

MEMORY, NARRATIVES AND IDENTITY. HOW PEOPLE RECALL, TRANSMIT AND LIVE THROUGH HISTORICAL EVENTS

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RESUMEN

En este artículo revisaremos 6 trabajos que se centran en el impacto que tienen hechos de carácter sociopolítico, estructuras identitarias y reacciones emocionales en la creación, transmisión y mantenimiento de las memorias colectivas. Estos trabajos analizan el recuerdo de hechos históricos y la manera en que este recuerdo está influido por la edad o género de las personas. Se verá cómo se produce un fuerte consenso intercultural en el recuerdo de hechos históricos importantes. No obstante también será importante diferenciar entre el hecho de recordar algo y la interpretación que los diferentes grupos sociales pueden dar de ese hecho. En los artículos podremos observar como la identidad social del grupo y la búsqueda de mantenimiento de esta identidad social positiva conduce a que existan diferentes memorias de un mismo hecho por parte de las víctimas, sus familiares y amigos, o las personas que realizaron la acción. Estas memorias tienen consecuencias para los valores, creencias y perspectiva acerca del mundo tanto para la persona como para el grupo al que pertenece.

ABSTRACT

In this article we will review a series of studies concerning the impact of sociopolitical events, identity structures and emotional reactions on the creation, transmission, and maintenance of collective memories. These studies reflect on how historical events are remembered, how these memories are mediated by age cohorts and gender. Moreover, processes of globalization have produced a strong cross-cultural consensus in the recall of these events, although the content of what is recalled may be different in diverse groups. Identities and the need to maintain a positive social identity are also crucial in the recall of events. This derives in the existence of different possible memories in victims, members of a victim's family or friends, and perpetrators of traumatic events. We will see how these memories have a series of consequences in a person or group's values, beliefs and general view of the World.

Key words: historical events, eurocentric collective memory, national events, sex, age

It is important for political psychology not to define issues on a mere psychological basis, but by using a psychosocial perspective. The context and situations in which we live, the identities we chose to consider important or salient, the effects of our group belonging, our sense of just/unjust acts, general socioeconomic and political factors, our hopes, fears or trust are important issues in shaping our life, memories and in some cases that of our siblings.

This special issue of the *Psicología Política* is important not only because of the topics it addresses, of the future studies it may direct us to, but also because it drives us through the narratives of memory and history not merely psychologizing politics, but bearing in mind the importance of social, political and cultural features.

In this issue different authors have elaborated on features related to the way in which we socially recall events, the events we remember. Social identities and political orientation are stressed as important features in collective remembering. Sociopolitical events anchor our views and beliefs which in turn affect our social memory. Another interesting aspect of this monograph is the importance attached to the role of emotions (basically guilt and shame), something we do not normally find in other studies. All of the authors engage in a series of coherent and appealing discussions, both theoretical and empirical, which lead us through an issue as socially relevant as memory and its narratives.

In Pennebaker et al's article we are presented with those events recalled by students, and in some cases parents, in different European and American countries. The study shows that there is a clear cross-cultural consensus in the events recalled. Even though some of the events which people remember have to do with their own national/ethnic history, in general there is a hegemonic shared belief about the important events in world history, regardless of the country in which the study was conducted. Such events are basically Eurocentric. These results clearly indicate the impact which the different processes of globalization (political, economical and cultural) in the XXIst century have on the construction of our personal and social identities. We live in a world in which the Internet, satellite dishes, increase in travels, etc. have led us to homogenize certain aspects of our daily life. Mass media plays an important role in this sense, especially in the case of events with a socio-political interest. For instance in Pennebaker et al's study we find the prominence of an event such as World War Two. This War, and its effects, has repeatedly appeared in mass media whenever another war or conflict has started. Media coverage of the Balkan Wars in the 1990's repeatedly addressed the issue of the "last" War on European soil, Holocaust and ethnic cleansing.

As Malik (2003) mentioned, coverage of events such as wars is stressed, and better remembered, when the West has a geo-strategic interest. Western media has a great impact on the whole world, and so the events transmitted by these media allow the event to be assimilated and its past references to be integrated in our collective memory. The media not only reports but also constructs events. If we look into any film database,

we will find that films referring to the Second World War, or its consequences, come second to none in terms of historical events. This allows the event, and its representations and metaphors, to be better remembered by future generations. Oskamp (1991) already stressed that the mass media has an important effect on what is remembered, and studies such as those conducted by Behr and Iyengar (1995) in relation with the agenda setting hypothesis showed that it is the media which sets the public agenda and not vice versa. Nevertheless, Schuman and Corning (2000) have also shown that although an event may be well documented so that people born after the event took place have integrated it into their collective memory and are knowledgeable about it, those who were alive when the event took place acquire and retain a greater knowledge than those exposed to history through the media.

All these works stress the importance of studying patterns of formal and informal transmission of historical events in a way which will allow us to understand why people remember what they do. Or as Burke (1989) mentioned, memory is not completely reliable but in fact is a reconstruction with an important presentist function, and so it is of utmost importance to ask ourselves who wants to remember what and why?.

Pennebaker et al. also discover a recency bias in which the best remembered events are those that have taken place during the last time span. There is also a certain nostalgic bias in which events which took place further back in time are evaluated more positively than those most recent events. This is an aspect which is important because it exemplifies how history and recall is heavily influenced by our current needs, values and recent experiences, and its study would allow us to look into the content of the memory, and see which elements are remembered or forgotten, or the meaning which different social groups render to the same event. For instance we see that in Russia, World War II can be remembered with two names with totally different meanings. We witness how an important historical event which is remembered by different social groups is also given a different name and thus a different sense leading to the creation of contrasting social identities. Or as Schuman and Corning (2000) stated, many people remembered Stalin's purges (although interestingly this is not an event found in Pennebaker et al's study), but the older age cohort focused their recall on the victims, whilst the younger age cohort did so on the perpetrators. This is further evidence for the importance of age cohort in identifying patterns of recall and meaning. In this sense Pennebaker et al's comparison between what young and older Spanish and Americans remember is quite illustrating, especially given the level of agreement found. In a similar vein,

the authors find that men and women use different strategies to define events as historically important. Fournier and Wineburg (1997) when studying how schoolchildren viewed the past also found that boys and girls differed in their drawings. The same event or person generated different views, more or less consistent and focusing on some aspects or others of the role models. All these results illustrate the importance of focusing on the content and meaning of recall and not only on pure recall.

In line with this article we find an elegant exposition of the importance of identities in the creation and maintenance of memories in the works of Dressler-Hawke and Liu, Marques, Páez, Valencia and Vincze, and Espinosa and Calderón. Each of them focus on different areas in the identity processes, but as a whole they give us important insights on the relation between social identity and collective memory.

In Espinosa and Calderón's work, predictions derived from the study of cultural values, political ideology, Terror Management Theory, and Social Dominance Theory in connection with the March 11th bombings in Madrid are presented. Results of this study shows that political position is an important feature predictor which helps predict how one copes with a traumatic event. In fact political ideology is the best predictor of identification and evaluation of the national ingroup, avoiding the outgroup considered "responsible" for the bombings, interpersonal coping, emotional inhibition, or altruism in other people. The authors find that people with a centre-right wing political orientation score higher in all four of the value dimensions (security, conformity, power and tradition), and perceive the rest of the population as more benevolent, which could be an ingroup bias seeking social and group cohesion. It is them who also use public transport less after the attacks (public transport – trains – was the medium in which the bombs went off), have less relationships with Arabs and Muslims in general, and perceive a lack of sense in the World after the attacks. As we know from Terror Management Theory, cultural values are important mediators in how one perceives mortality salience effects. Value systems which emphasize tolerance are less likely to engender a negative reaction to those dissimilar (Salzman, 2003). If low authoritarianism is related with resistance to negative effects of mortality salience, and as Espinosa and Calderón show values such as security, conformity and tradition are good predictors of authoritarian ideology, we can conclude of the importance which tapping a group's values has for issues relating to coping strategies and relations with outgroups. This study is an important step towards relating ideological positioning, value dimensions, ingroup/outgroup relations, etc. with collective remembering. On the basis of these variables, we could look

into how they influence the recall these groups have of recent historical events, such as the Madrid bombings.

Marques, Páez, Valencia and Vincze's three studies directly address the issue of the importance which source and target have on the transmission of information regarding historical events. The studies look into what groups do in order to defend their group's social identity. An important aspect of the study is that the events depicted did not take place in the actual lifespan of the participants in the studies, but in fact various centuries before. Nevertheless, the group's sense of historical belongingness and transmission of ethnic and national being implies that people have a sense of cultural continuity and use different strategies depending on target and source. For instance, participants protected their social identity when confronted with a negative past collective ingroup event by minimizing its importance or reconstructing its meaning. This work stresses the importance of stereotypes as relevant mechanisms in creating shared collective memories (e.g. a group is perceived as historically trustworthy and another is not). This has important implications for the way a group is perceived and for future interactions. In this sense Shaheen (2001) studied more than 900 films of the whole XXth century, and looked into the way Hollywood had portrayed Arabs and the Arab world. The worst list outnumbers the best list by 8 to 1. As Shaheen states, Arabs are seen as "one alike", "all the same", "brutish murderers", or "religious fanatics" (p. 2). Cultural stereotypes linger on for decades, and in such way stick in our memory.

Marques et al.'s studies show how the ingroup's and outgroup's acts are viewed in a different perspective. There are different coping mechanisms at work depending on who performs the actions and who the source of the information is. There is more guilt and shame felt when the target is a national ingroup and the source of the message is also the ingroup. In this case, negative information about the ingroup derives in more anxiety, shame and guilt. These results allow us to better understand the implications for a national group of feeling scrutinized by other outgroups, or by members of their own group. It explains why denial, when it is possible, reconstruction, omission or minimization of historical events is such a pervasive feature in the creation of national identities and memories.

In relation to these issues, Dressler-Hawke and Liu's article asks about the issue of collective guilt and shame in Germans when questioned about the crimes of the Third Reich. This study stresses the existence of a sense of liability in the fact of belonging to a nation in the sense that national identities involve a continuous relationship between past and present. As in the Marques et al paper, the source of the information or comparison is an

important feature in how Germans relate to their past and remember these events which took place more than 60 years ago. This is a relevant issue due to the importance of understanding a nation's past and how they relate to other nations and cultures. It is important to see if people talk about past traumatic events which still shape the image of a nation both for the in-group and outgroup. In this sense, Bar-On and Kassem (2004) use the psychological concept of working-through in an attempt to study how different generations from those who suffered a traumatic event represent the event and try to understand their feelings and those of the outgroup. Bar-On (1995) showed that children of the Holocaust survivors dared ask their parents what had happened, and these did not want to talk about the events. The event was systematically erased from both the individual and collective memory.

Studies conducted among others by Bar-On (1989, 1995), or Weissmark (2004) have tried to study how hatred and resentment is passed on from generation to generation, and how both sons and daughters of victims and perpetrators face up to the facts of the deeds of their parents. In these works we find how the memory of a event such as the Holocaust has affected the lives of people who were in many cases too young to remember the event first hand and who have encountered silence in their families, or who have had to make sense of the stories transmitted to them by their parents (with coping mechanisms such as denial, suppression, omission, etc.). As Weissmark points out, we have Justice both as an intergenerational and interpersonal situation in response to a historical event. People have to confront the dreadful events, the role played by their parents' generation, by their parents themselves, and reinterpret all these situations on the basis of their own identities.

In this context, the study of how national identity is related to confrontation patterns, to acceptance of Nazi crimes, and how shame and guilt are involved in these relationships is an important addition in studies on collective memory.

Shame and guilt also appear in Páez, Marques and Valencia's article. The emphasis is on how emotions such as these may strengthen bonds between group members, reinforcing compliance with norms and pro-social behaviour. Nevertheless, Tangney and Steuwig (2004) distinguished between these two emotions in the sense that guilt motivated people in a constructive, proactive, future-oriented direction, whilst shame motivates people toward separation, distance and defence. The importance of studying these emotions is further stressed both by Dressler-Hawke and Liu, and Páez et al. when the latter state that from a cultural perspective it is impor-

tant to understand if a certain culture is a culture of shame or guilt. The former will stress the focus on one's public image and external punishment, whilst the latter will rely more on internal self-criticism. These cultural differences will probably lead to different interpretations of history and of the role of one's ingroup in past activities. These distinctions could help understand the differences between Japan and Germany when facing acts committed during the Second World War, and the reparation which other countries expected from them, and which in the case of Japan and their non acceptance of certain events (i.e. Nanking massacre, rapes and massacres in Korea, etc.) lead to various problems in current Asian relationships.

Finally, Cabrera, Martín-Beristáin, Jiménez and Páez offer us an extensive description of the situation in Guatemala from 1960 until 1996 with its gruesome tales of massacres and genocide of the Mayan population. The study explores the basic views which people who have directly, or indirectly, been victims of the civil war situation have with regard to the World in general, other people in particular, or the meaning of the political and (para) military repression. Results of the study show that those who have experienced a traumatic event share a less benevolent view of the world, show less confidence in other people, have a worse image of themselves, and see less meaning in living in the World. Nevertheless, sometimes people also admit having learned from these experiences and seek social and political reparation and believing that what happened had a sense or meaning and that you can learn from those experiences. An important aspect of the study is to show the persistence of these reactions 10 or 15 years after the event has taken place. Memories linger on for decades, and in such way are important in shaping the current events and feelings.

This special number of *Psicología Política* will allow those interested in the relationship between identity, emotions, politics and reconstruction of memory and history to review research conducted in different countries and on different aspects. It will also allow them to see how researchers have answered many of the questions and doubts which they may have, and at the same time it will stimulate more work on such a sensitive and polemical issue which has grown in importance with the processes of globalization we are engaged in, the influence of the mass media, and the importance of the study of cross-cultural differences in psychology.

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