

Dissolving dichotomies: Norbert Elias's legacy for thinking “memory” sociologically

Journal of Classical Sociology
2025, Vol. 25(1) 20–36
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DOI: 10.1177/1468795X231212418
journals.sagepub.com/home/jcs



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Abstract

This paper discusses how Elisian ideas on memory could have changed the history of Memory Studies ideas. The history of the phenomenon of memory inside the sociological field reflects the foundational dichotomies of the discipline: macro × micro dimensions and biological × social realms. Many of the hurdles and discussions of Memory Studies still lie upon these dichotomies. Although Elias has never investigated this topic properly, he has a rich discussion on relationality, interdisciplinarity, and processuality. These three aspects would dissolve many of the actual hurdles faced by Memory Studies.

Keywords

Norbert Elias, processual sociology, relational sociology, social theory, sociology of memory

Introduction

Norbert Elias was one of the most prestigious sociologists of the 20th century. While Elias contributed to many sociological issues and areas, he unintentionally provided some key insights into the sociology of memory that have been overlooked for many years. Specifically, he addressed certain foundational dichotomies of sociology, such as macro–micro dimensions and biological–social realms. Many current hurdles and discussions surrounding Memory Studies still stem from such dichotomies, which Elias addressed throughout his *oeuvres*. Elias overcame these dichotomies through a relational and interdisciplinary perspective that may be applied to elevate contemporary sociological understandings of memory.

This paper discusses how Eliasian ideas on memory and time could have changed the history and trajectory of Memory Studies¹ had the field considered his contribution.

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Although Memory Studies as a distinctly interdisciplinary field began to take shape in the late 20th century (particularly during the 1980s), the work of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs laid the groundwork for it and impacted later work on the topic.

Halbwachs inherited some issues developed by Émile Durkheim, whom he followed during a significant part of his career. For Durkheim, sociology was not simply the scientific study of humanity but the more precise practice of studying a realm of phenomena known as the “social,” which he claimed exists beyond the individuals and political organizations that had been his predecessors’ subjects of study. Moreover, in pointing to this class of phenomena, he also argued that its study required a new and specific set of analytical tools and methods. In *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), Durkheim argued that sociology was not “the appendage of any other science”; rather it was “a distinct and autonomous science” (Renwick, 2012: 3). Although this position was key for establishing the discipline, it hindered holistic views on cross-border phenomena and interdisciplinary discussions. While there may be purely social phenomena that lend themselves to exclusively sociological analyses, memory is a phenomenon that encompasses neurosciences, cognitive sciences, psychology, sociology, and history.

Within this historical context, following Halbwachs’ introduction of memory into the field of the social sciences in the 1920s, other intellectuals also turned their analytical attention to memory, including the French social psychologist Blondel (2011 [1926], 1946 [1928]) and the British psychologist Bartlett (2003 [1932]). These pioneers of Memory Studies broke with the subjectivist and internal approaches toward memory favored by philosophy, biological sciences, and psychoanalysis by setting forth perspectives that considered the social realm as an explanatory factor in the phenomenon of memory.

For several decades, interest in memory within the social sciences diminished, only to re-emerge in the 1980s with the formal recognition of Memory Studies as a humanities-based field. This resurgence attracted numerous scholars who began exploring memory through various disciplinary lenses (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Connerton, 1989; Fentress and Wickham, 1992; Nora, 1984, 1986, 1992; Olick, 1999; Olick and Robbins, 1998; Rosenthal, 2016; Schwartz, 1982; Wertsch, 2002). Although a few classic works have been revisited, Halbwachs’ contributions remain the most prominent. However, references to Halbwachs and others have mainly remained superficial; as Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi & Levy argue, “references to such iconic figures need to be more than totemic” (Olick, 1999: 16). Despite their superficial nature, totemic representations can still influence Memory Studies. Specifically, the totemic depiction of Halbwachs has given rise to two approaches (*strong* and *weak* versions, to be explained throughout the text) that exclude natural scientific interpretations, even though the natural sciences are essential in investigating memory.

Additionally, memory is often treated as a static entity rather than a processual phenomenon within Memory Studies. Such approaches create two main obstacles to the development of a comprehensive understanding of memory: (a) the gap between social studies of memory and natural sciences; and (b) the persistence of the individual–society dichotomy. By examining Norbert Elias’s work, we may uncover valuable insights and promising avenues of investigation that can help to address these issues from a sociological perspective.

Elias addressed many sociological problems throughout his works, such as power, habitus, deviance, national identity, and geniality, among many others. Although he never systematically presented an argument on memory, he did not overlook the subject either. Memory appears in several of his writings, including *Involvement and Detachment* (2007) and *Symbol Theory* (1991), albeit as a phenomenon without a sharp conceptualization and proper investigation. Indeed, his most salient contributions on this topic are not found in the passages where he discusses memory explicitly but rather permeate his sociological approach as a whole. In this sense, it is understandable that Elias's work has not been included in the Memory Studies canon.² When Elias deals with memory, he seems to understand the phenomenon narrowly; he deals with memory as a means, a cognitive skill to store knowledge. For example, in specific passages in which he discusses memory, he refers only to memorization, and he often employs the word "memory" with the broad meaning of "storage of knowledge." However, Memory Studies has already overcome such narrow conceptions of memory, understanding it instead as a multifaceted phenomenon with multiple manifestations. Thus, Elias's contribution extends beyond those passages in which he cites "memory" *en passant*.

The following discussion will clarify the hitherto overlooked importance of Elias's work for Memory Studies, especially Sociology of Memory.³ This analysis will examine how Elias's sociological approach can be directed toward Memory Studies and situated within classical sociological debates on the subject. It will demonstrate that Elias's sociological perspective points to new possibilities for solving the three main problems that persist in Memory Studies: (i) the individual–society, or agency–structure, dichotomy; (ii) the lack of discussions with natural and cognitive sciences; and (iii) the hypostasis and essentialization of memory. Throughout the paper, we will introduce the foremost authors in the field of Memory Studies who supported arguments based on these limitations. To consider solutions to these problems, we evoke arguments from Elias that could have been considered to think about memory in an interdisciplinary (not strictly social), relational (non-dichotomous), and processual (non-static) manner. We argue that Elias affords us three answers to these problems: (i) he argues for a relational approach; (ii) he breaks with the dichotomy of mind–body or nature–culture by opening his sociology to natural science approaches; and (iii) he puts forward a processual approach.

Toward an interdisciplinary lens: Memory, the biological apparatus, and the psychoanalytical realm

In this section, we argue that memory is a bio-psycho-social process; that is, memory is not solely a social phenomenon but also involves individual mental and neurological mechanisms. Memory Studies arguments drift away from the biological and psychoanalytic dimensions to highlight the social aspect of memory. However, as we will explore, this approach seems inappropriate for such a genuinely multi-dimensional phenomenon as Memory Studies. Elias's holistic approach can offer a nuanced perspective on the relationship between nature and culture, bridging the gap between the soft and hard sciences in Memory Studies. The dialog with psychoanalysis is also key because Elias incorporates elements of the psychoanalytical framework while addressing the challenges of isolating the unconscious from social constraints.

On biology

“Memory” has been historically studied in ontological, epistemological, and metaphysical terms. Presenting all the formulations of memory across disciplines would be a Herculean and indeed impossible task. However, memory studies researchers who ignore or overlook the various aspects and domains of memory risk operating on the basis of incomplete conceptions of memory. As neither of these approaches is desirable, it makes sense to find a middle ground by considering some fundamental principles from relevant disciplines.

Each discipline presents distinct perspectives on memory. Cognitive sciences and neurosciences developed essential aspects of memory from a biological standpoint. At the same time, psychoanalysis proposed new and interesting ideas on the relation between memory, the conscious, and the unconscious. Firstly, we know that in normal (non-pathological) conditions, every human being can remember their past—assuming a brain and a mind is a *sine qua non* for exploring the phenomenon of memory. Although some works in Memory Studies have argued for the socio-historical aspects of memory (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995; Connerton, 1989; Nora, 1984, 1986, 1992; Olick and Robbins, 1998), the latter remains indisputably a mental process. While it may have social manifestations and conditions, memory is not merely an abstract phenomenon but necessarily passes through an individual mind and brain. As a conscious activity, memory is a mental process activated to recall and understand past events within specific contexts, contingent on the healthy functioning of particular neurological mechanisms. In this sense, we should characterize it as a bio-psycho-social process that may suffer impairments if extraordinary biological conditions exist. However, sociological studies within memory studies (Bartlett, 2003 [1932]; Fentress and Wickham, 1992; Halbwachs, 1941 [2008], 1997 [1925]; Zerubavel, 1997) have not acknowledged the biological apparatus; instead, sociology primarily deals with memory, overlooking the existence of both the brain and mind.

While sociological studies have thus far failed to recognize the biological aspects of memory, bridging the gap between soft sciences and hard sciences is an essential endeavor for those investigating memory. Otherwise, we may fall into conceptual fallacies and theories that do not adequately clarify memory’s biological limits and potentialities. Elias is one of a few sociologists to have acknowledged the importance of the biological apparatus when considering social phenomena. For him, the development of a biological apparatus allows the storage of experiences and the synthesizing of these experiences is fundamental to the symbolic construction of a specific human condition:

Sociologists who have not studied medical topics often speak about “society” without covering the human biological aspects. For me, this is a mistake. Sociologists have a defensive attitude towards biology because they fear that sociology loses its substance to biology. For me, it is impossible to build a theory of human activity without knowing how the organism works. In philosophy, it is impossible to develop epistemological theories of human activity without knowing how an organism is built and works. With this in mind, I introduced in my sociology classes a dissected brain in order to show students how people are built. This way, they can comprehend how societies work. By doing that, I do not reduce sociology to biology. (Elias, 2001a: 38)

Elias acknowledges advancements in other areas to provide enriching tools and hypotheses to support the sociological analysis of remembering. Although biological conditions are outside of the sociological scope, we must accept them to overcome the Cartesian dualistic assumption regarding the separation between mind and body. However, this effort does not imply merely locating the neural foundation of a process, as the neurosciences do, because that does not explain the effects of such a process in terms of individual and social consequences. Elias has a more comprehensible understanding of the social and biological limits and their interaction.

Elias's holistic approach offers a nuanced perspective for sociologists who are working to understand the relationship between nature and culture rather than viewing them as opposing forces. His "Sociology of knowledge" (Elias, 1971) acknowledges the biological dimension. Elias simultaneously considers the physical apparatus essential for human comprehension, human knowledge as a set of meanings, human communication as both physical sound standards and symbols, and the means of transmission across generations through the materialization of knowledge. In this process of knowing and knowledge formation, the biological dimension plays a vital role in learning, storing, and reproducing experiences. However, Elias is careful to distinguish between phylogeny and biology as universal potentialities associated with the human species (human nature), and ontogeny (the growth and development of individual organisms), which is always contingent and mediated by socialization in specific historical and societal cultures ("second nature"). Brains may differ across societies, reflecting the interplay between social and biological dimensions. While the practices of knowledge conveyance may vary from culture to culture, the biological basis for knowledge is universal (under normal conditions). Elias even hypothesizes about the potential universality of some symbols.

I shall leave open for further exploration the question of the innateness of some symbols. There is some evidence that suggests that buildings with a large cupola arouse different feelings in human beings than a steeply rising minaret-like tower because the former are symbols of the female breast, the latter phallic symbols. This is not implausible, but there is not enough evidence for this view to carrying conviction, and it needs further scrutiny. (Elias, 1991: 73)⁴

In *Über die Zeit* (2021), Elias makes clear his theoretical endeavor, which is focused on crafting a process-oriented synthesis that rejects dualisms. The greater significance of his contribution to the discourse surrounding the nature of time lies primarily in his holistic and process-driven view of the temporal phenomenon. For that, he developed a general theory of symbols. This effort culminated in the elaboration and publication of his book *The Symbol Theory* (1991), which is a fundamental source for understanding his approach to time.

In *The Symbol Theory* (1991), Elias argues that biological development is a *sine qua non* for the social-symbolic world, which enables the transmission and the retention of knowledge that acts over other previous knowledge. Communication through symbols is possible because the organic capacity related to vocalization combines with the human capacity to link previous experiences (memories) to actual experiences. In what follows, knowledge, language, and memory are parts of a knowledge complex. Symbols are

always linked to a temporal flux because they represent recursive processes whereby previous symbolic and experiential syntheses are continually resynthesized; they emerge from the representation that articulates the experience's situation to previous images stored by memory. Thus, as representation, symbolic production is not mere imitation, reflex, abstraction, or generalization. For Elias, memory is not just the act of memorizing; it also refers to the content, which is contingent on internal biological and external social processes. Once the biological capacity to remember exists, it is employed socially over time, using other materialities intertwined in these symbolic production processes (Elias, 2001b). In this sense, symbolic production does not refer only to "ideas." Elias (2001c) does not draw the sociology of "thinking statues" because the social domain is not composed exclusively of agents that think; they are also disembodied and manifested in the material world.

Elias hypothesizes that the assumption of the universality of the production of meanings does not lie in the meanings conveyed but in the biological apparatus that allows us to convey them. The human capacity for communication, reflection, and synthesis is an a priori biological condition that allows us to produce symbolic knowledge. However, Elias does not mean an innate symbolic knowledge, as claimed by Kant (2015). Instead, knowledge is produced socially and varies contextually and historically, and it can be permanently reproduced due to the healthy functioning of the physical apparatus. Even though Elias does not develop any further relevant comments on the relation between memory and the physical apparatus, he paves the way to work sociologically with biologically based cognitive skills. This makes it possible to acknowledge relevant and primary findings from other fields, such as cognitive sciences. For example, considering the symbolic production in which memory is involved, the cognitive scientist Endel Tulving (1972) differentiates between *declarative semantic memory* and *declarative episodic memory* to classify what someone has experienced and learned. His distinction traces an essential line between memory and history because *episodic memory* regards the pieces of knowledge regarding the self's past, so the memory is self-referential. The *semantic memory* regards general facts that are externally presented to us. For instance, in a mnemonic narrative, they could dovetail with episodic memory. Remembering a particular date may imply remembering our own experience of that day.

Regarding this day, we may find other facts, such as the public name of where the event took place or important political events from that day or week. Although both are forms of symbolic production—once there is no absolute structural break in the continuum leading from symbols or memory images (Elias, 1991: 71)—they have different physical implications regarding the sensorial apparatus. This happens because witnessing something means perceiving something (*episodic memory*) and learning something means understanding and memorizing (*semantic memory*).

Elias does not explicitly expand any further on memory. For him, memory is just part of symbolic communication, predicated on human communication, memory, knowledge, and thought. However, he weaves together sociology, psychology, and biology while articulating these concepts by simultaneously understanding memory in its biological, individual, and social realms. He does not argue for a layered conception of reality; instead, the domains involved in symbolic production (consequently in memory) are inseparable (Elias, 1991). By discussing memory in the terms proposed by Elias, we can

overcome the obstacles of the differentiation between *individual memory*, *collective memory*, and *historical memory* proposed by Halbwachs (1997 [1950]).⁵ By following an Eliasian perspective, it is possible to fully utilize memory's "interdisciplinary" nature.

On Psychoanalysis

The first part of Halbwachs' book *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925), which represents an early sociological approach to memory, directly responds to the Freudian idea of memory. Halbwachs argues that remembering is a social as well as a psychological process. In the 1920s, Halbwachs broke from a narrow view of memory that understood it as a storage box. As a Durkheimian, he also distanced himself from psychoanalytic ideas such as the "unconscious," a phenomenon free of social constraints.⁶ He offers the example of dreams as a counterargument: in dreams, one is uninhibited by social constraints and, in this manner, the images are disorganized and intelligible. Over the years, sociology consolidated, and the struggle with psychology and psychoanalysis was put aside to make way for more sophisticated and integrated approaches between the disciplines. Engaging with concepts like the unconscious posed challenges for studying memory and highlighted key theoretical issues such as the relation between memory and trauma.

In contrast to Halbwachs, some contemporary Eliasian work embraces the Freudian psychoanalytical framework. There is an ongoing and heated debate within the current memory literature concerning the differing perspectives. Some authors wholly embrace the psychoanalytic framework, whereas others posit that it contains inherent contradictions and incompatibilities when it comes to analyzing social memory.

Freudian psychoanalysis holds that highly emotional events are stored as isolated elements within the unconscious. Freud presents a straightforward memory model, wherein the conscious mind integrates and stores "copies" of past experiences for potential re-elaboration. At the same time, overwhelming episodes are repressed (*verdrängen*) into the unconscious, forming trauma. In this context, trauma functions as an anti-memory due to the unconscious repression of the image, which subsequently fails to attain a discursive representation. These past images, lodged in the unconscious, operate as static elements that repetitively attempt to connect with the ego (Freud, 1990 [1920]). This repression and subsequent compulsive repetition are what sustain the traumatic experience.

Since the conscious mind delineates the boundaries of linguistic representation, unconscious trauma lacks linguistic representation and, consequently, meaning over time. Repetition contrasts with re-elaboration and therefore opposes dynamic memory, which relies on re-elaboration. Given that the outcome of the remembering process constitutes a form of knowledge, language serves as its means of communication and transmission. Re-elaboration emerges through narration, which is made possible by shared language that enables intersubjectivity.

Although trauma (repressed memories in the unconscious) influences individuals internally and affects their interactions with others and the world, it does not form part of a shared process of narrating and re-elaborating past events. This premise distinguishes the unconscious from the act of remembering, constructing it as a separate domain exempt from social constraints. Consequently, significant critiques of the Freudian conception of the unconscious focus on this aspect, recognizing the possibility and necessity

of re-elaboration as a crucial step in understanding memory. Furthermore, the close relationship between language, memory, and knowledge is essential for comprehending memory as socially constructed.

In this light, how does Elias maintain a psychoanalytical framework without falling into the problem of an isolated unconscious? When discussing the Freudian theoretical framework, Elias approaches the concept of the unconscious as a static and ahistorical concept. While he rejects the notion of the unconscious as something psychic, innate, and universal, he admits that the idea that the unconscious may keep some experiences from conscious access remains plausible (Elias, 2010). Indeed, Elias appropriates the Freudian unconscious in a very particular way that helps him to explain the human being more thoroughly. For example, he accepts the Freudian idea that our behaviors and motivations have little to do with reason, whether conscious or unconscious. Elias maintains this logic by attributing it to the notions of “automatism” and “second nature,” which express something unknown to individuals in their social dimension. Therefore, Elias extends this idea from the unconscious to a type of socio-genetic oblivion in the social dimension of the formation of behaviors, feelings, and motivations in individuals. In this sense, he does not entirely reject the “unconscious.” By studying and debating other areas, Elias has a broad view of the impacts of the social realm on memory, and he can at least overcome the Cartesian split between mind and body, nature and society.

Overcoming dichotomies: Memory, figurations, and relationality

Early researchers who considered memory, like Halbwachs, Blondel, and Bartlett, held an *avant-garde* position, suggesting that memory is not subjectivist or a mere “storage box” of past images. Thinking of memory as dependent on the social dimension is, in a comprehensive sense, a relational approach. Nevertheless, this movement toward relationality does not solve the dichotomy of individual–society/agency–structure. Halbwachs, for instance, distinguishes between the individual and the collective realms by constructing the concepts *individual memory* and *collective memory* as phenomena that belong to different layers of social reality. This distinction has been critiqued as merely analytical (Cordeiro, 2021). He presents the concept of *group* as a tool for articulating the two dimensions and presents a meso-approach with a co-determination of the domains (individual and collective). According to Olick,

Halbwachs is in this sense still a “nineteenth-century” theorist, one who sees individual- and collective-level problems as problems of different orders. In such a dichotomous worldview, the options are to emphasize one or the other, to present a grand theory of aggregation and translation between the “levels,” or to produce a sometimes productive hodgepodge of insights about a particular range of problems. (1999: 336)

Within this limited framework of possibilities, two interpretative branches have stemmed from Halbwachs’ approach and have been developed within memory studies: *collective memory studies* and *collected memory studies*, according to Olick’s (1999) terminology, or the *strong version* and the *distributed version*, according to Wertsch (1998).

The first branch, *collective memory studies* or the *strong version*, tends to reify “collective memory” as a long-term phenomenon attached to a social structure or, more specifically, a specific group. In this sense, what “societies remember or commemorate” would escape from individual effort. This branch stresses the power employed by an institution that organizes and perpetuates a collective memory. The *distributed* or *collected version* gathers works that view remembering as a collaborative process based on the mental processes operated by one or many individuals; thus, it requires “active agents and instruments that mediate the recall” (Wertsch, 1998: 119). It does not take memory as a thing; there is no hypostasized conception of memory because it does not exist “as a thing,” but is a collaborative process distributed among different people and instruments and/or objects in interaction (Wertsch, 1998). Therefore, *collected memory* stands for a memory within the group, while the *collective memory version* stands for a memory of the group. *Collective memory/the strong version* (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995; Connerton, 1989; Nora, 1989; Schwartz, 1982) lays full stress on the macro dimension. In contrast, *collected memory/the distributed version* (Heersmink, 2017, 2018; Sutton, 2008; Wertsch, 2002) relates the micro and macro dimensions (the focus typically varies between the dimensions depending on the approach).

As has been demonstrated thus far, memory is primarily a mental process that reframes and interprets past events according to the present moment in collaboration with others’ minds. The interplay between individuals and groups is the central feature of the remembering process because it clarifies what is meaningful and real. People help each other make sense of the past; otherwise, their minds would fall into forgetfulness, haziness, daydreams, and hallucination. This interplay among individuals is a core assumption in understanding the phenomenon of remembering. This approach has an ontological assumption, which may be based on the idea of *homines aperti* (Elias, 1978, 1994).

Elias presents *homines aperti* as opposed to *homo clausus*, rejecting the traditional dichotomy between subject and object in which the subject is autonomous from the social realm. Elias’s relationality is vital for integrating different memory studies approaches because both *collected memory/distributive* and *collective memory/strong versions* reflect the persistent division between subject and object. This division obfuscates the interplay and synthesis between interiority and exteriority, which is especially important for understanding memory.

Instead, in many of his studies, Elias attacks this dichotomy. The theoretical-philosophical and, notably, epistemological foundations of Elias’s investigation into time express his position clearly (Elias, 1991, 2001b). In *Über die Zeit* (Elias, 2021), we encounter a collection of essays that make various references to the conceptual challenges of time. With the publication of this book, Elias firmly entered the philosophical debate on the nature of time. In its introduction, the author clarified the book’s aim: to provide insights for an interpretation of time that would navigate “between the traditional philosophical alternatives of subjectivism and objectivism.” Setting aside the contentious issue of classifying Kant’s notion of time as either “objectivist” or “subjectivist,” the reality is, according to Elias, that both viewpoints share a common hypothesis: they treat time as a given of nature. In one case, it is viewed as an “objective” fact independent of human reality; in the other, as a mere “subjective” representation rooted in human nature. Posed in such a cunning and subtle manner, the question assumes a division of the

world between subject and object, as if there were distinct independent internal and external realms. As noted above, Memory Studies has predominantly taken up this premise.

In seeking to solve this issue, Elias posits the interdependence between connected individuals whose lives are shaped and played out within dynamic processes over time. He calls these processes “figurations” (Elias, 1978), which contain both the morphological dimension (the connections among individuals) and the epistemological dimension (the symbolic representation).

When correlating the sociology of knowledge and epistemology, Elias furnishes elements for understanding how remembering, language, and power relations are connected. For example, a mnemonic community—that is, people who collectively remember some aspects of the past (Zerubavel, 1997)—can be considered a figuration because people are intertwined and dependent on power relations. Adding a relative notion of power is crucial to understanding how some past narratives prevail over others. As Elias suggests, power sources may vary from one context or time to another. Reputation or authority comes from providing meaning for something, in this case, for some past event.

Habitus is a key element in understanding the relationality proposed by Elias. For him, individuals’ behaviors and habits are molded by long-term socio-historical processes. As societies undergo “civilizing processes,” they develop norms, behaviors, and etiquettes, which individuals internalize over time (Tabboni, 2001). This internalized behavior becomes a “second nature” to them, a habitus. Elias introduced the concept of “figurations” to describe dynamic, interdependent networks of individuals. Rather than seeing individuals as isolated entities, he saw them as part of complex webs of relationships.

This relational approach rejects both a voluntarist and a deterministic position since, within a relational conception, an individual would not transform a social structure and vice versa. Assuming a “flat ontology”⁷ does away with the poles or hierarchies, as the focus shifts from the “poles” to “transactions between different interdependent actors.” Instead of thinking of “the individual and his actions as pre-existing things outside social relations” (Dépelteau, 2008: 63), acting, speaking, or writing is motivated by understandings built relationally (Dépelteau, 2008). If we abstract from the variety of theories deemed “relational” (from Elias to Bruno Latour), we may note two main premises: (i) relationships are the only units of analysis; and (ii) objects and individuals are made up of relationships (Crossley, 2010; Dépelteau, 2015; Depelteau, 2018; Depelteau and Powell, 2013; Emirbayer, 1997). However, a third premise leads us to Elias’s next contribution: (iii) relationships are processes. If relationships are processes, “time is the symbol of a relationship between the individual (the continual transformations in body and thoughts) and some external changes” (Tabboni, 2001: 12). So, given that figurations change over time, the processual dimension should also be considered.

Processual thinking: Memory as a remembering process

Depending on the relational perspective, the importance of the processual aspect varies. The sociology of Norbert Elias is a classic example that comes to grips with relationality

alongside processualism. Elias argues that the social fabric comprises social actions, plans, and reactions from many interconnected individuals in an ongoing processual flux. The social figurations employ more or less stable processes of social change. For Elias, the social world is a set of relations in constant processual transformation. From this perspective, the flow of continually changing actions becomes central. Change is the condition of the social life—considering that processes will vary significantly according to the temporal scope. Accordingly, Elias works with broad historical processes that increasingly shape some habitus and related practices. It is also worth considering narrower temporal periods that may fit within a lifetime. He conceives the social world as a continuous process involving individuals, symbolic artifacts, and relationships (primarily relations of power). So, more than looking at an actor in isolation, the flow of continually changing actions must also be acknowledged. The world is not static or innate; things are not determined in a single moment but over time. When assuming a relational and processual ontology, the hypostasized idea of “memory” must be less important than the “remembering process.”

When considering the phenomenon of memory, a processual analysis is key to understanding the individual’s capacity to remember their own life and clarifying broader processes regarding the social communication of remembrances over generations. In both cases, a processual account leads us to understand “memory” as “remembering.” Remembering expresses this movement as an ongoing process. However, it may also be a noun, “the remembering,” that expresses the process’s instantiation at some point. As noted previously, “memory” (or “remembering”) is not a static thing because there is no past that exists in and of itself. There is a past that is instantiated and reframed in the present moment because memory is inevitably apprehended in the present. However, actual memory is only possible because remembering lies in reframing past events, resulting in future consequences. There is no preserved past itself, just a past that presents itself in the actual moment driving our future perception. This processual chain may be fluid and changeable with some elements that persist in time. According to Abbott (2016), every individual’s biological existence is stable and permanent. The symbolic codification (language) and the materialization of memory in papers, recordings, and digitalization persist over time. However, this does not mean that the individual’s biological apparatus or a materialized artifact contains the past itself. Instead, both retain something of the past that can be procedurally reinterpreted in the light of the present.

The empirical reality apprehended by the researcher is the stabilization and instantiation of processes that take concepts such as “family” or “memory” not as analytical abstractions but as a stable grouping of individuals or a set of stable remembrances derived from a continuous process of evolution and transformation (Abbott, 2016). Thus, if, on the one hand, it is not possible to say that the course of social life always generates “final results,” on the other, it is possible to argue that we find “social stabilities”—or “regularities,” in Abbott’s (2016) parlance, or what Glaeser (2005) calls “institutionalization.” Rules, arrangements, and standards result from the stability of social processes. Regarding memory, materialization and practices are essential for stabilization over time.

A relational approach combined with a processual perspective is key to understanding how remembrances are woven into the social fabric from the social interaction between

individuals and artifacts over time. There is no memory *per se*, held by a single person or group. Instead, remembrances are built within mnemonic communities or networks where the relational dynamics change over time. Consequently, the balance of power will also change. Having power is also the possibility to negotiate interpretations of the past.⁸

Final remarks

This paper has made an argument in three steps. Firstly, it was shown that Elias participated in a lengthy debate on the importance of biological aspects of memory by criticizing the departmentalization of phenomena employed by human sciences. For him, human sciences lagged behind many discoveries from natural sciences. We hardly find sociologists (especially from the 20th century) bridging gaps between soft sciences and hard sciences—something that is essential for many phenomena, such as memory. Elias responded to this by being an assiduous proponent of dialog among disciplines. Updating his reflections in the light of contemporary debates is productive and necessary to understand the remembering process further.

Secondly, it was shown that Elias argues for a relational approach that overcomes the dichotomy between individual and society, which would solve one of memory studies' central issues: the division between cognitivist and culturalist works. Thinking of a relational social ontology enabled Elias to focus on the relativity of many other social phenomena, such as “power,” which he understands relationally as a “balance of power” and “groups” that he called “figurations.” These kinds of concepts (“balance of power” and “figurations”) should be brought into the field of memory studies, which is still stuck in monolithic views in which groups impose their memories (as a “thing”), through their absolute power, on other groups. Finally, it was shown that, for Elias, the whole idea of the process is crucial. Once the notion that everything exists on an unremitting temporal flow of events is taken as a basic assumption, it becomes clear that neither memory nor its transmission processes are static.

Memory is an active remembering, and remembering is a mental process dependent on social interaction and supported by artifacts; it is a bio-psycho-social process. Remembering is involved in the complex nexus between the past, the present, and the future. Minds and mnemonic artifacts collaborate and interact to reconstruct the past. Artifacts are not the guardians of an intact past, but they work as material sources for drawing different interpretations, meanings, and feelings that can be changed according to the context. Elias contributed considerably to this understanding by providing arguments for retrieving and making sense of the past.

This whole reflection is vital to understanding the phenomenon of memory, clarifying that not everything we experience becomes a remembrance in the future because there is a distinction between repressed events (in the unconscious) and those reframed over time. Furthermore, Elias also draws attention to the role of language within this context. Language is crucial for remembering, and repressed experiences lack meaning precisely because they cannot be linguistically represented. Sharing experiences in the social realm guides and shapes the remembering process.

Elias also has a valuable account of social relations and power. Considering the notions of figurations and balance of power, it is possible to understand how some past interpretations prevail over others. Although *collective memory* is very popular (esp. because of Halbwachs' (1997) *Sociology of memory*), it is misleading to assume that monolithic groups hold collective memories and may impose them on others. Relations are dialogic; individuals exist, act, and produce knowledge through interaction. As an engine of knowledge, the remembering process also plays out within multiple interactions within figurations. Thus, we must assume that individuals interact within a network of relations that changes over time.

Although Elias acknowledges that identity and memory are intertwined, he overlooks that the most meaningful knowledge conveyed by memory is *episodic knowledge* related to one's own experience. Remembering produces knowledge about oneself. Biographies, for instance, may be an outcome of this process. At the base of the autobiographical act—that is to say, “graffiti” or “narrating” (γράφειν) one's “own” (self) “life” (bios)—are processes of memory and identity that are more organic and far more complex than mere lines written about a life story. If rescuing the past is a way to rescue oneself, building an autobiographical mnemonic narrative presents and interacts with the world. Hence, there is a close linkage between autobiography, identity, and memory. Notably, while Elias may not have acknowledged the importance of personal narratives, considering them does not necessarily go against his belief that process refers to “continuous, long-term transformations, that is, usually no less than three generations of changes in human-made figurations” (Schafers, 2001: 271). Conversely, biographical methods (Schütze, 1984) have shown that processual sociology could and should also focus on subjectivities and identities. Past facts are essential for understanding how the past has shaped the present, particularly in terms of how they have constructed individual narratives and subjectivities.

Finally, Elias could not foresee how trans-spatial and trans-temporal the future would be. Nowadays, thinking of processes inevitably involves thinking about the future. Figurations today are flows in action–reaction that transcend time and space. Artifacts conveyed by technology are also part of these flows. Contemporary trans-spatiality and trans-temporality enable past actions and past knowledge to impact future orientation. According to Glaeser, “there is a well-established body of literature about the mass media [. . .] Unfortunately, the focus of this literature has been on these techniques per se, not on how they enable other processes” (Glaeser, 2005: 26). Indeed, as Elias's work brings to the fore, memory studies should not ignore social processes but should instead seek to clarify how they are integral to the bio-psycho-social phenomenon of memory as the act of remembering.

In considering future directions for the sociology of memory, it is crucial to build upon Elias's work, integrating the interplay between the biological, psychological, and social dimensions of memory. Theoretical advancements should examine the complexities of individual and collective memory across diverse cultural contexts and the role of power dynamics and social relations in shaping memory processes. Using a range of methodologies and incorporating innovative technologies, empirical studies can provide valuable insights into the underlying mechanisms that drive the relationship between memory and social processes. By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and drawing

upon both theoretical and empirical contributions, the sociology of memory can deepen our understanding of the intricate connections between individual and collective remembering, power dynamics, and social relations, ultimately bridging the gap between “soft” and “hard” sciences.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The São Paulo Research Foundation. Process: 2016/16471-7.

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Notes

1. Memory Studies is an interdisciplinary academic field that focuses on examining and understanding individual and collective memories. This area of study brings together scholars and researchers from various disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy, and cultural studies. The field aims to explore how memories are formed, recalled, transmitted, and transformed across time and cultures, as well as the impact of memory on identity, social dynamics, politics, and historical narratives.
2. Although, as previously mentioned, Elias is not included as an essential reference in the memory studies canon, there exists an interesting account of his potential contribution to the field in the paper “On the potential of Norbert Elias’s approach in the social memory research in Central and Eastern Europe” by Bucholc (2013). The author explores some Eliasian ideas—such as imaginary and symbolic communication—to elaborate on the collective memory of Eastern Europe and its regional identity. Bucholc notes that Elias’s ideas about the civilizing process, figurations, and habitus can be particularly useful for understanding the dynamics of collective memory in the context of the historical transformations experienced by Central and Eastern countries, including the collapse of communism and the transitions to democracy and market economies. She argues that Elias’s approach can help researchers capture the long-term social processes and interdependencies that shape the formation, reproduction, and transformation of collective memories in these societies.
3. The text does not aim to cover all Memory Studies in an interdisciplinary manner. Instead, this is a sociological discussion, focusing specifically on theories that have emerged from Maurice Halbwachs’ work on collective memory.
4. It is worth mentioning with regard to Elias’s ideas related to constructions and their relationships to the phallic or the female breast, current debates would likely critique his focus on psychoanalytic theory and the emphasis on sexual symbolism in shaping social constructions. Contemporary approaches to gender and sexuality tend to emphasize the importance of social and cultural processes in shaping gender identities and expressions and the role of power relations and intersectionality in shaping experiences of gender and sexuality.
5. *Individual memory* refers to the memory of perceptions (and is therefore autobiographical), while *collective memory* pertains to the shared memory of specific events. As we have seen,

individual memory is based on personal experiences or testimonies, while collective memory is a product of the intersection of individual memories, meaning it cannot be fully reconstructed by a single person's mind. In essence, collective memory is the memory of a group. The term *historical memory*, according to Halbwachs, might not be the best choice, as it associates two concepts that differ in several respects. History, undoubtedly, is a compilation of events that have held significant importance in people's memories. However, when read in books, taught and learnt in schools, past events are selected, compared, and classified according to needs or rules that did not apply to the circles of people who were once their living repositories.

6. Durkheimians are usually not focused on domains free of social constraint.
7. Flat ontology is an approach that aims to treat all entities, objects, or beings in a given domain as having equal ontological status, avoiding hierarchies or privileging certain entities over others. The term "flat" denotes the absence of layers or levels in the ontological structure, in contrast to traditional ontologies that may differentiate between primary and secondary entities or arrange entities in a hierarchical order. Instead, flat ontology emphasizes the interconnectedness and mutual influence of all entities, recognizing the agency and significance of non-human entities as well.
8. One historical example that may illustrate this idea is how the interpretation and remembrance of the American Civil War have changed over time within different mnemonic communities or networks. During the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, the dominant narrative of the war and its causes was one of heroic sacrifice by Union soldiers to preserve the Union and end slavery. In contrast, Confederate soldiers were often portrayed as misguided but honorable defenders of their way of life. This narrative was primarily shaped by white Northerners who held political and cultural power after the war. However, the balance of power and cultural influence shifted over time, and different mnemonic communities or networks emerged with different interpretations of the war and its causes. African Americans, for example, developed their mnemonic communities that emphasized the role of slavery and the struggle for freedom in the war. In the mid-20th century, the Civil Rights movement also contributed to a broader shift in how the war was remembered, with a greater focus on the struggle for racial equality and the ongoing legacy of slavery and discrimination. These different mnemonic communities and networks continue to negotiate and reinterpret the meaning and memory of the Civil War today. For example, debates over the display of Confederate symbols and monuments in public spaces reflect ongoing negotiations over the power to shape the interpretation and remembrance of the war.

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