History in Family Memory

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1. Approaching Family (Historical) Memory from a Cognitive Psychology Perspective

What do you know about your mother, your grandfather, your great-grandparents? Family memories, whether about personal events or events that mattered to a community, might be transmitted across generations and remembered by the descendance. The aim of this chapter is to discuss how cognitive psychology investigates the question of family memory and its transmission.

We start by reflecting on how cognitive psychology has approached memory work and the underlying assumptions, emphasizing the aspects where our approach diverges. Arguing that cognitive psychologists should extend their focus beyond the individual, we then examine existing research on family memory and collective contexts. Next, we introduce the hourglass metaphor developed by our interdisciplinary team. We proceed to review our research on the intergenerational transmission of family (historical) memories. Finally, we consider social and political momentum.

Cognitive psychologists approach memory empirically to understand the processes at play when individuals remember past events (see also William Hirst's and Robyn Fivush's chapters in this volume). Their understanding is based on three assumptions: First, they follow a *(re)constructivist view* of memory, originating in Bartlett's work (Bartlett 1932). In this view, memory is not a truthful retrieval of the past stored somewhere in the brain, but a dynamic and constructive process influenced by knowledge, beliefs, and expectations. Such a reconstructive process can produce alterations and distortions but is inherently adaptive (Schacter 2012). This point leads to the second important consensus: cognitive psychologists adopt a *functionalist view*. Memory serves a purpose, which then influences the remembering process (Bluck and Alea 2002; Harris, Rasmussen, and Berntsen 2014). Finally, they follow an *individualistic view*. It is the individual that remembers their own experiences. Friends, family, or others are generally ignored in studies, and when they are not, they tend to be seen at best, as the social context in which the memory takes place, and at worst, as distractions or sources of misinformation and social contagion (Barber, Harris, and Rajaram 2015; Loftus 2005). In other

words, they are considered an external influence on an internal, individual remembering process.

Although we also follow a constructivist and functional view, we disagree with the individual view. Emerging psychological research emphasizes considering the individual within their social, collective, and cultural context (e.g., Barnier and Sutton 2008; Fivush 2022; Hirst, Yamashiro, and Coman 2018; see also John Sutton's chapter in this volume). Humans do not live in a bubble, they constantly interact, sharing memories and building together the world of tomorrow. Memory is a socially constructed phenomenon with two main social contexts to consider: a personal context (family and close friends) and a collective context (broader groups that the individual identifies with such as nation, religious communities, fan groups).

Within cognitive psychology, the family context has been mostly investigated from a developmental perspective (e.g., Fivush et al. 2011; Reese and Fivush 2008; Van Bergen et al. 2009). This field examines how parents shape children's memory and storytelling, and how reminiscing practices at home (e.g., dinner table discussions, parents questioning about their day) impact children's personal and family identity, emotional development, well-being, and values (see Robyn Fivush's chapter in this volume). Overall, the emphasis is more on the act of reminiscing together or on how parents help their children reminisce than on the memory content. The transmission of family memories over multiple generations is less frequently studied in cognitive psychology, outside the particular case of trauma (e.g., Alaftar and Uzer 2022; Lev–Wiesel 2007).

Family memories can also be examined from the functional perspective. Cognitive psychologists describe autobiographical memory as serving three main functions: identity, social, and directive (Bluck and Alea 2002). We claim that family memories serve similar functions (Cordonnier and Luminet 2023; Burnell, Umanath, and Garry 2022). Undeniably, family history is part of one's identity (Fivush and Merrill 2016). In most countries, defining oneself includes bearing a family name–an official link to our ancestors. We also share family stories from before our time with friends or family members to bond or reflect on how things were back then. Furthermore, these stories can provide examples that help us plan and make decisions for the future. Pillemer et al. (2015) showed that vicarious memories—recollections of other people's significant life episodes, such as those of close friends and family members—

serve similar functions to personal memories, albeit at lower intensity levels. Thus, the family context is an intrinsic component of individual memory.

If cognitive psychologists are increasingly including close others as an integral part of the study of memory, we believe it is essential to also consider a more macro (collective) context. Our memories do not occur in a vacuum, they are situated in place and time, and this context can influence remembering processes. Brown's Transition Theory (2016) shows that autobiographical memories often center around major life transitions. When these transitions involve public or historical events, he labels it the "*Living-in-History* effect." Our past is thus intertwined with the past of our society.

While social psychologists have explored the interplay between collective memory, attitudes, social identity, and representations, primarily at the group level (e.g., Bouchat et al. 2020; Liu and Hilton 2005), cognitive psychologists have often overlooked the collective, historical, or cultural content in the memories they examine. An exception is the field of flashbulb memories, which are memories of the reception context where one learns about an important, surprising, and consequential event (Brown and Kulik 1977; Luminet and Curci 2018). We form these memories essentially to be part of the collective, aligning our lives with the group's through shared memories (Hirst and Meksin 2018). The collective context mixed in with social identity thus favors the formation and the retention of these particular memories (Cordonnier and Luminet 2021). Since flashbulb memories are connected to culture, aesthetics and media, exploring them from an interdisciplinary perspective and including literary concepts such as "tellability" would be beneficial (Erll and Hirst 2023).

Beyond flashbulb memories, the collective context can be particularly pregnant within the study of family memory. When examining the transmission of events set within the historical past, the way they are discussed (or not) and remembered within the family should not ignore the associated collective memories and emotions (Barnwell 2019; Nahhas 2016). After all, collective memories also serve collective functions for the individual; they shape group identity, support understanding of group relations or provide directions for the group's future (Burnell, Umanath, and Garry 2022; Heux et al. 2022). Some research within cognitive psychology acknowledges this collective context in intergenerational memory transmission. Svob and Brown (2012) discovered that, in families who had not lived through conflicts, cultural-life script events (e.g., going to school, getting married, first child) were mostly

transmitted to the next generation, whereas if the parents had lived through conflict, these family historical memories took a prominent place in the transmission. Stone et al. (2014) empirically tested Assmann's (1995) prediction that communicative memory–memory transmitted through everyday communication that is neither formal nor stable–would last for three to four generations, finding a steep decline in intergenerational transmission. In particular, the youngest generation had extremely limited knowledge of their grandparents' WWII war experiences, relying on cultural sources instead, although barely, reflecting Schuman and Scott (1989)'s findings that personal war stories were prevalent in older generations, while younger generations discussed the war in a broader historical context. These intergenerational variations could be explained by the evolution of these memories from lived (occurring during a person's lifetime) to distant (occurring before someone's lifetime) (Hirst and Manier 2008). Memories from lived experiences are typically more personal, causally coherent, contextualized, emotionally intense and positive than distant memories (Muller et al. 2023; Muller, Bermejo, and Hirst 2018; Muller, Bermejo, and Hirst 2016; Zaromb et al. 2014). These studies demonstrate how psychology can empirically test hypotheses from the humanities, such as that communicative memory is more limited than what Assmann (1995) hypothesized, and that collective and generational contexts influence both what, how, and why a past is transmitted and remembered.

Of course, intergenerational memory transmission has also been extensively studied within the humanities and social sciences, generally under the broader field of collective memory originating in Halbwachs' work (Halbwachs 1925; Halbwachs 1950). Unlike psychologists who investigate memory processes, humanities scholars embrace a narrative-driven approach, focusing on the content and use of collective and family memories by public and private agents. Relying mostly on qualitative methods, they explore narratives, oral histories, and cultural artifacts to understand how topics are represented and discussed within the broader population, investigating the mechanisms of memory construction, transmission, and contestation over time, and the tensions between memory and history (e.g., A. Assmann 2009; J. Assmann 2011; Erll 2011; Gensburger and Lefranc 2020; Portelli 1998; Rothberg 2014).

In the context of family memories, the sociologist Welzer (2005) researched descendants of former National Socialist German Workers' Party members, finding that some younger generations transformed and reinterpreted stories about their Nazi grandfathers in a more positive light, a phenomenon he called "cumulative heroization." Hirsch 's contribution to

cultural memory marked a significant advancement, particularly in exploring the recollections of descendants of people who lived through traumatic events like the Holocaust. She termed this form of memory “postmemory” (Hirsch 2008, see also Marianne Hirsch's chapter in this volume). In these types of studies, narratives, photos and other transmission mediums are examined to understand the effects of non-lived memories on following generations.

The strengths of the humanities thus lie in their ability to uncover nuanced and idiosyncratic aspects of memory, including the emotional and symbolic dimensions. Through case studies and in-depth analyses, they provide a multifaceted understanding of their subject matter. However, what they gain in specificity and depth, they might lose in generalizability. In contrast, the empirical rigor and systematic analysis of cognitive psychology excel in identifying general patterns and mechanisms of memory but often overlook the unique, context-dependent, and deeply personal aspects that the humanities capture so effectively. By integrating the strengths of both approaches, a more comprehensive understanding of memory across generations can be achieved.

To sum up, cognitive psychologists have mostly investigated memory as an *individual process of remembering one’s personal past*. Recent studies have started to go beyond this restricted focus by considering vicarious and family memories. Now, we also argue for the need to include both the content and the collective context of these memories. In our research, we are applying methods from cognitive psychology to study memory beyond the individual by focusing on the intergenerational transmission of family memories. In the next section, we propose a tool that reflects our approach to the study of family (historical) memories.

2. The Transmission of Family Memory: Through the Hourglass

Tackling the intergenerational transmission of family memory is a significant endeavor. From a cognitive psychological perspective, which views memory as a functional construction, it requires a deep understanding of different aspects: 1) what is transmitted and why (the transmission function for the transmitter), 2) what is remembered by younger generations and why (the function of these family memories for the receiver), and 3) the variables that influence transmitting and remembering processes. This way of breaking down a complex process (family transmission) into fundamental elements by identifying and manipulating variables is characteristic of a cognitive psychology approach. However, to accommodate broader

influences, we developed the hourglass metaphor with colleagues from political sciences and history (see Figure 1) (Cordonnier et al. 2022). The top of the hourglass represents the collective context (macro level), encompassing prevalent collective memories and representations of the past. The bottom represents individual idiosyncrasies (micro level), including personal beliefs, attitudes, and social identifications, which influence how the past is apprehended and reconstructed. The narrow passage where the two bulbs join embodies family memory (meso level), acting as a meeting point, filtering and merging collective representations with personal experiences.

The hourglass can be used from a top-down (collective to individual) or a bottom-up (individual to collective) perspective. However, true integration of micro processes and macro influences can only be achieved through interdisciplinary work (Cordonnier et al. 2022). This is what we have strived to do within our last three projects: TRANSMEMO, RE-MEMBER and TRANSGEN[1]. In the next section, we will use research from these projects to exemplify what cognitive psychology can contribute to this topic.

[1] TRANSMEMO (2017-2020) and RE-MEMBER (2020-2025) are interdisciplinary projects involving historians, political scientists, and social and cognitive psychologists that examine the intergenerational transmission of family historical memory across three generations related to major Belgian historical events. TRANSMEMO focused on the memories from the resistance and from the collaboration during War World II (WWII) while RE-MEMBER focuses on the memories from the collaboration during WWII and the colonization of Congo. TRANSGEN (2022-2026) is a psychology-only research projects that examines in a systematic way the intergenerational transmission of autobiographical and "living-in-history" memories within families.

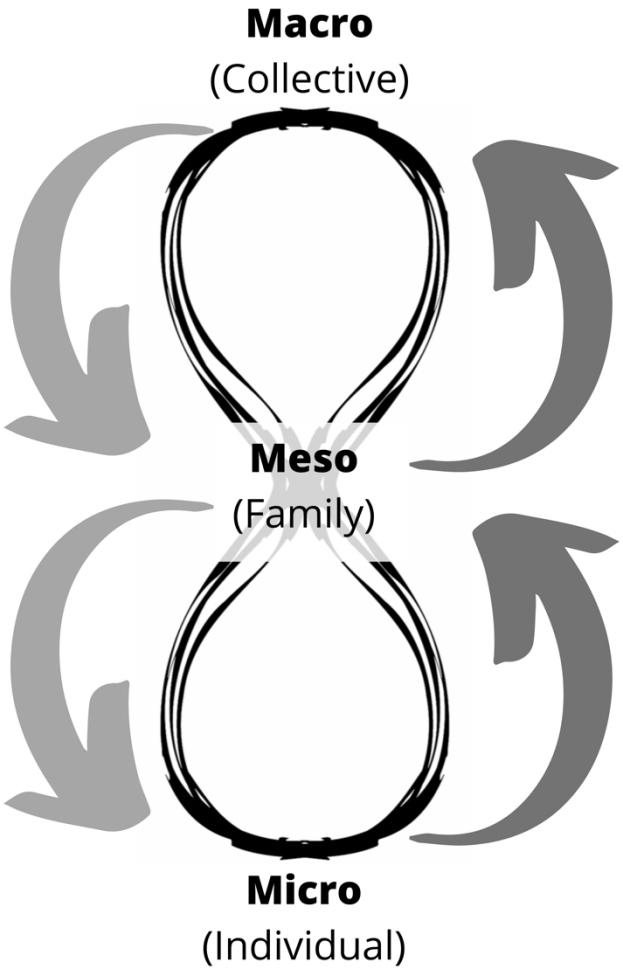

Figure 1. The hourglass metaphor.

What can Cognitive Psychology bring to the Study of Family Memory?

Cognitive psychology provides essential knowledge for understanding memory processes and functions, focusing on the micro level. In our research, we investigate the cognitive aspects of intergenerational memory transmission while considering its family (meso level) and collective (macro) contexts. To achieve these aims—understanding cognitive processes of family memory transmission and investigating the influence of the collective context—we combine cognitive psychology-only research (with higher experimental control) with interdisciplinary research on case studies involving diverse collective contexts. We use a consistent methodology to facilitate knowledge build-up (see William Hirst's chapter for a similar program of research).

Our methodology centers on the transmission and remembrance of anecdotes, defined as the retelling of specific events set in a particular place and time. The term "anecdote" emphasizes the non-necessity to select impactful events; it can include seemingly minor or insignificant occurrences. Although narrative identity research often prioritizes turning points or identity-defining events, our approach allows for any self-selected event, enabling us to assess what is genuinely transmitted.

We have deployed a two-approach design across multiple experiments (with some variations) based on the transmission of anecdotes over two or three generations: a *transmission approach* and a *vicarious memory approach*. The former assesses transmission success, transmitted memories' characteristics, and their functions for the transmitter, while the later assesses vicarious memories' characteristics and functions for the receiver. This dual approach allows a systematic investigation of the variables at play in the retelling of a family memory, depending on individual goals and idiosyncrasies.

The *transmission approach* contains two steps. First, the older generation provides personal or family anecdotes they have discussed at least once with the younger generation(s). After detailing the event, we ask questions regarding memory phenomenology (e.g., vividness), experienced emotions, shared frequency, event significance, and why they consider it important to remember. Second, we verify what was indeed transmitted to the next generation(s) by asking them if they know the anecdotes selected by their ancestor.

In the *vicarious approach*, the objective is to understand the role of these family memories for younger generations. The method closely mirrors the transmission approach but prompts younger generations to generate their own anecdote about their ancestor's past (i.e., a vicarious memory). They select it, describe it, and answer the various scales, ending with a reflection on why they remember that memory. Allowing them to select an anecdote reveals what is most salient in their memory, providing insights into the function of that vicarious memory for the subject. In a second step, we sometimes revisit the older generation and request their version of the story. This practice of having multiple generations recount the same story—whether initiated by the oldest or youngest generations—enables a comparison of memory content. This analysis explores similarities and variations, including changes, omissions, enhancements, twists, misinterpretations, or additions across generations.

Although most of our research is ongoing, an example of the transmission and vicarious approaches can be found in Cordonnier et al. (2021).[2] This study explores the intergenerational transmission over three generations of family historical memory related to the Resistance during WWII. Our analysis focused on the elaboration level provided by different generations. In the transmission approach, we observed that the oldest generation provided rich, detailed anecdotes, while the middle and youngest generations offered fewer details or did not know the story. However, all participants could provide a vicarious memory, even if their narrative contained only the essence of the story. Additionally, we identified "family myths" where all generations recounted the same story in detail. We noted that these family myths were all highly emotional anecdotes. We also found that overall, positive anecdotes were known in more detail than negative ones and that humor was a good predictor of knowledge. These findings highlight the importance of examining emotional aspects of memory transmission.

This brings us to another important feature of the cognitive psychological approach to memory: we are mindful of variables that influence memory. Emotions, including their appraisals like the perceived importance of an event and the associated feelings, can enhance memory, aid transmission, and affect narrative reconstruction across retellings (Luminet and Cordonnier 2024a; Luminet and Cordonnier 2024b; see also Luminet's chapter in this volume). Stronger family relationships and frequent contact likely contribute to better memory transmission, as bonding and repeated storytelling consolidate memories. Phenomenological characteristics, often assessed in cognitive studies to gauge subjective experiences (Johnson et al. 1988), may indicate more effective transmission. Individual differences, such as conversational roles (narrators, monitors, mentors) also shape family stories emergence (Van Der Haegen et al. 2022). Social identification, examined quantitatively (how strongly one identifies with their social group) rather than qualitatively (being a member of a group vs of another), is another crucial element, especially in the context of family and collective memory (Bouchat et al. 2020; Cordonnier and Luminet 2021; Hirst and Manier 2008). In our research, we strive to incorporate these variables, though their inclusion can vary based on study design, data type, sample size, and methodological constraints. Therefore, we combine research on family historical memory, focusing on variables like social identification which may strongly

[2] Note: we used different terms to name these approaches in the paper: the transmission approach was referred to as *recalling* while the vicarious approach was referred to as *retelling.*

influence memory quality but often involve smaller samples, with a cognitive-only approach on larger general population samples, enabling a more systematic analysis of these variables.

Understanding the functions of family memories is also paramount. We investigated the importance of transmitting WWII-related family historical memories—whether related to resistance or collaboration—and the underlying reasons (Cordonnier and Luminet 2023). Using qualitative analysis, we categorized responses into personal or collective functions, further coded as self, social, or directive (see also Alea and Bluck 2003; Burnell, Umanath, and Garry 2022). Our findings reveal these memories serve vital roles in personal identity and social relationships at the individual level, with more directive functions at the collective level. Anecdotes of the resistance also played a more collective role than stories of the collaboration, serving as identity markers for the group or as examples to follow in the future. To understand why these war-related stories fulfill different functions, it is essential to situated them within their broader context.

Replacing Micro Processes in the Hourglass

Investigating the transmission of family memories extends beyond understanding information sharing. Memory content and its remembering context can significantly influence the entire process. Integrating knowledge across micro, meso, and macro levels requires insights from various disciplines such as social psychology, history, and political science.[3]

Belgium provides an intriguing case study when it comes to family historical memories (Hirst and Fineberg 2012). Our research has explored two main events within living memory: WWII and the colonization of Congo. These episodes in Belgian history still resonate in today's political and social climate, and their memories continue to divide branches of the population (e.g., French- vs Dutch-speakers, left vs right, monarchists vs Flemish nationalists, younger generations vs older generations) (Rosoux 2021; see also Valérie Rosoux's chapter in this volume). Controversial representations of the past directly impact family transmission. For instance, we found silence, sometimes even taboo, within families whose parent was condemned for collaborating with the Germans during WWII, particularly in the French-

[3] This evidently is not a complete list of valuable disciplines; they are just the ones we have worked most closely with.

speaking part of Belgium. One participant expressed: “When I was 14, he asked me to keep it a secret. I can understand his motives, but at the same time, he told me: 'You can't tell anyone, because if you do, it could hurt me professionally. (…) It's a terrible thing to tell a kid such a secret.” Beyond socially-driven silences, an absence of transmission–and thus a lack of knowledge for younger generations–can also be functional. Although many psychologists have highlighted the positive impact of intergenerational narratives on well-being (see Robyn Fivush’s chapter in this volume), we argue this is not always the case. We encountered a family where the collaborator himself was still alive and nearing his centenary. During an extensive interview, his daughter expressed her need to remain in the dark, fearing that what she might learn could prevent her from continuing to care for her father as she had for the past decade. Not all family memories are deemed worthy of transmission, especially when they can elicit feelings of shame, guilt, anger or a sense of disconnection with family members or society overall.

In contrast, Dutch-speaking families appeared less burdened by such a past, with some even expressing a certain level of pride. They associate acts of collaboration with a fight for Flemish rights and the repression of people who collaborated with unfair treatments from a mostly French-speaking state. The granddaughter of a former collaborator noted: “Actually I no longer have any connection with Belgium. When I'm abroad I say I'm Flemish, not Belgian. [Pause, reflects]. I am disappointed in Belgium for what they did after the war in relation to my family. Whether they were correct or not, it wasn't what I had expected.” Understanding this disparity in transmission thus requires the interdisciplinary lenses of both history and political science (Aerts 2018; Bouchat et al. 2020).

Generational influences are also crucial for understanding family transmission. The concept of generation can be considered from two perspectives (see also Amy Corning’s chapter in this volume). The first, rooted in sociology, draws from Mannheim’s renowned theory of generations (1952). This perspective recognizes that people born in different eras create distinct cohorts, shaped by the socio-historical environment of their youth—a factor particularly significant in research on the colonial past (Licata and Klein 2010). Indeed, many of our participants insist on the importance of placing their family’s past in the cultural and social context of the time.

The second perspective focuses on the generational gap between the memory-holder and the rest of the family, embodying the passage of time and reflecting on the lasting importance of family memory. Our research seeks to operationalize and evaluate both generational concepts, as well as their interaction. Some family members can feel torn between their family lineage and the values of their generation. For instance, a young descendant of a former colonial official told us: “I'm ashamed of Belgium's situation in relation to these countries, especially the Congo here. But I'm not necessarily ashamed of my family, I mean, in the sense that I think they've done some serious shit, like... I mean, they mucked around, but I'm not ashamed because it's built in a historical and societal context. … Well, I don't know. It's a bit complicated because I find it embarrassing to say that I'm not ashamed. I'm not proud!” Families function as small ecosystems, where individuals, their relationships within the family, and their positionality within the broader historical, social, and political context continually interact, influencing memory practices.

3. Considering Social and Political Momentum

Beyond acquiring fundamental knowledge, it is important to consider the political momentum of such research. The events under investigation occurred over half a century ago, yet their echoes still permeate various levels of society. With witnesses to these historical events diminishing rapidly, there is a pressing momentum to interview them before their insights are lost.

Regarding family memories, having a parent, grandparent, or great-grandparent associated with the "wrong side of history" or involved in acts considered wrong or shameful by today's standards can profoundly affect individuals and families. Among our participants, we observe a spectrum of coping mechanisms, ranging from complete silence and avoidance to a transmission focused on justifications. However, participating in our research can create a context conducive to initiating reflection or even dialogue about the past. In most families we've interviewed, participants have used the pretext of the experiment to open a dialogue with parents or grandparents about the family's history. In one instance, a young adult learned just days before meeting us about his grandmother's involvement with the Rexist party (a party close to Nazi ideology) and her post-war condemnation. During the interview, he opined that his family is reserved and avoids discussing the past, leading to a sense of not being particularly

close to them. Then, a few days after our meeting, we received an email from his mother, whom we had previously interviewed. She said:

> Yesterday, my son and I took the time to discuss our family history. First of all, I was able to tell him what I know about my mother's and grandfather's history. Then, for several hours, beyond the questions he was asking, we shared our thoughts on the values that drive us, on life's paths, mine, his, the family's, what guides our choices, how to build ourselves as men and women, what makes us who we are, who are the ones who play a decisive role in our lives and why... It was a very rich encounter! I really think that your research project helped me find the way to share all this with my son, and I thank you for that.

This quote underscores the concealed dimension of research like ours: our direct influence on the cognitive, emotional, and social processes of the participants we meet. It also highlights the role of family transmission, emphasizing the robust connections between memory, values, and closeness. When collective influences impose silence about the past, the repercussions extend beyond a mere deficit of knowledge. By researching such topics, we create a space for these memories to exist.

Our research also matters at a collective level. Topics such as collaboration or colonization frequently resurface in the news, with collaboration often discussed in the context of Flemish nationalism, while colonization has gained international attention, especially after the murder of George Floyd. Understanding how family memories influence political and civil debates is crucial for addressing the enduring consequences of major conflicts.

In conclusion, family memories play a vital role at both the individual and collective levels. They provide continuity from a bygone past that persists through transmission. They shape individuals by imparting values, knowledge, and a sense of belonging, as well as providing an interpretative framework for understanding historical events. The study of family memories is intricate and therefore necessitates the integration of multiple approaches within and across disciplines.

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