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Witnessing and Cultural Trauma: The Role of Flashbulb Memories in the Trauma Process

A COMMUNITY'S IDENTITY WILL IN PART DEPEND ON HOW IT DEALS WITH its past. In many instances, disturbing events from the past—slavery, wars, economic depressions, governmental repression—can come to haunt a community. Jeffery Alexander (2004a) has taught us to refer to these disturbing events of community-wide importance as “cultural traumas.” According to Alexander, events treated as cultural traumas are not inherently traumatic. Rather, communities undertake what he calls a “trauma process” through which “members of a collectivity [come to] feel that they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness” (2004a, 1). As he wrote,

Schools may fail to educate.... Governments may be unable to secure basic protections.... Economic systems may be profoundly disrupted.... Such problems are real and fundamental, but they are not, by any means, necessarily traumatic for members of the affected collectivities.... For traumas to emerge at the level of the collectivity, social crises must become cultural crises. Events are one thing, repre-

sensation of these events quite another. Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity. (10)

The trauma process provides a means of filling in the gap between the event and its representation. Alexander relied on speech act theory to provide a framework for discussing this trauma process, identifying three key elements: “[1] Speaker: the carrier group, [2] Audience: the public, putatively homogenous, but sociologically fragmented, and [3] Situation: the historical, cultural, and institutional environment within which the speech act occurs” (2004a, 12). For Alexander, carrier groups are the collective agents of the trauma process. They can be elites or marginalized classes, a particular generation, a nation, or an institution. Whatever their constitution, they are involved in “meaning making,” incorporating a potentially traumatic event into a collectivity’s master narrative. Carrier groups (or alternatively, carrier agents) may be works of art, the mass media, and state bureaucracies, including leadership.

Our interest here is the trauma process and, in particular, the role that a specific type of carrier group plays in this process. Alexander (2004a) viewed the trauma process as a temporally extended undertaking. We focus on what might be viewed as the earliest stage of the trauma process, the discussions that begin shortly after the event occurs but continue for many years thereafter. We are particularly concerned with the role of witnesses as the carrier group that furthers and shapes discussions. We want to explore the possibility that many individuals who did not directly experience the event can still serve as witnesses because they have memories of living through the event, what psychologists refer to as flashbulb memories. We want to examine the role flashbulb memories can play in granting an individual the ability to serve as a witness and the way such witnessing allows the community as a whole to enter into the trauma process.

WITNESSES AS CARRIER GROUPS

Alexander, discussing instances of cultural trauma, appears to give special “carrier” status to witnesses of potentially traumatic events. In his essay on the Holocaust as a cultural trauma (2004b), for instance, he wrote eloquently about the significant impact that Anne Frank’s (2010) diary—in written form and as dramatized in both a play and a film—had on the public, transforming the Holocaust from merely another evil perpetrated by the Nazis to an evil beyond all evil, a sui generis event that became a cultural trauma not just for Jews, but for many across the world.

Witnesses such as Anne Frank can serve a critical role of translating “accurate distress” into core elements of a collectivity’s identity because they provide a detailed account of what it was like to experience this “distress.” In doing so, they can act as a key element in constructing a representation of the event. It is not only a matter of providing raw facts, however. Witnesses to the Holocaust may not have known, except through the subsequent efforts of scholars, that six million Jews were killed during the Holocaust. However, the power of their first-person accounts cannot be underestimated. They ground the trauma not in sterile statistics about the precipitating event but in specific human perceptions, actions, and feelings. In doing so, they can give life to these statistics. At times, one can use the first-person accounts to guide fictional representations of individuals experiencing the precipitating event, as Alexander (2004b) underscored in his discussion of the television series *Holocaust*. But these fictionalized accounts no doubt spring from the testimonies of witnesses like Anne Frank (2010), Primo Levi (1996) and Elie Wiesel (1972), as well as from the oral testimonies of other survivors captured by the Shoah Foundation and the Fortunoff Video Archive. The testimonies grant a depth and emotional salience to the Holocaust, or any potentially traumatic event. With dramatic force, they can give meaning, particularly emotional meaning, to what may simply be another historical event when encountered in a textbook.

Yet, as Alexander stressed, the effectiveness of a carrier agent is constrained by “the uneven distribution of material resources and the social networks that provide differential access to them” (2004a, 21). Moreover, he emphasized that it does not necessarily unfold in a “transparent speech situation,” a violation, then, against a normative ideal essential to democratic function in the public sphere, according to Habermas (1984). For Alexander, it would seem, the trauma process can be deeply undemocratic, governed either by elites or specialized groups and undertaken in a nontransparent fashion.

Because of these constraints, witnesses may sometimes be ignored. For a speaker to be effective in shaping the trauma process, the audience should be aware of the message and be willing to listen to it. Yet, as compelling as a witness’s testimony can be at times, audiences do not always want to hear it. Primo Levi’s (1996) *Survival in Auschwitz* was initially rejected for publication and did not sell well for many years after it was finally published. The intense experience of the war may have been too recent for the community to begin to wrestle with the horrors described in Levi’s memoir.

FLASHBULB MEMORIES AND WITNESSING

We are interested here in instances in which the carrier group and the audience intersect to a large degree, thereby minimizing constraints on resources, social network structure, and the transparency of the “speech situation.” One such occasion occurs when most or all members of a community serve as witnesses, making the overlap of carrier group and audience almost complete. On these occasions, a speaker does not have to talk to an audience and hope that it listens. The speaker and audience may share similar experiences, and feel similar distress, and in doing so, can reach out to each other to discuss how best to represent the event. There is no need to find a way to communicate because everyone in the community bears witness and wants to participate in the process of building a collective understanding. It is not necessarily the case that all members of a community share the same understanding and interpretation of the precipitating

event. Rather, because they can serve as witnesses, they each have, if you like, a democratic standing as a witness, with no one individual necessarily more important than any other in shaping an understanding of the event. To be sure, other forces might come into play to privilege some individuals over others, but at least in the situations we are imagining, each community member begins the traumatic process as a witness similar to all other witnesses.

In considering such occasions, we do not have in mind simply economic crises or natural disasters, instances in which most if not all of a community experiences the precipitating event directly. Rather, we are interested in events for which the direct experience is confined to just a segment of the community. The Holocaust would no doubt be one example, but there are many others: the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001; the Bataclan shooting; the assassination of Olaf Palme; the Vietnam War. The incidents generally are temporally and spatially bounded. The September 11, 2001, attack took place within the confines of three hours and three locations. Similarly, the Bataclan shooting took place within a confined time period and geography. However, while these bounded events unfolded, they garnered the attention of the affected community, even though only a few people directly experienced them.

Although those who were physically present may have privileged status as witnesses, can we treat individuals who did not directly experience the event, but lived through it from a distance, as potential witnesses? The answer rests, in part, in the memories these individuals form. They often develop clear, vivid, and long-lasting memories of the circumstances in which they learned of the event, which psychologists refer to as “flashbulb memories.” Extensively studied by psychologists since Brown and Kulik (1977) first brought them to the psychology community’s attention, investigated flashbulb memories have involved events such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Challenger explosion, the resignation of Margaret Thatcher, and the attack of September 11, 2001 (9/11; see Hirst and Phelps 2016; Luminet and Curci 2017). Flashbulb memories can some-

times involve positive events, such as the election of Barack Obama or Donald Trump—at least for some people (Cyr and Hirst 2020; Koppel et al. 2013), but they usually refer to negative events, particularly ones that might be culturally traumatic (see Stone and Jay 2017 for a discussion of positive flashbulb memories).

For psychologists, the central question concerning flashbulb memories is how they differ from or are similar to other, more “ordinary” autobiographical memories (Talarico and Rubin 2017). We want to explore here a largely unappreciated possibility that is nevertheless relevant to our concerns about cultural trauma. The presence of a flashbulb memory may allow members of a community to serve as witnesses to the precipitating event. That is, although those who directly experienced a precipitating event may have a well-defined and perhaps privileged status as a witness, those with flashbulb memories may serve as witnesses as well. As a result, they too can participate in the meaning-making process that takes place between the event and its cultural representation, the trauma process.

In making this assertion, we need to be clear about what we mean by “witness.” Although few Americans directly experienced the 9/11 attack—they were not at Ground Zero or the Pentagon at the time of the attack—most Americans learned about it from a distance, often hundreds or thousands of miles from the sites of the attack, watching television in the comfort of their living rooms. In other words, their experience of the 9/11 attack was mediated, not direct. They did not see a plane hit the World Trade Center with their own eyes; rather, they saw a live television broadcast of the plane hitting the second tower with their own eyes. In this regard, their experience of the attack could be considered as not much different from that of a younger person who was not yet born in 2001, but “experienced” the attack by watching documentaries broadcast on television.

There is, of course, one critical difference between watching a live television broadcast and a broadcast recounting an event at a later time. In the former case, a person has a memory of the circumstances of learning of an unfolding attack, albeit from a distance, that

includes the experience of watching it on live television. In the latter instance, they may still have watched it on television, but not as the event occurred. They do not have a memory of learning of the event while it happened or shortly thereafter. For us, the widespread presence of flashbulb memories across a community allows individuals within an affected community to claim that they were present and experiencing the event in real time.

Perhaps more importantly, we aver that flashbulb memories allow one to connect what is happening in one's personal life—learning about the event as one sits in one's living room—with the event itself. Walt Whitman begins one of his four commemorative poems of Abraham Lincoln with "When lilacs last in dooryard bloom'd," referring to the circumstances in which he learned of Lincoln's assassination. The assassination occurred on April 14, 1865, a time when, indeed, lilacs were in bloom. As Whitman subsequently wrote: "I remember where I stopped at the time, the season being advanced, there were many lilacs in bloom. By one of the caprices that enter and give tinge to events without being at all a part of them, I find myself always reminded of the great tragedy of that day by the sight and odor of these blossoms. It never fails" (Whitman 1882, 320). His personal recollection of learning of the assassination is lastingly connected to the public tragedy itself.

The National September 11 Memorial & Museum similarly recognizes an important role for flashbulb memories. When museum-goers enter, they take an escalator down to the entrance floor, walk through a coffin-like space paneled in dark wood, and then begin their journey through the museum by listening to recordings of people reciting their flashbulb memories. Although those telling their stories did not directly observe the attack—they were not, for instance, at Ground Zero at the time—the museum found it desirable to begin its own rendering of the attack with these flashbulb memories rather than with recountings of those who actually saw the attack with their own eyes. The recordings of various individuals' flashbulb memories connect the museum's narrative about the attack itself to experiences

of individuals who had not directly experienced this historical event but nevertheless felt part of it.

Neisser (1982) probably reflected best on the distinctive role flashbulb memory can play in connecting an event with an individual living through the event, even when the event is one step removed. He wrote:

[One] recalls an occasion where two narratives that we ordinarily keep separate—the course of history and the course of our lives—were momentarily put into alignment. Details are linked between our own history and History.... [Flashbulb memories] are the places that we line up our own lives with the sources of history itself and say “I was there.” (47–48)

This feeling of “being there” gives those who possess a flashbulb memory a special status much like that granted to eyewitnesses, the term we will use when referring to those who directly witness an event. It does so because it allows these individuals to claim a personal connection to the event that others can empathize with. Hence, it is not just a few direct witnesses, for instance those present at Ground Zero or the Pentagon during the attack, who can assert that they were “there.” Rather, it is all who possess a memory of the circumstances in which they learned of the attack as it unfolded.

For us, then, the possession of a flashbulb memory can provide the bona fides that allow a rememberer to serve as an “authentic witness” to the event. The rememberer is not necessarily recalling the *facts* of the event in a more compelling manner than might someone whose only “experience” with the event is what they read in a book or saw in a TV documentary. What these rememberers do, as Primo Levi (1996) and others did exceptionally well as direct witnesses to the Holocaust, is capture what it was like to live through the event and convey what that experience means, at least to them. These observations are not facts, in the strictest sense, but they give

the precipitating event a resonance that it may not have if the events were reduced only to facts. As Alexander (2004b) rightly pointed out in his discussion of the Holocaust, it is the particularization and personalization of Jews suffering through the Holocaust that allows, in part, the trauma process concerning the Holocaust to transform this horror from just another Nazi evil to the cultural trauma it clearly is today. Accounts may be about the experiences of individuals, but they also reflect the way a community as a whole did—and perhaps should—feel. Even a novel or another fictional account of the horrors of the Holocaust will not just communicate from the point of view of an individual or individuals but also describe more generally the circumstances in which the individuals find themselves.

Being a witness by virtue of possessing a flashbulb memory offers a similar opportunity to testify as to “what it was like.” Someone with a flashbulb memory of the Boston Marathon bombing may not know that three people were killed in the explosions, but they can testify to the vulnerability that was felt as a result of the bombing. They may not have been on Boylston Street when the bombs detonated, but they nevertheless can serve as an “authentic witness” to the vulnerability the bombing elicited. In its strongest sense, authenticity refers to “undisputed origin or authorship,” but in a weaker sense, to “being faithful to the original” or to a “reliable, accurate representation” (Varga and Guigon 2017). Both eyewitnesses and their audience have in mind this weaker sense when they claim that the witnessing is authentic. Similarly, those with flashbulb memories could lay claim to being authentic witnesses to the event. The flashbulb memory allows them to say they were “there” and, as a result, serve as an interpreter of the experience. In turn, an audience will treat their testimony as an authentic account, in part because of the flashbulb memory.

The first author observed the use of flashbulb memories as a means of claiming authenticity in a recent visit to the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in New York. He overheard parents talking to their children about the attack as they moved through the section in the museum on the history of the attack, essentially a mo-

ment-by-moment recitation of the fateful day. In conversation after conversation, parents often began by recounting their own flashbulb memories of the day. What they did on 9/11 had little direct bearing on the accounts the museum is covering, such as the airport from which the planes originated. The parents may have been in Cincinnati at the time, whereas much of what the museum covers took place in New York or Washington, DC. Nonetheless, the parents recounted to their children their flashbulb memories. Our claim is that they did so in order to establish their bona fides as authentic witnesses. They may not be such compelling witnesses as those who were indeed at Ground Zero on September 11, but their own accounts of learning of the event and watching it unfold on television provided a degree of authenticity and personal impact to what they said that a history book, or the facts illustrated in the museum's displays, never could achieve.

FLASHBULB MEMORIES AND CARRIER GROUPS

To have a role in the trauma process, flashbulb memories may need to do more than simply allow people to report what it was like for them to live through the precipitating event. The witness must translate the distressing event into something that bears on or relates to the collectivity's identity. This collective identity construction may be easier for witnesses with access to and influence on the community. Clearly, Primo Levi was not granted this access when his memoir was rejected for publication, but with time, his writings reached a large audience and shaped the way affected communities view the Holocaust. But, as we have stressed, at times a more democratic process may unfold, a possibility that should occur when carrier group and audience overlap. Such overlap does not necessarily ensure a shared understanding of an event's meaning, an understanding that might lead a distressing event to be viewed as a cultural trauma. But it does provide the foundation for a communitywide discussion of its meaning among witnesses who are, at least at the time, of equal standing.

One reason flashbulb memories may figure in a trauma process, then, is that they signal an occasion when the identity of the witness and the social identity of members of a community overlap. Flashbulb memories are community-specific in that members of one community recall the personal circumstances of learning of a public, emotionally charged event, while members of another community do not. African Americans, for instance, have a flashbulb memory of the assassination of Malcolm X, whereas European Americans do not (Brown and Kulik 1977); French citizens have a flashbulb memory of the death of President Mitterrand, whereas French-speaking Belgians do not (Curci et al. 2001); Britons possess a flashbulb memory of the death of Princess Diana, whereas Italians do not (Kvavilashvili et al. 2003); Britons also tend to hold flashbulb memories of the resignation of Margaret Thatcher, whereas a non-British sample does not (Conway et al. 1994); and Catholics are more likely to remember where they were when they learned of the death of Pope John Paul II the more religiously involved they are (Tinti et al. 2009). To be sure, some events are consequential to many different communities, not just one. Luminet et al. (2004) found, for instance, flashbulb memories of 9/11 present in nine different countries (Belgium, France, Italy, Japan, Romania, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Turkey, the United States), at least immediately following the attack. However, in most instances, the holding of a flashbulb memory is community-specific.

Moreover, flashbulb memories can also serve as a criterion for community membership. That is, they can be community-defining. On many occasions, it is not just a few individuals from the affected community but the community as a whole that possesses a flashbulb memory. Almost everyone in the United States—the community affected by the event—formed a flashbulb memory of 9/11. For instance, all participants in Hirst et al.'s (2009 and 2015) 10-year longitudinal study of flashbulb memories of 9/11 claimed to have a flashbulb memory, and only 0.5 percent of them failed to provide a detailed memory even after 10 years had passed. Interestingly, whereas Luminet et al. (2004) found that there was no difference in the number of

details citizens of different countries could recall about their reception event immediately after the 9/11 attack, they found differences across nations in a follow-up study undertaken a year and half after the attack (Curci and Luminet 2006). Moreover, whereas intensity of feelings about a disturbing event may decline over time, Curci and Luminet found that emotional intensity associated with the 9/11 attack declined over time less markedly for US citizens than for non-US citizens. Finally, after a year and a half had passed, the level of social sharing of flashbulb memories reported by US citizens was greater than the level reported by non-US citizens.

In other words, for many public, emotionally charged events, especially those that might be candidates for a cultural trauma, the presence of flashbulb memories, especially detailed ones, appears to be an indicator, if not a defining feature, of community membership. It is one of the things that members of the affected community, but not necessarily members of unaffected communities, are expected to know. Just as one might expect anyone who witnessed a horrible crime—and lived through the personal trauma—to remember the circumstances of experiencing it, one also expects any member of an affected community to remember where they were when they learned of an event that becomes a cultural trauma. If you do not have a flashbulb memory of 9/11, then you cannot be considered a “proper American.”

It is not surprising, then, that Americans often ask their fellow Americans for their flashbulb memories when discussing 9/11. It is expected that they have one. More importantly, it would be peculiar for someone who did not have a flashbulb memory to then claim that they can speak for how Americans felt as the attack unfolded. To be sure, scholars could cull through novels, memoirs, documentaries, and other cultural artifacts to get some insight into how Americans felt. On the basis of this research, they might claim to understand the feelings of Americans at the time. But an ordinary citizen without a flashbulb memory would be making unsubstantiated claims if, without such research, they still asserted that they knew how Americans

felt at the time of the attack. To the extent that the possession of a flashbulb memory is community-defining, then, under most circumstances, one cannot speak for the American community if one does not possess this community-defining knowledge.

Although there are no doubt exceptions to the rule, those with flashbulb memories can have a voice within the community of witnesses and, as such, can participate in the trauma process. All witnesses—whatever their origins—make claims to an understanding of the precipitating event. They have experienced the distress not just as an individual but also as a member of the affected community. It is in this sense that they can be treated as carrier agents.

THE RELIABILITY OF FLASHBULB MEMORY AND ACCURACY OF EVENT MEMORIES

One problem with our claim that the possession of a flashbulb memory allows people to assert that they were “there” is that there is now ample evidence that these flashbulb memories are not necessarily accurate. Philosophers, legal scholars, and psychologists have been concerned about the epistemological status of the testimony supplied by witnesses (Adler 2017). This concern arises, in part, because people tend to treat eyewitness testimony as accurate. In the legal setting, an extraordinary number of guilty verdicts are handed down solely on the basis of the testimony of a single eyewitness (Rakoff and Loftus 2018). People believe the eyewitness because they believe that what one reports seeing with one’s own eyes must be true, especially if the claims are accompanied with a strong level of confidence.

Yet while people tend to believe eyewitnesses, even in instances in which there is a great deal at stake, the empirical evidence suggests that this faith is misplaced (Rakoff and Loftus 2018, but see Wixted 2018). In study after study involving mock crimes, people remember what happened inaccurately (Loftus 2019). And the same seems to hold in “real-world” situations. In one study, researchers asked Navy SEALs who had been tortured as part of their training (in order to prepare them for what might happen to them outside their

training) to identify the torturer (Morgan et al. 2004). Even though this was clearly an emotionally intense experience, and emotion usually enhances memory, the perpetrator was correctly identified in high stress conditions only 30 percent of the time. As a result of these findings, researchers interested in eyewitness testimony often stress that one should avoid giving special status to eyewitnesses, a special status we are granting them when discussing the trauma process.

This literature, however, is mainly concerned with the testimony of those who directly experienced the event. Moreover, the focus is mainly on testimony given within the legal setting. Similar reservations can arise when considering flashbulb memories. In their groundbreaking study, Brown and Kulik (1977) argued forcefully that assumptions about flashbulb memories being reliable are reasonable. They stressed that flashbulb memories differ from ordinary autobiographical memories in that they are vivid, confidently held, and retained over the long term. Ordinary memories may be replete with errors and decay over time, but, according to Brown and Kulik, flashbulb memories are “unchanging as the slumbering Rhinegold” (86). Brown and Kulik could not assess this claim in that they examined events that had occurred several years prior to their study. Subsequent work by other researchers employed a test-retest methodology, in which flashbulb memories are initially assessed within a day or so of the event and then several weeks, months, or years later. This paradigm allows researchers to determine the consistency of memories collected after a longer retention interval against those obtained the few days after the eliciting event occurred. If one assumes the few-days-old memories are fairly accurate, then this consistency measure serves as a proxy for accuracy (but see Winningham, Hyman, and Dinnel 2000).

A large number of public, emotionally charged events have been studied at this point, using this test-retest methodology (see Hirst and Phelps 2016; Luminet and Curci 2017). The extant studies indicate that Brown and Kulik (1977) overstated the matter when they posited that flashbulb memories are “unchanging.” People distort

and forget their flashbulb memories, at least in terms of the details. Talarico and Rubin (2003), for instance, asked participants within a week of 9/11 to report the circumstances in which they learned of the attack, as well as one other “important” autobiographical memory that occurred within that same week. They then assessed participants’ memory over the next 32 months. Although memory for the reception event of 9/11 was more consistent than recall for the “ordinary” autobiographical memory over this time period, the rate of forgetting was similar. Hirst et al. (2009) found that after one year, their American participants accurately remembered approximately 60 percent of the six memory features they assessed (who they first communicated with, what they were doing [prior to and at the time of learning], where they were, how they first learned, and how they felt upon learning of the event).

Should, then, a suspecting public treat a community member as an authentic witness if their flashbulb memories might be unreliable? How can one assert that “I was there” on the basis of an inaccurate memory? How can one state that the witness is authentic if what they remember is neither “being faithful to the original” nor a “reliable, accurate representation,” the definitions of authenticity we offered above? The answer, we aver, is that even if the memory may not be truthful, what matters is that almost everyone within a specific community has a memory. Moreover, and critically, despite the empirically based finding that inaccuracies arise over time, almost everyone with a memory is extremely confident in its veracity. For most autobiographical memories, confidence fades over time, along with accuracy. But, for flashbulb memories, people remain exceedingly confident in the accuracy of their memories, even if their memory is replete with errors of omission and commission. Moreover, because of the rememberer’s confidence, an audience for the recounting also may tend to believe in the accuracy of the recollection. The audience has no reason to question the memory’s veracity, in part because the rememberer is confident in its accuracy, but also because they have high levels of confidence in their own flashbulb memories. As a re-

sult, rememberers with flashbulb memories can serve as “authentic” witnesses, not because their memories are “reliable” and “accurate,” but because both the witness and those attending to the witness believe they are so.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION

Of course, in discussing the role of flashbulb memories, we have been focusing on short-term effects. The “trauma process” can begin immediately after the eliciting event unfolds, or even as it unfolds, but, as Alexander (2004a) stressed, it could take years. What people say to each other shortly after the precipitating event, as flashbulb-memory-based witnesses, may only be one step in a long road to the eventual construction of a cultural trauma. The initial exchanges might be thought of as involving communicative memories, whereas the latter process might involve cultural memories (Assmann 1995). Whatever their nature, early discussions may be important because they can set the tone for subsequent reflections presented by elites and institutions, as well as help shape a community’s receptiveness to these reflections.

Of course, flashbulb-memory-based witnessing need not be confined to exchanges among witnesses. As Assmann (1995) insisted, communicative memory often reaches across multiple generations. By grounding their testimony in their flashbulb memories, members of an older generation can speak authentically to a younger generation about the flashbulb-memory-eliciting event, as the first author observed in his 9/11 museum visit. There is, of course, a substantial literature on what Hirsch (1997) has called “postmemory,” the memories a younger generation has of traumatic events experienced by an older generation. Hirsch is mainly interested in memories of the Holocaust. Psychologists often refer to memories of events not directly experienced, but talked about with and held by others, as “vicarious memories” (Pillemer et al. 2015). For Hirsch, vicarious memories of the Holocaust, such as the stories children might hear from their parents about their experiences in a concentration camp, are so vivid,

so real, that they can legitimately be treated as memories. People suffer from a traumatic experience in large part because they have persistent, lasting, and disturbing memories of the experience. As psychologists often observe, posttraumatic stress disorder is a disease of memory (McNally 2005). For Hirsch, trauma can be transmitted across generations because the younger generation's postmemories share many of the characteristics of the older generation's memories.

We do not mean to equate the kind of intense emotional distress that may come with the intergenerational transmission of memories of personally experienced traumas with the transmission of a flashbulb memory from an indirect witness, even if this flashbulb memory and the eliciting event are emotionally charged. Nevertheless, those who lived through an event like 9/11 will often recount their flashbulb memories to younger generations and speak authentically to their children about what it felt like to live through 9/11 and what the event meant at the time.

Given the role intergenerational transmission might play in the trauma process, there is surprisingly little empirical work on the transmission of historically relevant personal memories across generations (but see Hirst and Merck 2020 for a discussion of some relevant research). Most of the relevant work in the Holocaust literature is more anecdotal than empirical in nature. Moreover, there are legitimate reasons for wanting to move beyond the Holocaust. With these lacunae in mind, Meyler et al. (2020) solicited from children who were nine years old or younger at the time of the 9/11 attack what they knew about 9/11, as well as what they knew about their parents' experience of 9/11. Although they were not always accurate, nor very detailed in their reports, 89 percent of the children could report on their parents' flashbulb memories. (By accuracy, we mean the extent to which the child's report about the parental flashbulb memory corresponded to the parent's report.) The distribution of accuracy was bimodal, with 39 percent of the children reporting the parental flashbulb memory accurately and in detail, and 51 percent reporting an accurate flashbulb memory, but with only minimal detail. Whereas

11 percent of the children claimed not to have any knowledge of the parental flashbulb memory, only 2 percent of the parents thought that their children would not know their flashbulb memories. As a testimony to the transmission of affect between parent and child, a strong correlation existed between the parents' self-report of their emotional state at the time of the attack and the children's report about how their parents felt at the time. The age of the child, the amount of 9/11 talk between child and parent, and the amount of media attended to by the child did not affect the accuracy or knowledge of parental flashbulb memories.

One factor that had a substantial bearing on children's knowledge of parental flashbulb memories was the extent to which the child identified as an American. The stronger the identification, the more likely it was for a child to know their parent's flashbulb memory and to be accurate in their report of this flashbulb memory. Because we are dealing with correlations, it is difficult to attribute causality here. It could be that because they identified as American, children more carefully attended to what their parents said about 9/11 and hence remembered what was said more accurately. Alternatively, they may have felt more "American" because they knew their parents' flashbulb memories. They were "there," by extension, if they knew where their parents were and what they were doing as the attacks unfolded. Of course, it would be even more salient and resonant if the parent was actually at Ground Zero that day and witnessed the event with their own eyes. But by grounding their recollection of 9/11 in their flashbulb memories, parents may allow their children to understand that day in a more salient and resonant way than the reading of a textbook account ever could.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Beyond the first room in the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in New York, in which one listens to flashbulb memories of people from across the world, there is a short passageway and then a staircase taking the museumgoer to the basement of what was once

the World Trade Center complex. One immediately sees a blue-colored panel, reminiscent of the clear blue sky in New York on September 11, 2001. Above it is a quote from Virgil's *The Aeneid*: "No day shall erase you from the memory of time." The quote suggests both our need to remember those who died at this sacred site and our need never to allow that fateful day to fade from history. But the quotation is incomplete, for in full it reads: "If aught my verse prevails, no day shall erase you from the memory of time."

We have suggested that, when it comes to members of an affected community, their "verse [will] prevail" in part because community members will remember where they were when they learned about the event, and, therefore, feel they "were there." As a result, in the act of remembering and sharing this experience, they can serve as authentic witnesses, not just for themselves but also for the community. Moreover, their discussion will not be confined to a single generation but can further be passed on and continue to shape a community's identity. These memories will be both community-specific and community-defining. Regardless of their accuracy, the possession of flashbulb memories, especially given the confidence with which they are held, can become an essential marker of one's membership within a particular group. Community members who lived through but did not directly experience a public, emotionally charged event, then, may hold a privileged status as a witness and can speak to what it felt like to experience the event and how it should be interpreted by the community.

Discussion among witnesses may help shape a community's understanding of an event and, in doing so, provide the foundation for further developments in the trauma process. A flashbulb memory, however, does not necessarily fully represent the cultural trauma. It only underscores the legitimacy of community members to serve as authentic witnesses. It is a step in the trauma process, and not a necessary step. As we have noted, there is a plethora of carrier agents ready to shape the representations of cultural upheaval.

Midway through “When lilacs last in dooryard bloom’d,” Whitman intoned:

How should I warble for the dead one [Lincoln] there I love?
How shall I deck my song for the large sweet soul that has gone?
And what should my perfume be for the grave of him I love?
What shall I hang on the chamber walls?
And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls,
To adorn the burial-house of him I love?

Different people, and different communities, might answer these questions differently. Alexander is no doubt right that the way a community answers these questions—and the degree to which its members see the answers in traumatic terms will reflect the actions of carrier groups. We have tried to assert here that, at least at the beginning of the trauma process, one such carrier group—those undertaking the discussion, shaping the warbling and decking—may be made up of ordinary members of a community who feel, by virtue of their flashbulb memories, that they can speak about an event from the perspective of a witness and in doing so, guide their community towards an understanding of the traumatic nature of the event.

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