicate a point of passage between the focused study of autobiographical memory per se, and broader social and political questions of the kind posed within what has come to be called Cultural Memory Studies (Erlil & Nunning, 2008).

In our own work, the intermediate point where psychological and broader ethico-political questions come together is in the study of specific settings in which remembering is performed. If there is broad agreement within the 'modern' or, as we would term it, 'expanded' view of memory, that in principle distinctions between truth and falsity of recollections are not meaningful to make, then this does not mean abandoning the search for veracity. It simply means acknowledging that the 'truth' of a given memory depends upon the particular practice and setting where the recollection is subject to evaluation, and the criterion that are in play. For example, had the patient from Conway & Jobson's example offered that recollection as part of a legal case against the grandfather, the success of the prosecution would probably be in doubt. But in therapy, the switching of ages does not undermine the veracity of what is recalled, and perhaps even increases its believability because it fits with therapeutic expectations about managing traumatic experience.

Our approach to vital memories addresses settings (e.g. professional practices and sites, institutions, families etc) as crucial sites where the resources for constituting and evaluating personal memories are located. We can make a notion of culture operant here as the ways in which we collectively assemble and mobilise versions of the past in accordance with the extant practices of the setting. For example, the Reminiscence Museum based in the Humanitas care home in Rotterdam, is a somewhat unique space of memory (see Bendien, Brown & Reavey 2010; Bendien, 2013; 2009). Constructed in the basement of the care home, it consists of a series of rooms arranged with the décor and household objects of homes in the Netherlands around the period 1930-1950. There is a living room, two kitchen spaces, bedrooms, a child's nursery, a workshop, and several adjoining spaces that are full of period objects. The museum is open to visitors, along with elderly clients of the home, and provides a space for viewing the collected objects, entertaining visiting families or simply reflection. As might be imagined, the museum is extraordinarily successful at facilitating autobiographical memory, even amongst visitors who beginning to experience memory problems, and a whole series of museums have opened across the country.

Two short stories from the museum demonstrate its power. A group of elderly visitors were discussing a washing tub with one of the museum staff, telling stories of how 'wash days' were organized domestically when they were children. One member of the group offers a small recollection of being 8 or 9 and having to carry a bucket filled with scalding hot water up the stairs from the communal water heater to the family apartment. On another occasion, a different elderly client was in the kitchen with her adult daughter, who was visiting. The mother appeared unimpressed with much of what was on display, until they looked at an old early mechanical washing machine. On viewing this, the mother spoke in quick succession of her teenage school years and early married life, her now adult son, who had recently died, and finally a story about the son as a young boy which involved him coming into danger when playing near the exposed machine parts of a similar washing machine.

In both of these cases, we would argue that it is the arrangement of the setting that affords the recollection. These autobiographical memories can, and doubtless have been told, on other occasions, for other purposes. But the specific form they take when recollected in the museum appears to be fitted to the particular circumstances of the visit. In the first story, the collective talk around the washing tub is doing a work of elaborating a shared history amongst the women. What is not explicit in the brief details we have provided is that the way they talk indicates that they all grew up in Rotterdam during the 1930s/40s. What they are describing is the city as it was before its partial destruction during the second world war, and the hard times of the *Hongervinter* (famine or 'hunger winter') that came towards its end. To talk of wash days is then also to acknowledge the loss of that world and the difficult period that ensued. Interestingly, the way the story about carrying the water is narrated emphasizes not the danger, but rather the resilience of the woman as a young child. The hearable implication of telling this story if she could do such things as a young age, then one should not assume that her current age makes her vulnerable or infirm.

The second story equally seems to be addressed as much to current circumstances as to the past. The elderly mother initially takes their joint viewing of the antiquated kitchen appliances as an opportunity to emphasise the difference between her early adult life and that of her daughter. This shifts into a memory of a recent loss that then segues into a recollected episode where the mother was able to shield her then young son from danger. There is a awful lot being done here – the mother is comparing her life with her children, emphasizing the difficulties that women of her age faced, and showing how she confronted adversity in the past. All of this, which is accomplished in a matter of minutes, speaks to her current circumstances and the state of her relationship with her daughter as she is passing into the challenges of later life. This recollection, like the one before, seems to be uniquely afforded by the very particular sets of resources on offer in the setting at that moment – the specific objects they are viewing, the interaction between the visitors and the current life circumstances of the person remembering.

The reminiscence museum appears to support coherence in autobiographical memory, and authorise elderly visitors to show the relevance of their personal past to an understanding of the present. But there are settings where precisely the reverse appears to be the case. We have researched the experiences of patients in medium secure forensic psychiatric units (see Brown, Reavey, Kanyedredzi & Batty, 2014). These are psychiatric hospital units within UK National Health Service (NHS), where persons who have either been charged or convicted of criminal offences are transferred following a mental health diagnosis which renders them as either having 'diminished responsibility' for their 'index offence' or as unsuited to prison committal. Patients on the unit remain detained under the guidance of a section of the Mental Health Act ('sectioned') until such time as a tribunal agrees their release, which is typically anywhere between 3-10 years, depending on the severity of the initial offence and their compliance with psychiatric intervention.

One might imagine that, as a therapeutic space, a concern with the original index offence and with the circumstances that led to its occurrence would be central to the practices of the unit. In fact, the reverse is the case. Forensic psychiatric care primarily aims at 'stabilising' a patient's condition until they are judged to be well enough to return to long term out patient care within the community. As such, patients are discouraged from talking about their life prior to entering the unit, since this is taken to be irrelevant to the practice of supporting their current self-management of their condition. Patients typically spoke in vague, euphemistic terms of their recent past life (e.g. 'I was very unwell') and

indicated that they had been made aware that dwelling on this was counter-productive to successful progression on the unit (e.g. ‘You don’t want to get deeper into your illness’). If the reminiscence museum facilitates coherence, then the secure units seem to actively disrupt or suspend coherence, and emphasise the need to dispose of autobiographical memory, if only for the time of seeing out one’s section.

What we want to draw attention to by way of these examples, is that coherency in vital memories, and, by extension, amongst other kinds of autobiographical memories, is not accomplished by the person alone. It necessarily depends upon the settings in which we participate, and the relations that are afforded there. Authorship of our life stories may, in the final instance, be attributed to each of us alone. But the composition of those stories, the resources out of which they are built, and the opportunity to rehearse them is a collective, setting-specific process. And whilst we draw upon broader cultural narratives and values, they are mediated through the specific practices that define the setting in question.

### *Self as Ongoing Project*

There are almost unbearably weighty philosophical issues involved in conceptualizing self in relation to memory (see, for example, Ricoeur, 1990; Bergson, 1992; Stiegler, 2009). In the same way that the consensus on memories themselves has shifted from treating memories as ‘traces’ or ‘things’ that are stored within the cognitive system, to the notion of them being transient constructions that are assembled in the here-and-now to accomplish some purpose, so it may be that the challenge ahead is to offer compelling conceptual ‘non-foundational’ descriptions of ‘self’ as an ongoing, reflexive process rather than a structure or a system that is located somewhere or other (e.g. in the brain, in society, or the interaction that lie between them) (see Brown & Stenner, 2009; Reavey, 2010).

Our own contribution to these emerging debates is to elaborate upon a notion of self as spatially and temporally extended. What we are, emerges from the relationships we have to others, and from the diverse heterogeneous materials through which we act. If the term cognition can be plausibly extended to these distributed arrangements of materials, then there is some meaning in considering whether ‘self’ can be similarly dislodged from its tradition location ‘in the head’ and into a process unfolding, in the world. Indeed, one of the concerns around ‘digital memory’ that has emerged in media studies and elsewhere (see Hoskins, 2011; Garde-Hansen, Hoskins and Reading, 2009), is with the vulnerabilities and potential fragility of self that arises when so much of our personal memories are resourced by networked electronic media whose technical formats and proprietary arrangements do not necessarily guarantee its longevity. Think of how much of ‘you’ would be compromised by losing your smartphone or by your Facebook profile being made inaccessible...

Temporal extension is, we have argued elsewhere (Brown & Reavey, 2015), best thought by using metaphors of flow. Although we divide our lives up according to various socio-chronological conventions, our personal experience is continuous and indivisible. There are no pre-existing markers that clearly demarcate our lives into constituent parts. We live not some much in the present moment as in a flow where past and future meet, and where both are ceaselessly responding to the unfolding of events. Our past is never really over – it is reworked and reconstructed as we go along – and our anticipation of the future is correspondingly shifting. In this sense, ‘self’ names a project, a work-in-progress subject to endless revision, hesitation and reflection.

Vital memories provide vivid illustrations of the contingency and potential difficulties of this project. For example, survivors of the 2005 7/7 London Bombings found that their lives were irrevocably altered in the space of a few hours (see Allen, 2015; Brown, Reavey & Allen, 2015). Some survivors suffered life-changing injuries that meant that there could no possibility of a return to the life and the aspirations they had had before the bombings. Other survivors found that they were immediately caught up in the fast developing media and political story. John Tulloch, for instance, was photographed leaving the Aldgate underground tube station in a state of distress, with bandages around his head injuries and his face covered in blood. During the time of his extensive recuperation from his injuries, he discovered that his image had been used (without his consent) by a national UK newspaper in a front-page editorial supporting increased anti-terror legislation. As he put it, he was faced with the task of reconstructing himself at the same time as he was being reconstructed by the broadcast media in completely different ways and in support of a political project to which he profoundly disagreed.

Tulloch eventually wrote an account of his experiences, in part to rescue his own project of remaking himself from competing versions that were in circulation in the media. Rachel North, who was on the Piccadilly line train, where the largest number of fatalities occurred, also wrote a book in an effort to reclaim her personal experiences. North had begun making online posts about what had happened to her on the same day as the bombings, and had been invited by the BBC to maintain a blog about the events. This led to her engaging with the media and subsequently becoming active in support groups for fellow survivors and in campaigning for an enquiry into the official response to the bombings. As a consequence, North's account of her experiences became widely circulated. Her book is an attempt to situate that relatively short period of time in relation to her broader life story, and in particular to link her distress and recovery from the bombings to a previous period in her life where she was a survivor of a serious sexual assault (North, 2007). Both Tulloch and North have found that their lives have been irrevocably fractured by 7/7 bombings, and have faced the challenge of having their experiences reconstructed in multiple ways by others (including so-called 7/7 'truthers' who deny that the events happened at all), as well as having to try to accommodate what happened into their own project of (re)making themselves.

Tulloch and North's projects of self-making have been unusually complex, because of the highly public nature of the events in which they were caught up. But their experiences are exemplary of many other kinds of vital memories. What happened to them was an irrevocable change that shifted the flow of their life thereafter, and became central to their self-definition. Whilst the significance of the event was clear, the meaning of it and the ways in which it ought to be accommodated into their evolving project of self was uncertain. In a sense, both Tulloch and North will always be there, on the trains, in the immediate aftermath and confusion of the bombings. Everything that they aspire to be, that they can be, will have to be routed through this indelible rupture in their lives.

### **Summary**

In the early 1990s, critics of experimental psychology could confidently assert that the mainstream psychology of memory had a woefully under-developed conceptualization of the sociocultural contexts in which remembering was performed. Such critiques are certainly not pertinent a quarter century later. Research on autobiographical memory is one of the most vibrant and progressive areas within the psychology of memory. Through the efforts of researchers such as Katherine Nelson and Robyn Fivush, the idea



that telling culturally derived and sanctioned stories about oneself is a 'critical developmental skill' has been successfully embedded. Martin Conway's recent reformulations of his model of the 'self-memory system', which has near hegemonic status within the field, clearly demonstrate a willingness to take 'culture' on board as critical component of autobiographical memory. At the same time, recent developments in 'extended', 'enactive' and 'distributed' cognition explored by researchers such as John Sutton and others are beginning to revise some of the fundamentals of cognitive science in ways that close the gap significantly with constructionist approaches to psychology, not least because they converge on shared problems around how to conceptualise the role of external material resources and technologies in psychological functions.

It seems to us that the time has come to put aside squabbles about fine-grained philosophical distinctions and methodological (in)securities and recognize a shared convergence on a set of problems. In this chapter we have proposed that one starting point for seeking a way forward is to reflect on the key issues of function, culture and self in relation to autobiographical memory. Our own particular concern is with a subset of autobiographical memories that refer to painful or distressing events, which we call 'vital memories'. It is important to us that these memories are not treated as in some way outside of normal functioning, or as pathological in any way. The participants that we have worked with – including people who have been given mental health diagnoses and who are currently 'sectioned' – seem to us to be doing their best to creatively produce a form of coherency in their life stories, using the resources available to them. It seems to us that one should not really depart too far from the practice and the setting in which the recollection was occasioned in one's theorizing. Thus in our repeated citing of Conway & Jobson's example, we have been keen to place that example back in what we take to be its original context, rather than see it as a jumping off point for abstraction.

The most pressing agenda, as we would see it, is to build upon Conway & Jobson's distinction between correspondence and coherence in autobiographical memory. It is to be celebrated that the frankly ludicrous obsession with correspondence as the principal evaluative criterion for personal memories, much promoted by Elizabeth Loftus and her colleagues, has been superseded with a concern for how recollections of personal experiences are fitted into a broader conception of self. However, treating correspondence and coherence as dimensions that can be plotted together to create a kind of 2 x 2 problem space of remembering does not really do justice to the setting and practice specific nature of recollection. We propose that the way forward is to see both correspondence and coherence as setting level accomplishments that are indexed to the practices that are operant in the setting in question. We further propose that clarity and ambivalence are not normative criterion, but are themselves relative to our participation in the settings where our autobiographical memories are made relevant. Sometimes we need to settle matters. Other times, it works best for us to leave them open. It beggars belief that we, as analysts, would dare to assume that we have in principle, definitive answers to such highly contextual and situated problems.

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<sup>1</sup> These can be termed the 'extremity' and 'deficit' models of memory (see Brown & Reavey, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> We are using the term 'patient' to reflect the description used by Conway & Jobson, not because we think this is the most appropriate way in which to refer to individuals using services, unless they are de facto patients in a hospital setting.