

Remembering while Forgetting

How young Czechs grow into collective memory

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This study is focused on the modalities of transmission of knowledge related to historical events. It focuses on a generation of young Czechs in the age of 12 – 25 years. The data were gathered during 11 focus groups that took place with students on each of the three levels of Czech formal educational system represented by elementary schools, secondary schools and universities. The focus group script revolved around 4 significant historical events reaching almost 70 in the past: the terrorist attack in New York in September 2001, the fall of the communist regime in the Czech Republic in November 1989, the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and the Czechoslovak coup d'état in February 1948, during which the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia took over. The data were analyzed by using Adele Clarke's situational analysis, focusing on the particular elements of situations in which knowledge about the events is transmitted. Among the elements we typically found narration of parents and grandparents, television broadcasting, films and series and various internet sources. However, we also found that the configuration of these elements with regard to each event differs and that there is a distinctive pattern of dropping off information sources while moving further into the past. On the other hand, the data also hint at a process of gradually adopting the shared knowledge of historical events as actors get older. As a result, we can observe the simultaneous processes of forgetting and growing into the collective memory.

Introduction

Adolescence and early adulthood is one of the most crucial periods in the formation of political attitudes (Braungart & Braungart, 1986; Alwin & Krosnick, 1991) as well as collective memory (Mannheim, 1952; Schuman & Scott, 1989; Schuman, Akiayanam & Knäuper, 1998; Kyoung & Hye-Kyung, 2015). Literature (e.g. Schuman & Corning, 2000, p. 916) states that events, which individuals personally experienced in this 'critical period', are perceived with heightened importance within the individual biography and that they tend to persist in the collective memory of a particular age cohort, until this cohort naturally disappears.

One of the focal points of this research lies in the extent to which these experiences become part of collective memory and on factors, which can affect the formative process. Although these factors are elaborated upon in the contemporary literature (Schuman & Corning, 2000; Schuman & Rodgers, 2004; Schuman & Corning, 2012), much less attention is devoted to transmission of knowledge of events which are not directly experienced by adolescents and young adults (see e.g. Rosenthal, 2009; Lee & Man Chan, 2013; Kyoung &

Hye-Kyung, 2015; Sik, 2015). Especially to the specifics of socialization mechanisms that are responsible for intergenerational transmission of knowledge and meanings of the past.

In the case of the Czech Republic this is particularly important, because the post-totalitarian societies of Central and Eastern Europe and their elites are selective in remembering their history (Sik, 2015; Dimbath & Wehling, 2016). In these cases, we are dealing with heterogenic forms of remembering, forgiving, and forgetting (Dimbath & Wehling, 2016, p. 138) that can produce, what Demonkos Sik (2015, p. 53) calls 'memory vacuum' – an abbreviated and flat vision of the past.

This paper tackles these issues by drawing upon qualitative research with young Czechs in the age of 12 – 25 years. It focuses on the modalities of transmission of knowledge related to four significant historical events reaching almost 70 years in the past: (1) the terrorist attack in New York in September 2001, (2) the fall of the communist regime in the Czech Republic in November 1989, (3) the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 and (4) the Czechoslovak coup d'état in February 1948, during which the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia took over. Three of them are connected with totalitarian past of the Czech Republic.

The paper should contribute to both, understanding to process of intergenerational transmission of collective memory of these events in the contemporary Czech Republic, as well as a more comprehensive understanding of socialization mechanisms to collective memory.

Theory

We approach collective memory from an interactionist perspective, which leads us to be interested in how the past is shared by contemporary actors and what kind of meaning it has for them (Olick, Robins 1998). In this respect, we focus not only on individual actors and their meanings, but also – in relation to work of Jeffrey Olick (1999, p. 346) – on the mnemonic structures that create conditions for organized ways of remembering. The most important of these structures include family, educational institutions and the media. These three types of institutions are of particular significance, because they are considered to be crucial agents of socialization (Furnham & Stacey, 1991) that 'filter', what individuals and collectives remember (Zerubavel 2011, p. 221).

Literature conventionally claims that the *family* is the first place of mnemonic socialization (Zerubavel, 2005, p. 5; 2011, p. 222), which produces conditions for intergenerational learning and allows for acquiring 'first hand' experience (Rosenthal, 2016, p. 34). This is probably the reason why Barbara Misztal (2003, p. 84) points out that family is a 'living link' between generations, in which children get their knowledge about historical events through interaction with their parents and grandparents. However, from empirical data about sources of historical information gathered in Central Europe we know that only 15 percent of contemporary Hungarian families are the actual places of mnemonic

socialization (Sik, 2015, pp. 69-70) and only 20 to 26 percent of Czech adolescents were led by their families to be interested in history (Labischová 2012, p. 152).

Another key institution responsible for mnemonic socialization is *school*. Furnham and Stacey (1991, p. 8) state that the influence of school institutions is carried out by interaction with teachers, peers and school subjects. In the context of transmission of collective memory in this institution, Lee and Man Chan (2013, pp. 980–981) claim that students usually learn only basic facts about historical events in school. Then, if they get interested in an issue, they try to gather more information – usually together with their peers – from other information sources, typically from media, or members of their families.

Media represent the last key set of institutions which are responsible for mnemonic socialization of youth people. Here, literature (e.g. Edgerton & Rollins, 2001; Lipsitz, 2001; Edy, 2006; Neiger, Meyers & Zandberg, 2011) usually focuses on the role of television series, documentaries and news in the formation of collective memory, that is, how is past depicted in media images and commemorated via TV broadcasting. But new issues emerged in the last decades as a result of the development of Web 2.0, which is claimed to have virtually unlimited capacity to store and process data (Esposito, 2016). According to Viktor Mayer-Schönberger (2009) this environment represents a completely different memory platform that forgets nothing and can be seen as an ideal model of memory. However, the authors do not have any substantial findings about usage of this environment by youth in memory transmission.

Methodology

The methodological approach employed by this study is situational analysis developed by Adele Clarke within the tradition of grounded theory (Clarke, 2003, 2005; Clarke, Friese, & Washburn, 2015; Clarke 2015). Situational analysis draws upon traditional procedures such as coding, writing memos, or theoretical sampling. However, it differs by substituting the notion of context (which was traditionally conceptualized as generalized conditions of action) with the notion of situation. According to Clarke, all conditions and means of action can be found in a situation in which it takes place (Clarke & Friese, 2014). As a result, situation becomes a basic unit of analysis in this approach and the traditional procedures of grounded theory are supplemented by creating situational maps, which serve analytical purposes (classification of elements, describing relationships among them) just as well as visualization of the studied phenomenon.

The data were gathered during 11 focus groups which took place in December 2015 and February 2016. Sample construction was led by the principle of highest diversity and so the sample includes each of the three levels (primary, secondary and tertiary) of Czech formal educational system. On each level we attempted to include into the sample various types of schools (secondary schools, grammar schools), or different types of education (technical or humanities oriented study programs at universities). The resulting sample is summarized in the following table:

Table 1: Focus group sample

School level	Age	N
Primary	12 – 14	21 (10F, 11M)
Secondary	18 – 20	46 (23F, 23M)
Tertiary	23 – 25	21 (10F, 11M)

Analysis

Drawing upon Adele Clarke’s situational analysis, we organized the analysis of our data according to the logic of situations. We attempt to construct a typical situation of remembering for (1) each of the four historical events contained in the focus group script and for (2) each of the three educational levels we covered during data gathering. These criteria for situational analysis allowed us to see on the one hand how the situations of remembering transform as the historical events that are remembered get further into past and on the other, how the situations of remembering are structured for students on various educational levels. We will elaborate both analytical directions in the paragraphs below.

First, the results of the analysis structured by historical events show that the older the historical event is the scarcer are the elements in the situation of remembering. With regard to the events of September 11th 2001, the situation involves elements such as parents, television broadcasting, documentary films, conspiracy theories, classmates and peers, anniversaries and other contemporary events, or internet sources. However, when our informants talked about the events of November 17th 1989, they stopped mentioning their classmates and peers. With regard to the events of August 1968, anniversaries and contemporary events vanished from their descriptions. And so, when talking about the events of February 1948, the elements of situations our informants described were reduced to half-forgotten school lessons, occasional storytelling of parents or grandparents, and a potential use of internet sources. With every subsequent event reaching further into history some of the situational elements (often sources of information) fall off and knowledge of the events gets thinner. As a result, the social conditions of remembering, as materialized in the form of situations, seem to support the tendency of linear forgetting.

Second, the results of analysis structured by educational levels show that while there is a stable set of situational elements common for all of them, there is also a tendency of gradual increase in presence of some elements while moving from the primary, through secondary, to the tertiary level. The first set of elements present consistently at all three levels involved narrations of parents and grandparents, television broadcasting, internet websites or social networks, and school teaching. The second set consisted of elements that were either not talked at all about or were mentioned in the conversations only marginally at the primary level. However, at the secondary and tertiary levels, they became the topics of conversation within the focus groups more and more often. Moreover, as we compared the elements to one another, we found out that they can be classified into two general

categories: (1) information sources and (2) expressions of reflection. While the first category includes sources such as (documentary) films, newspaper articles, or communication with peers, the second category includes for example the reflection of trustworthiness of information sources, reflection of the potential that the events introduced or removed, or reflection of the informant's own ability to appropriate the information and gradually gather knowledge about the events. As a result, we can see that there are basic information sources that are consistently present across educational levels and that they are supplemented as actors get older. Furthermore, we can see that actors get progressively more reflective of the historical events as they get older. Both of these tendencies point to a process of gradual growing into shared images of significant historical events.

Discussion

Overall, that formation of 'post memory' (Hirsch, 2001) in the form of successful transmission of knowledge of events which were not directly experienced by adolescents and young adults is very fragile process, which consists of ambivalent aspects supporting both remembering and forgetting. The reason for this lies in the presence of two different sets of mechanisms: (1) the specific socialization environment of contemporary youth which leads to forgetting of events from the distant past; (2) an increase in cognitive capacity to grasp and reflect historical events, gradually accumulated in the course of an individual's biography, which can affect remembering or its specific aspects.

Elaborating further upon the first set of mechanisms, we can see that the crucial agents of socialization – family, school, and media – emphasized by collective memory studies (e.g. Zerubavel, 2005; Neiger, Meyers & Zandberg, 2011; Lee & Man Chan, 2013), are also responsible for mnemonic socialization of Young Czechs. These agents mediate the basic information about historical events to adolescents and young adults. Nevertheless, mnemonic socialization mediated through these institutions is quite limited. The older an event is, the less talked about it is within family or at school, as well as less commemorated it is in all kinds of a media. As a result, the knowledge youth has about events from more distant past is vague, incomplete and simplified. The events are being gradually forgotten.

On the other hand, the gradual increase in cognitive capacity to grasp historical events that takes place within the period of 12 to 25 years of age goes in the opposite direction. The older the actors are, the more sources of information they use and the more reflexive they are. However, this is not just a result of psychological cognitive maturation, but also an outcome of a longer period of socialization during which the actors gather experience as they go through various situations of remembering.

We conclude that the simultaneous presence of both mechanisms we described above points to the fact that maintaining a memory of historical events is not something that can be taken for granted. By the time individuals mature enough to be sensitive and reflexive of the information they receive, the situational circumstances may be in a state

which does not provide sufficient sources of information. The continuation of remembering of historical events presupposes the interlocking of these two conditions.

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