Editorial

MEMORY STUDIES

Memory perspectives

Memory Studies
201X, Vol XX(X) 1–5

DOI: 10.1177/1750698013518131
mss.sagepub.com
SAGE

John Sutton
Macquarie University, Australia

Take a moment to remember giving a public talk, the last time you did so. Let the experience come back to you, with whatever emotions and associations it now brings. Now do the same for the last time you went swimming, and the last time you went out dancing.

Do you see the audience at your talk sitting out there in front of you? As well as the remembered feel of the water as you cut through the waves or down that lane of the pool, do you also in memory look back to the beach from out in the ocean, or see again the lane markers between which you swam? Such an internal, own-eyes or 'field' first-person perspective on the past is only one possibility. Instead of visualizing the past event in that way, as from your original location, do you see yourself in the past scene – perhaps remembering yourself dance as if looking down from above the moving bodies, or observing your past self presenting that talk? This kind of external or 'see-oneself' third-person vantage point is called an 'observer' perspective (Nigro and Neisser, 1983).

Such perspectival aspects of our memories are not often explicit in conscious awareness, but are pre-reflective structural features of the ways we remember past events. Although visuospatial perspectives in remembering may thus seem hard to pin down, there are surprisingly well-grounded and widely accepted results in what has become an increasingly mainstream line of research in cognitive psychology over the last 30 years (Rice and Rubin, 2009). Most people, on being asked to consider their memory experience across a range of contexts, actions, and episodes, do report adopting an external or 'observer' perspective for at least a sizable minority of past events, especially those which are more remote in time and those which involve some level of self-consciousness or self-awareness (such as, for some people, giving a talk or going out dancing). And most people can switch between an observer perspective and an internal or 'field' perspective on the same event.

Despite early discussions in the 1890s (Freud, [1899] 1962; Henri and Henri, 1898), this modern research tradition springs from Nigro and Neisser (1983), who came up with the terms 'field' and 'observer perspective' during their own conversations about Freud (Georgia Nigro, personal communication). Before autobiographical remembering became a respectable scientific topic again in the 1980s, references to visual perspectives in memory had continued elsewhere, in memoir, literature, linguistics, philosophy and art theory. But psychology has long since rediscovered the topic wholeheartedly, with flourishing literatures on perspective across its distinct subdisciplines, in clinical psychology, cognitive psychology, cultural psychology, personality psychology, social psychology, sport psychology and neuropsychology (for recent views, see Berntsen and

Corresponding author:
John Sutton, Department of Cognitive Science, Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW 2109, Australia.
Email: john.sutton@mq.edu.au

Rubin, 2006; Cohen and Gunz, 2002; Eich et al., 2009; Kenny and Bryant, 2007; Morris and Spittle, 2012). The cross-disciplinary spirit of this journal makes it appropriate now to reopen the issue, inviting complication.

The tactic of looking beyond memory studies, because remembering is neither a compartmentalized cognitive domain nor an isolated practice, can be productively applied to the case of memory perspectives. Since Freud, both the availability of observer perspectives in memory and the possibility of switching or flipping perspectives have rightly been seen as evidence of the constructive nature of remembering. The fact that any impression has thus been, as Freud put it, 'worked over' or 'translated', and is thus open to multiple influences, does focus tough questions about truth in memory. But this does not in itself entail that there can be no genuine or reliable memories from an observer perspective. After all, remembering from a field or internal perspective is also a constructive process. Nothing about a 'first-person' or 'own-eyes' mode of representation on its own ties it securely to reality: field perspectives too are incomplete and in need of some kind of multifaceted alignment to ring true, just as point of view shots in cinema do not on their own create a seamlessly rich form of 'imagining from the inside' (Smith, 1997). The form or mode of remembering, as well as its content, can be dramatically influenced by all kinds of experiences and materials, from cultural schemas and filmic practices to fragmentary sensory images or diffuse affective states. This makes the adoption of visual perspectives in memory an intriguingly specific yet multifaceted phenomenon, understanding of which may require the collaborative attention of researchers in many different areas of the humanities, the social sciences, and the cognitive sciences.

The word 'perspective' is used in many distinct contexts and ways: sometimes signifying in broad terms an individual or shared attitude, or sometimes to contrast 'subjective' and 'objective' perspectives. Like 'point of view', the term 'perspective' 'bears a visual bias' (Behnke, 2003: 52), and many discussions of memory perspectives are restricted to visual or visuospatial perspectives alone. But even in the domain of autobiographical remembering, there are other, non-visual modalities. Remembering swimming or dancing just now, for example, may have involved or evoked some bodily responses and tendencies, or elicited some distinctive mood or affective tone. In such memories, I can have an 'internal' or involved first-person kinaesthetic perspective, inhabiting my past actions or animating again – as from inside – the bodily sensations of those movements. This internal *embodied* or kinaesthetic perspective need not coincide with a 'field' or 'own-eyes' *visuospatial* perspective: many expert practitioners in sport and dance deliberately remember or imagine their own performances 'from the outside' visually, even while they actively cultivate a rich subjective sense of their movement activity (Sutton, 2012).

Likewise, our emotional or evaluative perspectives on past actions and experiences can take 'internal' or 'external' forms quite independently of the *visual* perspective we adopt in remembering those same events. The philosopher Peter Goldie makes this point in his posthumous book, *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind*, in the course of a brilliant treatment of perspective in literature and memory. My feelings now about certain past events may differ dramatically from my feelings at the time, as I now adopt a new, external emotional or evaluative perspective on, for example, my behaviour at the party the other night. For Goldie (2012), this 'ironic gap' between past and present selves is often 'opened up and simultaneously bridged in how I narrate [or remember] what happened' (p. 39). In these emotional and evaluative registers, distinct perspectives may thus be present to varying degrees at once: in this respect, they appear to contrast sharply with visual perspective, in which it may seem that only one point of view can be inhabited or occupied at once (Behnke, 2003: 53).

There is a persistent temptation, in discussing autobiographical memory, to collapse all forms of perspective into the visual or visuospatial modality, thus neglecting the possibility that visual, kinaesthetic and emotional perspectives need not always match. One practical consequence is seen

in the pervasive assumption in clinical psychology that those who remember traumatic experiences from an external or observer *visual* perspective are also (and thereby) engaged in potentially damaging forms of emotional avoidance. If instead we see that neither affect or kinaesthesis need be determined by visual perspective, or even inevitably follow it, we make room for a range of relations between these distinct modalities to operate in different contexts.

Taking this pluralism about perspectives further, even when we do restrict attention to *visual* forms of perspective, we cannot reasonably focus only on remembering to the exclusion of other domains and practices. 'Internal' (field, own-eyes) and 'external' (observer, see-oneself) visuospatial perspectives are also in play when we imagine, dream, gesture, represent our own bodies, and navigate or think spatially. Just as some expert movement practitioners may employ techniques of visualizing themselves from an external perspective, so ordinary cases of imagining future actions from the outside can influence self-perception and behaviour. In one striking study, Lisa Libby and colleagues found that people who pictured themselves from a third-person, observer's perspective voting in the upcoming 2004 US Presidential Election not only adopted a stronger pro-voting attitude but also were significantly more likely actually to vote than people who had used a first-person perspective to picture themselves voting (Libby et al., 2007). In the case of dreaming, databanks of recorded dream reports include a sizable minority of cases in which the dreamer observes herself from an external perspective: 'I was seeing my body lying on the bed, and it was completely white, better "beige"' (Cicogna and Bosinelli, 2001: 31). These reports are in certain respects reminiscent of reports of 'out-of-body experiences' (OBEs), and the ordinary adoption of observer perspectives in remembering or imagining could plausibly be classified as another form of 'autoscopy' or seeing oneself (Brugger, 2002; Rosen and Sutton, 2013).

Heather Rice and David Rubin (2011) have documented how frequently people report remembering single episodes from *both* field (internal) and observer (external) perspectives, and also noted the multiplicity of 'external' perspectives: while we tend to remember swimming from above, we usually see ourselves running in memory from behind, and giving a talk from an elevated position in front, such that 'there is no single third-person perspective location' (p. 576). The prevalence of flipping or switching perspectives in remembering suggests perhaps that the capacity to adopt or inhabit such distinct perspectives is a symptom of our capacity as agents to acknowledge diverging conceptions of the world and of our selves. But it also raises a more specific question:

> How do individuals experience multiple perspectives? One possibility is that individuals switch from one distinct perspective to another distinct perspective. However, it may be that they experience multiple perspectives simultaneously. Informal conversations with participants suggest it is the former, but future investigations should examine these alternatives. (Rice and Rubin, 2009: 887)

The alternative possibility of some kind of simultaneity or copresence of distinct perspectives need not be ruled out. Remembering has features in common with imagining and dreaming, as well as with perceiving, so it need not be bound by all the constraints of our modes of direct sensory access to the world. In particular, ideas about the way we navigate diverging perspectives in spatial thinking may prove suggestive in this context.

In thinking or describing spatial or geographical layouts, we typically operate successfully and unthinkingly with both 'route' (or 'tour') perspectives on space, in which I mentally journey along a real pathway, representing it as from my own eyes within the scene, and 'survey' (or 'map') perspectives which present a more objective tableau, as if from above. But, as Michel de Certeau ([1984] 1988) notes, in the ways we draw or talk about space, these types of representational perspective typically 'coexist in a single description' (p. 119). Barbara Tversky's psychological

research supports this claim, showing that we often speak in terms of route and survey expressions in the same clause, and that usually we are easily understood. Tversky compares culturally dependent representations of space with the way in which our 'spontaneous descriptions of space mix perspectives' in this way:

> Maps (as well as pictorial and other external representations) often show mixed perspectives; … many ancient and modern maps of towns and cities show the network of roads from an overhead view and key buildings from a frontal view. Like Cubist and post-Cubist art, maps can show different views simultaneously in ways that violate the rules of perspective, but that may promote understanding of what is portrayed. (Tversky, 2011: 507)

If this is the case for external representations of spatial thinking, could it be that in remembering past actions and events, it is also possible sometimes to hold different views, or different aspects of a view, simultaneously in mind? Just as our practices of navigating vary across historical, cultural and technological contexts, so do our practices of imagining and remembering. Perhaps even features of the phenomenology of memory which are usually unnoticed, such as the way we adopt visuospatial perspectives in remembering our past actions and experiences, may exhibit such plasticity. The combined expertise of researchers from across the disciplines with an interest in the varieties and forms of perspective will be required to understand these fascinating phenomena more fully.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Chris McCarroll and Doris McIlwain, and to the Australian Research Council's Discovery Projects scheme.

References

Behnke E (2003) Contact improvisation and the lived world. *Studia Phaenomenologica* 3: 39–61.

Berntsen D and Rubin DC (2006) Emotion and vantage point in autobiographical remembering. *Cognition & Emotion* 20: 1193–1215.

Brugger P (2002) Reflective mirrors: perspective-taking in autoscopic phenomena. *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry* 7: 179–194.

Cicogna PC and Bosinelli M (2001) Consciousness during dreams. *Consciousness and Cognition* 10: 26–41.

Cohen D and Gunz A (2002) As seen by the other …: perspectives on the self in the memories and emotional perceptions of Easterners and Westerners. *Psychological Science* 13: 55–59.

De Certeau M ([1984] 1988) Spatial stories. In: De Certeau M (ed.) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 115–130.

Eich E, Nelson AL, Leghari MA, et al. (2009) Neural systems mediating field and observer memories. *Neuropsychologia* 47: 2239–2251.

Freud S ([1899] 1962) Screen memories. In: Strachey J (ed.) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 3. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 303–322.

Goldie P (2012) *The Mess Inside: Narrative, Emotion, and the Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Henri V and Henri C (1898) Earliest recollections. *Popular Science Monthly* 53: 108–115.

Kenny LM and Bryant RA (2007) Keeping memories at an arm's length: vantage point of trauma memories. *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 45: 1915–1920.

Libby LK, Shaeffer EM, Eibach RP, et al. (2007) Picture yourself at the polls: visual perspective in mental imagery affects self-perception and behavior. *Psychological Science* 18: 199–203.

Morris T and Spittle M (2012) A default hypothesis of the development of internal and external imagery perspectives. *Journal of Mental Imagery* 36(1–2): 1–30.

Nigro G and Neisser U (1983) Point of view in personal memories. *Cognitive Psychology* 15: 467–482.

Rice HJ and Rubin DC (2009) I can see it both ways: first- and third-person visual perspectives at retrieval. *Consciousness and Cognition* 18: 877–890.

Rice HJ and Rubin DC (2011) Remembering from any angle: the flexibility of visual perspective during retrieval. *Consciousness and Cognition* 20: 568–577.

Rosen M and Sutton J (2013) Self-representation and perspectives in dreams. *Philosophy Compass* 8: 1041–1053.

Smith M (1997) Imagining from the inside. In: Allen R and Smith M (eds) *Film Theory and Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 412–430.

Sutton J (2012) Memory before the game: switching perspectives in imagining and remembering sport and movement. *Journal of Mental Imagery* 36(1–2): 85–95.

Tversky B (2011) Visualizing thought. *Topics in Cognitive Science* 3: 499–535.

Author biography

John Sutton is Professor of Cognitive Science at Macquarie University in Sydney. His current individual and collaborative research addresses collective cognition, history, memory, and skilled movement, across the humanities, the social sciences, and the cognitive sciences: journals in which his recent articles appear include *Biological Theory, Cognitive Neuropsychiatry, Discourse Processes, Educational Philosophy and Theory, Journal of Consciousness Studies, Memory, Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences, Philosophical Studies, Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology, Shakespeare Studies*, and *Textual Practice*.