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# Reflections and Comments on Research on Memory and Conversation From an Ethnographic Perspective

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**Abstract**

Reflecting on three papers included in this issue, we suggest that research on memory and conversation could benefit by making more use of analyzing real-life situations or close to real-life scenarios, full speech and body interactions, and the interaction with the physical environment. We also suggest that the process of remembering during conversation is investigated on a level of detail and sequence that allow for locating actual functions of different actions. Finally, we suggest that a life-span perspective on transactive memory systems must also model the development, maintenance, breakdown, and reestablishment of such systems.

*Keywords:* Ethnography; Conversation analysis; Remembering; Field studies; Dementia

The contributions of Harris, Barnier, Sutton, and Savage (2018), Peltokorpi and Hood (2018), and Rajaram and Maswood (2018) all present interesting and important aspects of the ways in which conversations shape the way individuals and groups remember the past. At the same time, we think that the presented work suggests several possible expansions or revisions of both methodological and theoretical aspects.

In this commentary, we will use examples from our own work on remembering and related areas using additional methods and perspectives, hoping that this will illuminate the pros and cons of the perspectives and the methods used in these papers.

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Instead of controlled experimental methods, we have conducted ethnographic field studies of people in their natural environments. We have studied not only how people remember the past (e.g., Hydén, 2017; Hydén & Samuelsson, 2018), but also their prospective memory, that is, remembering what to do in the future (e.g., Dahlbäck, Kristiansson, & Stjernberg, 2013; Forsblad, 2016; Hydén, 2014). The advantage of this approach is that we see a wider set of functions and processes, but of course, without the detailed control that can be obtained in experimental work. We want here to address two aspects to this. One concerns the phenomena possible to observe, and the other the theoretical frameworks used.

There are some potentially important aspects of remembering processes seen in field studies that are not all covered in the articles. For instance, collaborative remembering has often not only the function of remembering factual knowledge, but also about establishing and maintaining identities (Hydén & Nilsson, 2015; Hydén & Örulv, 2009) and to develop and maintain the necessary common ground (Clark, 1996). Furthermore, bodily resources are also important for collaborative remembering; when referring to people or places, gestures are a useful resource (Bietti & Galiana-Castelló, 2013). Peltokorpi and Hood also point to the possible importance of bodily uses when they note that dating couples seem better than artificial couples at using face-to-face information. We hypothesize that a detailed non-verbal analysis of long-term established couples' communication using concepts and methods developed in studies of dialogue and conversations (e.g., Linell, 1998, 2009) would show similar patterns, just as we have seen this in cases of couples where one has dementia.

We have also noted that in real life that the familiar physical environment is an important resource for most cognitive tasks, including remembering. The physical environment can be a resource that shapes and sometimes even reduces the need for conversation. Therefore, studying conversation without being able to use a common physical environment will leave out practices that are part of a collaborative remembering process (Forsblad, 2016; Kirsh, 2009).

Another, and in our view important, difference between field studies and controlled studies relates to the reason for performing the memory task (c.f. Hutchins, 1995, 2013). In real life, people rarely if ever remember things without a personal motif or reason for remembering the particular content, but in controlled studies the participants have no own reason for remembering these particular items. Also, in real–life situations, the remembered content is to be used for some purpose other than just remembering something, but in controlled studies, the task is just to remember. It is conceivable that people do not use the same practices when performing a memory task in experimental setups and in natural task where they have a personal incentive connected to the task at hand and performing in a familiar environment. This can have important consequences also for the conversational process of remembering in what on the surface seems like the same task, for example, like remembering names of mutual friends either as a task given by an experimenter, or, for example, deciding on who to invite to a party.

At the same time, it is true that by just studying uncontrolled real-life situations, it is more difficult to draw more general conclusions. One middle way between these two

approaches, which we have used in research on natural language dialogs with computer systems, is to use the so-called scenarios to frame the task for the participants in the study (Dahlbäck, Jönsson, & Ahrenberg, 1993), thereby making them more resembling real-life situations while preserving the control making statistical analysis possible. A scenario here means that a scene and reason achieving some goal is introduced to the participants as a reason for performing the task. One example of this could be to give a reason for remembering a number of items (e.g., planning to take part in a competition of the most interesting cities they have visited, and then ask the participants to do this together).

In addition to expanding the methods for studying remembering in conversation, we believe it would be fruitful to make use of theories and concepts from adjoining fields of research when studying this topic. This has two advantages: (a) it makes already developed approaches, concepts and theories available to memory research, and (b) it makes comparison between results from adjoining fields possible. We have already mentioned research on dialog and communication (see also e.g., Clark & Schaefer, 1987; Heritage, 2012), where utterances are analyzed pinpointing the specific local strategies used, and the exact function of the various kinds of actions, instead of treating all utterances alike irrespective of where in the communicative process they appear and what function they perform.

Inspired by the well-known research by Kahneman and Tversky, Gigerenzer, and others on decision making (e.g., Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011; Kahneman, 2011), where the identified heuristics can both lead to accurate and non-accurate decisions, we hypothesize that in a similar fashion the same mechanisms in conversations are in some cases causing the development of false memories, and in other cases make remembering more accurate.

We have also noted that in couples where one spouse is gradually memory challenged, the cognitive resources must be radically redistributed in the "transactional system" through the uses of compensatory strategies. Previous research has indicated that compared to the healthy couples, couples with dementia develop positive strategies for compensating memory loss (cf. Dixon & de Frias, 2007). Couples with dementia are thus an extreme case which highlights communicative strategies focused on the distribution of memories in "the transactional system" and how such systems handle a situation when the system becomes unreliable. This is one example of our general belief that how research on restricted, disturbed, and other kinds of communication can provide a deeper understanding of also normal conversational remembering.

We hope that, as a complement to the important research presented in these three papers, the perspectives and methods presented here can further deepen our understanding of how individuals and groups remember the past.

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