

# Collective memory: a new arena of cognitive study

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**Collective memory refers to recollection of events shared by a group. The topic has been of central interest in the humanities, but recently researchers have begun empirical studies. Topics such as how people remember a war or how quickly Americans forget their presidents can be studied objectively.**

## What is collective memory?

The term collective memory has various meanings [1] but at its core is a form of memory that is shared by a group and of central importance to the social identity of the group's members [2,3] (see [Box 1](#) for a delineation of the term from neighboring concepts). Scholars in several disciplines – history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, literature, and philosophy among others – have written on the topic [4,5]. With only a few exceptions, research about collective memory has relied primarily on humanistic and qualitative research. In recent years, however, empirical researchers have started to examine the topic in a more objective manner. Here we describe three separate lines of empirical research on collective memory to demonstrate how such research can enrich our knowledge about memory. We orient our discussion around the claim that collective memory can refer to a body of knowledge, an attribute, and a process [6].

## Collective memory as a body of knowledge: recall of presidents by Americans

People in a group often share a body of common knowledge, sometimes referred to as semantic memory. Americans, for example, all know the current president and have some shared knowledge of past presidents. A recent study showed that recollection of US presidents has remained remarkably consistent over 40 years ([Figure 1](#)), with striking primacy effects and recency effects (good recall of the first and most recent presidents) but also with superior recall of Lincoln and his successors from the period of the US Civil War [7]. The experiment, conducted at three different points in time (in 1974, 1991, and 2009), asked college students to name all US presidents in the correct order (if possible) so that ordered recall could be examined across decades and generations. Intriguingly, recall of this historical information seemed governed largely by the same principles as memories for word lists and other materials. As noted, recall of presidents revealed primacy and recency effects and, in addition, a regular forgetting function. The latter could be derived because data were

sampled from different points in time over 40 years, so estimates of how rapidly relatively recent presidents (Truman through Ford) are being forgotten to a baseline level could be calculated. For example, the authors predicted that by 2040 Truman would be as forgotten as Franklin Pierce and other presidents from the 1800s.

## Collective memory as an attribute: the image of a people

Collective memory seems to be shaped by schematic narrative templates, or knowledge structures that serve to narrate the story of a people, often emphasizing heroic and even mythic elements while minimizing negative or inconsistent ones [5]. Considering Americans who fought in World War II as the 'greatest generation' is one such mythic structure.

One group of researchers investigated the possible narrative template of younger and older American adults for three wars; namely, the Civil War, World War II, and the Iraq War [8]. Subjects were asked to list the ten most important events for each war and to rate them (e.g., with regard to their emotional valence). Although younger and older adults showed some differences in their recall of events, they nevertheless recalled a common set of core events of the first two wars (the Iraq War was ongoing at the time of the study). For example, for World War II, a great majority of subjects recalled the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor (7 December 1941), the D-Day invasion of

### Box 1. Understanding collective memory

Since the term 'collective memory' was introduced in the 1920s [1], it has been used in many different ways, in both scholarly and popular discussions. Three conceptual oppositions have been proposed to clarify its meaning [2].

#### *Collective memory versus collective remembering*

Collective memory is often described as static knowledge about past (historical) events shared by a group of people. By contrast, collective remembering describes a dynamic and continuous process driven by disputes about how the past should be represented and remembered.

#### *History versus collective remembering*

Whereas history aims to provide an accurate, objective representation of the complex past, including ambiguities and different points of view, collective remembering is often based on a single, biased perspective of the past, one that creates a shared identity in the present. Thus, simplifying processes and schematization in collective remembering stand in stark contrast to the more objective approach of history.

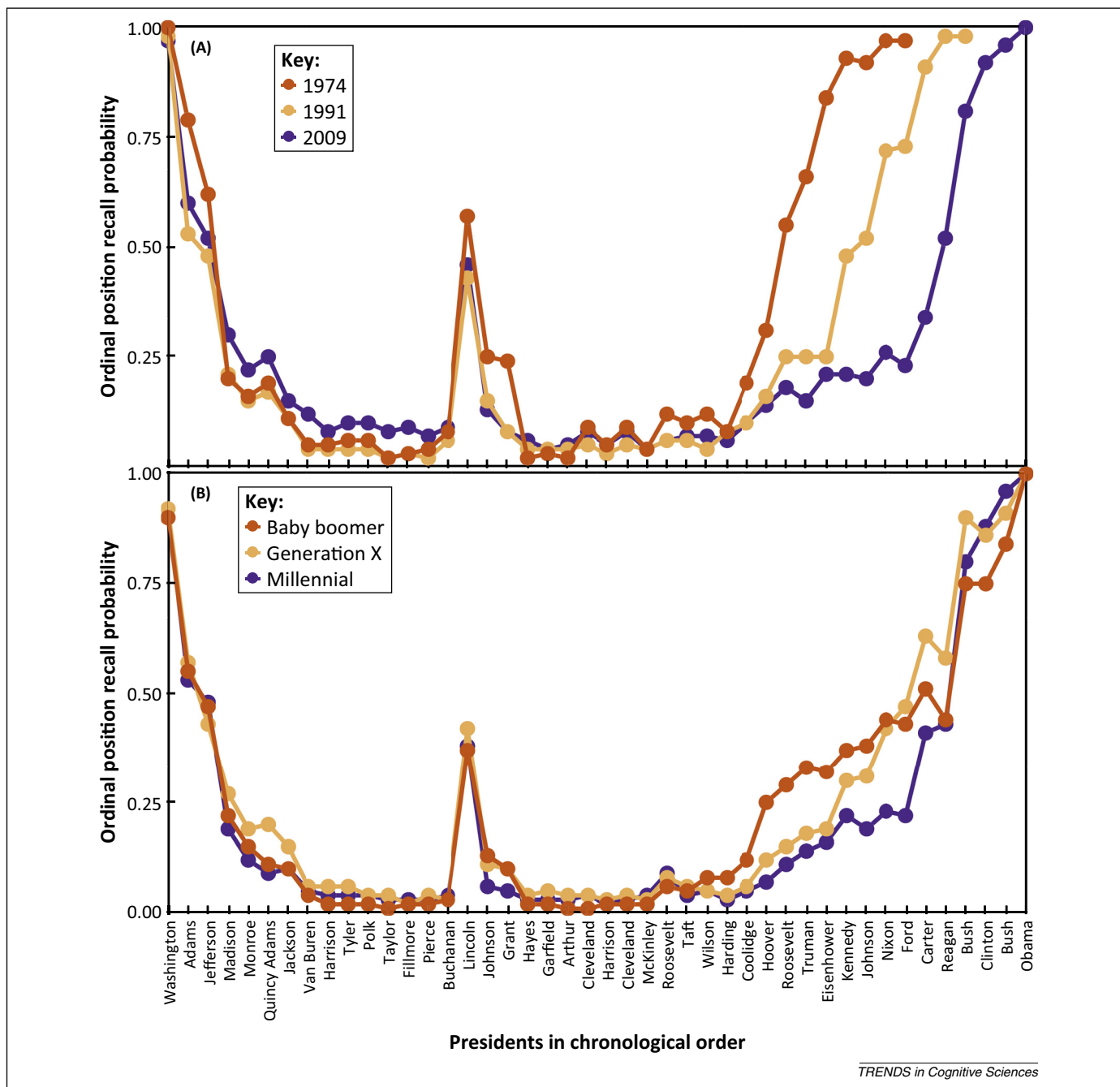
#### *Individual versus collective remembering*

Remembering is often regarded as an activity of isolated individuals, but individuals as the agents of remembering can alternatively also be seen as socially situated. Individuals as members of a social group share a similar set of cultural tools (e.g., narratives), which makes their remembering collective.

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**Figure 1.** Ordinal position recall probabilities of US presidents across decades and generations. Recall of presidents across (A) college students of three different generations (data collected in three different years) and (B) American adults of three different generations (data collected in 2014). Both plots show serial position effects (primacy effects for the first few presidents and recency effects for the last few presidents) as well as an isolation effect (for Abraham Lincoln and a few succeeding presidents). The data show remarkable stability in recall of the presidents over a 40-year period. From [7]. Reprinted with permission from AAAS.

France (6 July 1944), and the dropping of bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (August 1945). For Americans, these events represent a beginning, middle, and end of a narrative of the US's involvement in the war (while eliding many other important events in the war). This finding is consistent with the idea that events in collective memory may be characterized by a narrative structure that is rather simple and comprises only a small number of salient events referring to beginning, turning, and end points of the narrative [5].

Although Americans of different ages recalled similar events, the interpretation of some events changed over

the generations. Both younger and older adults recalled the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, they differed in how they rated the bombings. When asked to rate the events on an 11-point scale (0 = extremely negative, 10 = extremely positive), older adults rated the bombings quite positively (8.0 on the scale) and the younger adults rather negatively (3.4). Older adults attributed the end of the war to the bombings whereas younger adults (reflecting more recent history texts) perceived the bombings as deadly, killing many innocent civilians and releasing radioactivity that harmed many more people.

### Collective memory as a process: reshaping the past and fighting over it

Perhaps the most interesting feature of collective memory is its restless nature. The past is continually being reshaped in memory and many conflicts around the world today reflect different interpretations of the past and about who owns history and memory. For example, a century after the disputed genocide of Armenians in 1915, Turkey and Armenia are still fighting over how this violent part of their history should be remembered [9]. A relatively recent example from American history is the Enola Gay exhibit planned for the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum to commemorate the 50th anniversary of dropping the atomic bombs on Japan. (The Enola Gay was the airplane used to drop the first bomb.) Controversy erupted over portraying the bombings for the death and destruction they brought to Japan (favored by some historians) versus a more heroic light in ending the war (favored by veterans' groups) [10].

Demonstrating another type of dynamic in remembering, researchers have shown that the way in which groups of people recall memories can shape what is remembered in the long term. In particular, several studies have investigated how public silences for certain events or topics in social interactions can cause forgetting of details of those events or topics, thereby potentially affecting collective memory [11]. In these studies, a speaker was found to produce more forgetting of details in listeners by mentioning only parts of a previously experienced episode, compared with not mentioning the episode at all. Such socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting of related, but unmentioned, details has primarily been studied for dyadic conversations. However, new evidence suggests that it may also be relevant in larger-scale contexts. Researchers investigating the mnemonic consequences of public speeches by the king of Belgium showed that listeners suffered greater forgetting of unmentioned information related to the contents of the speech, compared with forgetting of completely unmentioned topics [12].

### Concluding remarks

Collective memory is an umbrella term that reflects how people remember their past as members of the group. It can be studied as a body of knowledge, as an attribute or schema of a people, and as a process of contestation and change. Such collective memories probably boost group identity and shape social and political discourse. In particular, the study of how various groups remember 'the same' events so differently may help to uncover important psychological factors at work in group dynamics and conflict.

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