



Commentary

Is Collective Forgetting Virtuous?



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Fawcett and Hulbert (2020) offered a penetrating perspective on the virtues of forgetting. As they rightly observed, remembering can often be problematic. Some memories come to mind when we wish they wouldn't, whereas others block us from both moving forward and finding creative solutions to pressing problems. Indeed, having a superior autobiographical memory can prove devastatingly problematic, as Fawcett and Hulbert observed in their discussion of Jill Price (Price & Davis, 2008). And Price is not the exception. Luria and Solotaroff (1987) provided a moving portrait of a man who was also controlled by his memories rather than being in control of them. For Fawcett and Hulbert, forgetting offers a means of mastering what we remember, supplying a needed control. I assume that when they used the term *forgetting*, they are not necessarily referring to the total erasure of a memory, but a substantial decrease in accessibility. Forgetting occurs for them, presumably, when memories that previously readily came to mind—even hauntingly—now remain inaccessible. The result, they averred, can be an increase in serenity, stability, clarity, revision, abstraction, inspiration, and rediscovery. Because of these various felicitous functions, forgetting can play the role of guardian, librarian, and inventor in an individual's life.

Does collective forgetting share these virtues? Fawcett and Hulbert (2020)'s discussions of the virtues of forgetting center mainly around how forgetting impacts individuals, but it is possible to explore the impact forgetting might have at the community level. Members of a community often share experiences and form collective memories around these shared experiences. The resultant collective memories, in turn, can be passed down from one generation to the next and can eventually be incorporated into the cultural artifacts produced by the community (see Hirst, Yamashiro, & Coman, 2018, for a review of the relevant psychological literature). Whether lasting for generations, or only for a short period of time, collective memories have

the potential to shape collective identities and collective actions (Hirst & Manier, 2008; Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, & Levy, 2011; Wertsch & Roediger, 2008). In shaping collective identity and action, will collective forgetting allow a community to form a collective memory that promotes serenity, stability, clarity, revision, abstraction, inspiration, and rediscovery for the community, just as individual forgetting does for the individual? That is, will it be virtuous? Although Fawcett and Hulbert briefly discussed collective forgetting, referring to work my colleagues and I have done, they did not explore its virtuousness. I describe our research in more detail here and argue that collective memory often rests, in part, on the same psychological mechanisms as individual forgetting. I then turn to the question just raised: With similar cognitive underpinnings, does collective forgetting possess the same virtues that Fawcett and Hulbert attribute to individual forgetting? I will suggest a tentative no.

The world is divided into different communities, many of which are hostile to each other. Collective forgetting may have different influences for these different communities. For instance, events that figure centrally in one community's rendering of the collective past may not figure at all for other communities. Thus, Americans view D-Day as one of the most important events in War World II, but not the Battle of Stalingrad, whereas Russians place the Battle of Stalingrad at the top of their list of important events (Abel et al., 2019). For them, D-Day does not make the grade. Even within a community, collective memories can diverge, with subaltern groups often forming *counter-memories* (Foucault, 1980). When asked to recall specific events from American history, African Americans are more likely to recall those associated with racial conflict (e.g., the Civil Rights movement) than are European Americans (Cyr & Hirst, 2019). It is not that Russians do not know about D-Day or that Americans do not know about the Civil Rights movements. These events simply fail to figure in their rendering of the past.

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They do not come to mind without the appropriate prompts. As we noted above, one does not have to have total erasure to use the term *forgetting*, only relative inaccessibility.

One might hope that disparate memories across communities and the counter-memories formed within groups may be minimized by establishing a more expansive and embracing collective memory. Such a course of events would surely be viewed as virtuous. But, as we shall see, human memory appears to be designed to, if anything, do the opposite—to reinforce barriers across groups and encourage the formation of counter-memories. In doing so, it might help create rather than help eliminate the disparate collective memories that characterize our presently conflictual world. When considering social forgetting, as opposed to individual forgetting, then, the virtues of forgetting may be more elusive. But before unpacking this claim more fully, I want to delve more deeply into the one aspect of social forgetting Fawcett and Hulbert (2020) discuss.

Human Memory and the Formation of Collective Memory: Socially Shared Retrieval-Induced Forgetting

The psychological phenomenon I want to concentrate on here is *retrieval-induced forgetting* (Anderson, Bjork, & Bjork, 1994). The phenomenon of retrieval-induced forgetting can be easily captured in an experiment in which participants study categorical word pairs such as *fruit-apple*, *fruit-orange*, *bird-swallow*, *bird-robin*, and then later selectively recall *apple* when prompted with the fragment *fruit-ap*.... In a final recall test for all the material, two effects arising from this selective practice become apparent: First, a *practice effect*, that is, participants will find it easier to recall the practiced fruit item, *apple*, and second, *retrieval-induced forgetting effect*, that is, participants will be more likely to forget the unpracticed, but related fruit item *orange* than the unpracticed, but unrelated bird items *swallow* and *robin*. Selective remembering, then, does not simply enhance one's memory for the mentioned material. Nor does it simply provide an opportunity for the unmentioned material to decay because of a lack of rehearsal. Rather it also actively induces forgetting. If one wants to continue to remember *orange*, it would have been better NOT to have selectively remembered *apple* in the first place. The act of selective remembering is costly, promoting in its wake selective forgetting.

Of course, the phenomenon captured in this experiment is not social at all. It occurs entirely within the individual, who studies the material, selectively practices some of it, and then recalls as much of the previously studied material as possible. Social forgetting comes into play in that people can be induced to forget selectively not only by selectively remembering themselves, but also by listening to others selectively remember (Cuc, Koppel, & Hirst, 2007). Thus, if we repeat the word-pair experiment again, but now have two people study the list and then only one of them respond to the fragmentary prompts, while the other listens, we observe retrieval-induced forgetting not only in the person retrieving the word *apple* (henceforth referred to as the *speaker*) but also the person listening to the speaker. The standard explanation for socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting is that listeners concurrently retrieve with the speaker,

albeit covertly, and hence are selectively remembering along the lines of the speaker. Such concurrent retrieval is not automatic. The listener must be motivated to undertake this effortful activity. When a listener is encouraged to concurrently retrieve by assessing the accuracy of what the speaker says, socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting is clearly observable. It disappears in instances when the speaker is encouraged, not to retrieve along with the speaker, but to attend to superficial features of what the speaker remembers, for instance, by judging whether the speaker remembered *apple* easily (Cuc et al., 2007).

Both within-individual and socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting involve similar psychological mechanisms, often posited as involving inhibition (Storm & Levy, 2012). They differ in that (a) retrieval in one instance is overt and in the other covert, and (b) listeners must be motivated in some way to concurrently retrieve, whereas speakers are, by definition, both retrieving the memory and then conveying it to others. Although we captured in our example socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting within the confines of a fairly standard verbal learning experiment, the phenomenon is quite robust. Importantly, it is found when two people study a story and then jointly recount it in a free-flowing conversation, suggesting that it occurs within everyday conversations. Moreover, it holds for a wide range of material, from stories to science texts to autobiographical recollections (see Hirst & Yamashiro, 2018, for a review).

Inasmuch as socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting involves concurrent selective retrieval, it is not surprising that it can serve as a mechanism for enhancing collective forgetting (Stone, Barnier, Sutton, & Hirst, 2010). After all, the selective remembering of one person in a conversation about previously learned material induces forgetting for the same material in both speaker and listener. If George Bush wanted the American public to forget that weapons of mass destruction figured in the build-up to the Iraq War, he would be better served if he discussed the build-up, but avoided mentioning weapons of mass destruction, than if he simply avoided discussing the build-up entirely. Of course, in complex situations such as these, there may be alternative sources of information that could supply the information Bush left unmentioned. But people often do not attend to alternative sources of information, making Bush's selective remembering a possibly effective means of inducing selective collective forgetting just along the lines he himself would wish. Stone et al. (2019) found just such collective forgetting in a study of the effect of selective remembering in a speech by the King of Belgium on the Belgian public.

With its capacity for retrieval-induced forgetting, then, human memory appears to have been designed not only to allow individuals to selectively remember and, in doing so, selectively forget their personal past. It also allows a community to selectively forget its collective past through conversations across a community. The conversations might involve a public speech, a complex series of social exchanges, written material or pieces of art, or a wide range of other cultural artifacts, but in each case, the account of the past is selective and the result is collective forgetting of material members of the community might have learned about on previous occasions. As a consequence, socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting might be said to enhance mnemonic

consensus by inducing forgetting among listeners for information that the speaker failed to remember, perhaps intentionally, but also perhaps unintentionally. In the unintentional case, for whatever reason, the memory was inaccessible to the speaker and because the speaker failed to recall it, listeners came to find the memory inaccessible as well.

There is no doubt, then, that socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting can play a similar virtuous role at the community level that [Fawcett and Hulbert \(2020\)](#) attribute to within-individual retrieval-induced forgetting at the individual level (see [Reiff, 2016](#), for a more sociological discussion of the virtues of collective forgetting). Given its potential to induce forgetting for problematic aspects of the community's past, it should, at the very least, promote serenity, stability, and clarity. In Turkey, there is a general silence about the Armenian Genocide, a silence enforced by punitive laws ([Akçam, 2004](#); [Wolgram, 2019](#)). As a result, when Turks tell their history, the Genocide does not figure centrally, if at all. Similarly, the pervasive silence around slavery in the Northeast of the United States has led to a rendering of American history that views Northeasterners as mainly abolitionists ([Ross, 2018](#)). The South is the main culprit. In both instances, the silence leads to a collective memory that can potentially unify a nation, leading, if you like, to serenity, stability, and clarity. Induced forgetting of the Armenian Genocide allows Turkey to view itself as a nation that respects human rights. And, whereas one may not be able to induce forgetting of the United States's involvement in slavery, the forgetting around slavery in the Northeast allows the country as a whole to feel that as a Nation they did not embrace slavery. A positive image of the nation as a whole is preserved, albeit in ways that many may view as problematic.

But, as I have suggested, the story is more complicated. The presence of multiple communities, multiple collective memories, and counter-memories presents real challenges for any claim about the virtues of collective forgetting.

Failing To Build Collective Memories Across Communities

Socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting may help build a collective memory within a community, but, in various ways, it does not serve well when it comes to building collective memories across different communities. I illustrate this point in two ways.

First, as noted, the presence of socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting depends on listeners concurrently, albeit covertly, remembering along with the speaker. But retrieval, even covert retrieval, requires effort. Listeners may need to be motivated to make this effort. The evidence suggests that listeners will be more likely to make this effort if they belong to the same social group than if they belong to different social groups ([Coman & Hirst, 2015](#)). As a result, selectively remembering by a speaker will not necessarily lead to the desired collective forgetting if listeners belong to a different social group. Through strategic or unintended silences, then, speakers might forge a collective memory among fellow social group members, but if their desire, intended or not, is to mold the collective

memories of outgroup members, their efforts will likely be unsuccessful. That is, at least with respect to retrieval-induced forgetting, human memory seems designed to further shape pre-existing collective memories through conversational interactions when speaker and listeners belong to the same community, but not when they belong to different communities. To go back to George Bush's attempt to induce forgetting about weapons of mass destruction, this finding suggests Bush would be more successful among his fellow Republicans than among Democrats. Serenity, stability, and clarity, then, may be a virtue of collective forgetting arising from selective remembering if all one cares about is reinforcing ingroup collective memories and collective identities. If one seeks a way to build connections across groups, this particular aspect of human memory offers little promise.

Second, even when speaker and listeners belong to the same social group, socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting is also less likely to occur if the listener finds the failure to mention certain material socially threatening. An often-asked question about the concurrent retrieval underlying socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting is this: Why doesn't the listener fill in the unmentioned information? If the Armenian Genocide is not mentioned, then why not, as a listener, retrieve memories of the Genocide, even if one does so only covertly? One possible answer might be that such "filling in the silences" is effortful, so, in most instances, listeners may make the effort to concurrently retrieve, but they will not make the additional effort to fill in what was left unmentioned. However, there may be instances in which listeners are willing to make the effort. In particular, they may do so when their social identity is threatened. In a study by [Coman, Stone, Castano, and Hirst \(2014\)](#), participants learned about atrocities soldiers committed, as well as justification of these atrocities. They then listened to someone recall some of the atrocities without mentioning the justifications. In a final recall of the atrocities and justifications, retrieval-induced forgetting was observed, but only when the participant's social identity was not threatened. For instance, American participants were more likely to forget justifications of atrocities perpetrated by Iraqi soldiers when listening to accounts of these atrocities (without the mention of any justifications) than they are if the atrocities were perpetrated by fellow Americans. The threat posed to their American identity by the atrocities committed by their fellow American was enough to motivate recall, or, in other words, overcome forgetting. Human memory may provide a means of inducing forgetting through selective remembering, but not at the cost of a threatened social identity.

Socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting, then, may serve as a mechanism to forge collective memories, but it is not necessarily a very virtuous one. In certain circumstances, it does not help in building a collective memory that might bind together diverse communities. Moreover, although it may preserve a positive image of a community's past, it may also allow for negative images of other communities to come to the fore. These dynamics might account for the conflict-ridden world we currently live in, enhancing divisions in a way that could hardly be viewed as ideal—or virtuous.

Creating Counter-Memories Within a Community

Not only does socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting fail to provide a means of building collective memories across communities, it may also create problems within communities, for many of the same reasons observed across communities. As we have emphasized, communities often seek a common identity and a common understanding of the past by being silent about problematic aspects of the past, and, in doing so, induce forgetting of these problematics. Although such efforts may serve the majority of the community well, they can leave a subsection of the community feeling isolated. The silence around slavery in the Northeast might work for the nation as a whole, and especially for most individuals who currently reside in the Northeast, but it leaves behind those Northeasterns whose ancestors were slaves. At times, the silences may be so complete that even aggrieved parties may still be affected by what we are calling socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting. But in other instances, the affected community can resist these attempts at silences, just as the American participants in our atrocity study did. They may feel the need to “fill in the silences.” I suspect something like that might occur within the Armenian community. An Armenian cannot allow the silence around the killing of one’s mother or grandmother to go unmentioned. The story of their murder will be told, and the silence will be filled in. This resistance may be confined to the family, but could also spread, family by family, across the entire Armenian community. If it does, then Turkey would, and indeed, does find it difficult to “induce forgetting” for the Armenian genocide within this community. Foucault (1980) labeled the collective memories emerging in a subaltern portion of a community *counter-memories*. Just as was the case when considering how alternative collective memories might emerge across communities, the dynamics of socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting may also allow for—even encourage—the construction of counter-memories.

The Limits of Collective Forgetting

Clearly, if one wants to build collective memories across communities and seek unity within a community, one cannot rely on socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting. Selective remembering within a community may foster collective forgetting within the community, at least for those who identify with the community, but it is ineffective in fostering similar collective forgetting across community. And even within a community, collective memory may, for instance, allow some part of a community to remember the justification of atrocities, while other parts resist these efforts. Socially shared retrieval-induced forgetting is about how the speaker can induce forgetting in listeners, but the effectiveness of the speaker in doing so depends on the motives and the relations of listeners to the speaker. As a result, when the motives of speaker and listener around any silence overlap, it proves to be an effective means of promoting the formation and maintenance of collective memories that joins together speaker and listener. But when motives differ, the result is not unity, but division. Such division may characterize the world, but it does not necessarily point to anything that

could reasonably be described as virtuous. Fawcett and Hulbert (2020) may be right that forgetting at the individual level has many virtues. The virtues of forgetting at the collective level are much more limited.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest for this article.

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