

Remembering for the Common Good

Background Paper No. 3¹

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One of the biggest challenges surrounding the building of a society based on the common good in Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland is the way in which the past is commemorated. This is not to suggest that the past should not be remembered but rather, in the interests of promoting a shared and inclusive society, *how* the past is commemorated needs to be considered. In the interests of reconciliation and the common good this is crucial, as social or collective memory plays a central role in maintaining group identities, which, in divided societies, are usually highly polarized (Roe and Cairns, 2003). Moreover, competing interpretations and narratives of the past can contribute to recreating the conflict and perpetuating a culture of violence. Significantly, this raises the question of how we can remember and commemorate the past in a way that is inclusive, shared, and promotes the common good. Giving a sense of urgency to this question is the current decade where several centenaries relating to World War 1, The Battle of the Somme, the Easter Rising and Irish Independence, among others, will be marked and which risks an increase in violence.

In seeking to explore and answer this question, this paper will first provide a short overview of the relationship between collective memory and intergroup conflict. Principles for how we can remember the past in a way that promotes reconciliation and supports the common good will then be introduced. The paper will conclude with some of the challenges surrounding remembering for the common good (in particular the challenge of competing nationalisms).

The role of memory in intergroup conflict

To understand the role of memory in intergroup conflict it is useful to turn to the work of Bar-Tal (2003). Effectively, there are three components to this relationship that work together to support a culture violence (see Fig. 1). The first component requires understanding the emotional impact that direct / physical violence has on individuals and groups. Violence (and in particular lethal violence) is an affront to one's sense of safety and well-being in the world (a core principle of the common good). Not only does this violate society's moral and legal code of conduct but it also strips one of their human right to life. The result is that individuals and groups are left to deal with the trauma associated with the loss of their loved one(s). While this raises significant ethical challenges around who has the right to take someone's life, it also causes parties to the conflict to become increasingly emotionally involved in the conflict. This can cause conflict to escalate. In Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland (NI), where more than 3 500 people were killed during the conflict, and given the small population

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size and close proximity of communities in NI, one can get a sense of the deep emotional impact this would have had on those affected by the conflict.

One of the outcomes of violent conflict is the social or collective memory a group holds about their experience of the conflict (the second component supporting a culture of violence). This is different from an official and recorded history (Roe & Cairns, 2003). Nonetheless, as Bar-Tal (2003) explains collective memory is needed to preserve the memory of the lives that were lost to the conflict and to give meaning to the sacrifices that were made. This can be expressed in a range of different ways including through patriotic myths and narratives, rituals, speeches, parades, music, murals, ceremonies and physical monuments which tend to glorify violence and heroize those who fought and were killed in the conflict. In Belfast alone, there are a total of 157 physical sites of remembrance, 97% of which have been built since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement (Viggiani, 2014; See also: Brown & Grant, 2016)). Significantly, this highlights the important function memorials have in giving meaning to the conflict. Referred to as cultural products, they also play a central role in inspiring other members of the group to continue fighting. Not only are they a constant reminder of the loss and sacrifices that were made by those who are perceived as 'heroes' in a conflict, but they can also fuel the animosity that is felt towards the perceived enemy.

The third component supporting a culture of violence are what Bar-Tal (2003) refers to as the four 'societal beliefs' which, he argues, are central to the way in which a group frames its experience. The first societal belief relates to what a group believes about the causes of the conflict, the sacrifices that were made, and the way it interprets the actions of the group it is in conflict with (the perceived enemy). These beliefs are integral to a group's ability to survive and justify the human losses that have been made.

The second societal belief relates to the way in which a group seeks to discredit and delegitimise their perceived enemy. Usually, this is achieved using language and stereotypes, such as 'terrorists' or 'murderers', that work to dehumanise the 'other' and ensure the superiority of one's own group. By depicting the actions of the perceived enemy as cruel, inhumane and, possibly even, evil, it justifies the use of further violence. Indeed, it is argued that people or groups who hold such qualities should not be tolerated; this works to justify violent acts of revenge. It can also provoke feelings of fear, anger and hatred towards the 'other'.

This leads to the third societal belief which allows groups to see themselves as victims and martyrs. If the groups see themselves and their actions as just, righteous and moral then acts of violence against them provides the basis for their sense of victimisation. Perceiving one's group as a victim removes the onus on the group to acknowledge their role in the conflict.

Finally, patriotic and nationalist beliefs that promote pride and loyalty to one's group or country form the fourth set of societal beliefs that work to support a culture of violence. These beliefs tend to be intensified with increasing levels of human loss. Together, these beliefs work to rationalise violence and justify the continuation of conflict. Moreover, this cycle of violence acts to entrench a culture of violence within a society. Consequently, to transform conflict one must also address the underpinning emotional, psychological and cultural aspects as they play a fundamental role in legitimising violence.

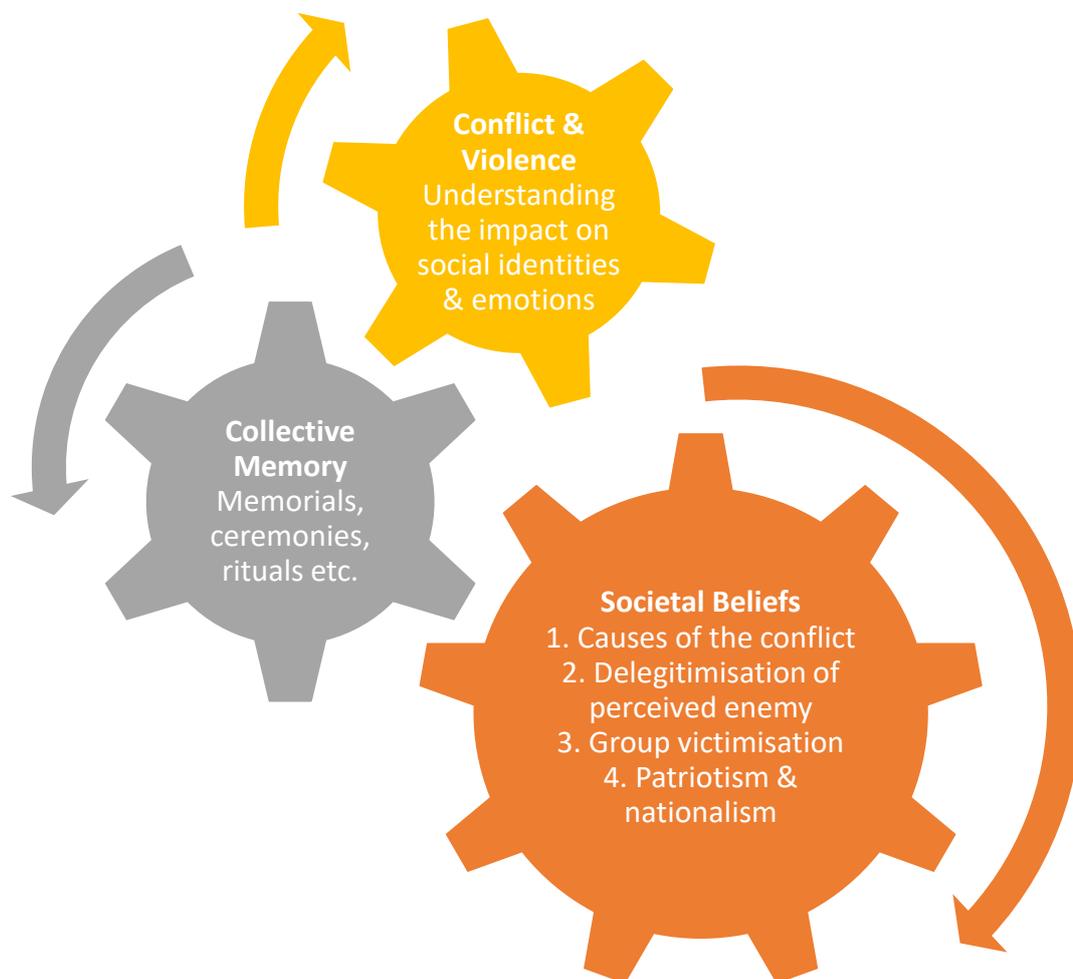


Figure 1: Diagram depicting the relationship between collective memory and intergroup conflict (adapted from Bar-Tal, 2003).

This brief overview highlights some of the complexities surrounding the relationship between social or collective memory and conflict. The deep emotional impact that violent conflict has on individuals and groups is particularly significant. Integral to this is the collective or social memory that groups need to make meaning of one's experience of violent conflict and its associated trauma and which is vital for maintaining the cohesion of the group. This is shaped and framed by the societal beliefs that a group holds and is expressed through, among others, memorials, murals, ceremonies and parades. For example, the language used in many memorials across NI such as that of 'murdered by'; 'innocent victims' to refer to the those who died in the conflict speaks to a groups sense of being victimised. It also works to delegitimise one's perceived enemy and give the group a sense of moral superiority. The use of language such as 'martyrs' performs a similar function, as does the use of Scriptures such as John 15:13 which states 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends', and claims to God and standing-up for His agenda. Moreover, commemorations which are triumphalist in nature can be perceived by the 'other' as exclusionary and dismissive of their own

rights and well-being. Finally, understanding that identity is essential to one's sense of safety and security in the world, commemorations can work to entrench deeply polarised and competing identities (Further see: Bollaert, 2019). This works against building a shared and inclusive society. Bearing this in mind, how then do we remember the past in a way that promotes the common good?

Shared and Ethical Remembering

Despite the complex relationship that exists between identity, memory and the perpetuation of conflict and violence, collective or social memory plays an important role in societies emerging from conflict. Not only do they offer a means of dealing with the loss and trauma of conflict, they can also be a form of truth-telling, which is integral to the reconciliation agenda (Viggiani, 2014). Indeed, Brown (2017) observes that while commemorations can perpetuate the cycle of violence and keep societies deeply divided, they also play an important part in building peace, in so far as they maintain the cohesion of the group (see also: Browne, 2013; McDowell, Braniff & Murphy, 2015). However, Rieff (cited in Brown, 2017: 1) contends that commemorations do nothing to promote healing but rather they 'pick' at the social wounds, preventing them from being able to heal.

Significantly, Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland does not have an official policy on memorialization, which, as Viggiani (2014) observes, has meant competing groups to the conflict have tried to claim the space as their own. Moreover, she explains that this has produced a fragmented and selective memory of the past in which competing groups have been 'adamant to see their opposing 'stories' about the collective past articulated and legitimized, in order to win the higher moral ground in the ideological and political contest for the status of victimhood' (Viggiani, 2014: 195). Thus, it is imperative that ways of remembering the past that promote reconciliation and a shared and inclusive society can be found. Indeed, this is supported by recommendations made in the Bloomfield Report (1998) and by the Consultative Group on the Past (2009) for inclusive forms of memorialization.

As a means of providing an ethical framework for remembering the past in a way that is shared, inclusive and promotes the common good, McMaster and Higgins (2015) remind us of three principles originally put forward by the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney. These principles include the idea of narrative hospitality, narrative flexibility, and narrative plurality.

Narrative plurality recognizes that no one has a complete view and understanding of the past. In the words of the writer, Anaïs Nin (1961): We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are. In other words, one's interpretation of the past is very much dependent on their experience and the societal beliefs that frame a groups experience. Thus, narrative plurality requires being open and respectful of the multiple narratives and perspectives of the past that exist (including those with whom we might disagree).

Narrative flexibility recognizes that history, by definition, is an interpretative discipline. As new scientific and historic discoveries are made, and as new information emerges, our understanding of history can change. Similarly, narratives of the past can also develop and change. Consequently, to remember the past in a way that promotes the common good, McMaster and Higgins (2015) assert that groups need to be willing and open to adjust their narratives to be more inclusive of other narratives.

Narrative hospitality argues for the need to be open and 'hospitable' to the diverse interpretations of the past. It requires a willingness to engage with and embrace the stories, memories and trauma of

the 'other'. The purpose of this is to gain a deeper (and more wholistic) understanding of the past, and not to try to gain moral superiority, judge or reinforce negative perceptions and stereotypes of the 'other'. In doing so, we can gain a more wholistic and complex understanding of the past. The failure to be open to the multiple perspectives and narratives of the past risks producing an 'accepted' history which simplifies the past to two competing and narrow narratives that excludes important voices such as those of women, ethnic minorities and young people.

These principles for remembering the past in a way that shared, inclusive and promotes the common good are further supported by the 'Principles for Commemoration' put forward by the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council in partnership with the Heritage Lottery Fund (2013: 3-4). These principles provide practice guidelines which include:

1. The need to find out and start with the historical facts surrounding the events of the past;
2. Recognising the implications and consequences of what happened;
3. Understanding that different perceptions and interpretations of the past exist; and
4. Showing how events and activities can deepen an understanding of the past.

Remembering the past in a way that is shared, inclusive and ethical also requires challenging nationalisms around which competing identities have been formed. Nationalism is based on the idea that people are united through common cultural bonds, such a language and religion. It promotes national pride, loyalty to the state or collective (or what Anderson (1983) calls 'imagined communities'), cultural and national unity, and attachment to one's ancestral history (Smith, 2001). It is usually expressed through loyalty to one's national flags, hymns and identity. A willingness to die for one's nation is seen as the ultimate sacrifice one can make for the nation.

McMaster and Higgins (2015) argue that when the past becomes an obsession, dependence on memory and commemorating the past becomes essential. Indeed, if it forms the basis of one's identity, then without it a group will lose their sense identity; their feeling of safety and security in world. It follows that offence, and possibly a violent reaction, will follow if the past (identity) is threatened. In the context of Ireland (both North and South) McMaster and Higgins raise the question of how much Unionist and Loyalist identity is dependent on the Battle of the Somme (and Battle of the Boyne) for its present sense of identity? Similarly, how much of Nationalist and Republican identity is dependent on the 1916 Easter Rising for its sense of identity? As well as the risk of violence (including lethal violence) they also caution against letting an obsession with memory and the past overshadow or even replace a vision of the future.

Conclusion

As significant anniversaries in Northern Ireland / the North of Ireland such as the Battle of the Somme, the 1916 Easter Rising, the Battle of the Boyne, and the partition of Ireland, are marked, the way in which they are commemorated cannot be ignored. Recognizing this, the Northern Ireland Executive's community cohesion strategy 'Together: Building a United Community' (2013: 93) states:

"The way these events are marked will have a significant influence on our continued journey towards a united community and [*on the common good*]" [Emphasis mine].

In other words, the way which the past is commemorated and the stories that are told will have an important influence on the future and the kind of society we want to live in (see also: Mac Bride,

2014). As Joe McKeown (2019), whose grandfather was killed in the Troubles, urges, this needs to include remembering the lives that people lived and not just their deaths.

Thinking about the future and building a society based on the common good requires finding more inclusive forms of memorialization that recognize the multiple narratives, perspectives and identities within the society, but that also have a historically factual basis to them (see further: Brown, 2017). While remembering the past in a way that is shared and ethical remains a challenge in a society that continues to be segregated and politically divided along sectarian lines, it is also forms a framework that can help the society move beyond sectarianism in a way that promotes reconciliation and the common good of all who live in it.

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