

# Memory and desire

## Reading Freud

**M**EMORIES are curious things. Sometimes they masquerade as thoughts, feelings, or images, without revealing themselves as memories. Sometimes they come to mind and seem relatively meaningless, other times they overwhelm consciousness and cast us back into a vividly remembered past. They emerge into consciousness from somewhere else and give us pause for thought. Why? When a hysterical patient finally connects their intrusively persistent awareness of a disturbing smell to a memory of the smell of a particular person's cigar (Breuer & Freud, 1895), why is it significant?

It is significant because memories are an intrinsic part of us – they are the database or the content of the self. They ground it in a remembered reality that constrains what the self can be now and in the future, and what it could possibly have been in the past. Because of this, memories are not some sort of mental wallpaper that merely provide a backdrop for the self. They are alive, free, sometimes alien, occasionally dangerous mental representations, that can overwhelm as easily as they fulfill.

This is what Freud came to understand at an early point in his work with Breuer on hysterical patients. The great insight was that hysterical symptoms, such as persistently experiencing a smell, represent memories that cannot be brought to awareness because they might overwhelm the self. This leads one into a flurry of thoughts about what the indirect effects of memories might be, what sorts of representations they are, what motivates and what prevents their recall. This is one of the reasons I personally enjoy reading Freud: I find that I think thoughts and consider questions I would not otherwise have thought or considered.

When reading Freud, however, I also have a peculiar amnesia for his writing. Sure, it is powerfully autobiographical and evocative. When I read the opening line of Chapter 7 of the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* [PEL] (Freud, 1901), I imagine that as the chattering subsides and the coughing begins I can almost hear him start a lecture with a customary flourish: 'If



*Freud understood that remembering is motivated by goals and nonconscious processes.* **MARTIN A.**

**CONWAY** reflects on his ideas.

anyone should feel inclined to overestimate the state of our present knowledge of mental life, a reminder of the function of memory is all that would be needed to force him to be more modest'. It is a line I have read many times yet never remember until I read it once again, with the same wry pleasure.

Indeed, I could not say how many times I have read the PEL itself, although I do have a vivid memory related to it which I am aware has been pressing to get into consciousness. In a flat I used to live in I see myself sitting on a wooden kitchen chair at an old Formica-topped kitchen table I used as a desk. (In the memory this part of the image keeps trying to metamorphose into a rather smarter and more modern stripped pine table). On the table/desk stands a small bookcase with wooden sides and one shelf. It houses my (very) modest collection of books. Also on the table is an old typewriter I rescued from a skip, a writing pad, and other objects I am aware of in some peculiar way but which I cannot see in the memory. I am leaning back on the chair, holding up a book that I am reading – the PEL, I think. I see myself in the memory but in a strange sort of way. I am there but not as I was 30 years ago, nor as I am now. The image I have is a sort of idealised representation of myself as a young man. Another image that also comes to mind is that of Bob Dylan on the album cover of *Highway 61 Revisited*. Well, he was a hero of mine too. I am wearing a checked grey, black and white shirt, jeans, and have a very strong sense of myself... or rather, of my 23-year-old self in a moment from a time that feels long ago.

The experience of remembering this anodyne event is both interesting and slightly disturbing. Why has it come to mind now? I do not often think about this

time. Why does it feel so emotionally flat? So dull. A memory of reading a book, the title of which I am not even sure I remember. But it may have something about it. It feels slightly 'spooky' or 'uncanny' – a memory-feeling familiar to Freud (1919; see also Sugarman, 1998). In many of our studies of autobiographical memory the perplexing recall of (apparently) low emotion, low meaning, but nevertheless fairly detailed long enduring memories is commonplace.

Indeed, we often implicitly stipulate that participants in our experiments should not recall personally revealing events – after all, they have to describe their memories often. And as Galton (1883) pointed out, memories can reveal more than a person might care to reveal. Freud in his chapter on screen memories (1901, Chapter IV in the PEL) observed that these types of memories – low emotion, low meaning, and rather enigmatic – were often encountered in memories of childhood events and in the very earliest memory. I believe, however, that they are endemic in autobiographical memory and can be frequently observed when any period of life is sampled, including the very recent past. If memory is motivated – as I, following Freud, have argued for several years (see Conway, 2005) – it seems reasonable to ask why we remember these pallid representations of the past?

Freud's answer is that they are not what they seem to be. They are not simple fragments of past experience. Freud noted, for instance, such memories often depict the rememberer in the memory, a perspective one could not have possibly had at the time. This is certainly true of my memory above. Interestingly, I view myself from a raised position looking down into the image, almost as though I was taller than myself as depicted in the memory –

this is also the case in many of the memories we have collected. There are several implications of such a perspective in a memory but, as Freud points out, one very clear implication is that the memory has been 'worked over', has had the perspective added after formation of the memory. How uncanny, to see oneself or some sort of representation of oneself in a memory. I wonder why I hadn't noticed this in my own memories prior to reading Freud.

Freud's view was that the knowledge memories bring to consciousness can often 'screen' or hide knowledge closely related to fundamental goals or desires. This knowledge has the potential to cause intense (destabilising) emotions in the

rememberer: especially negative emotions such as anxiety, guilt, hate, bad love, and intolerable desires. My memory of reading a book serves this purpose of representing fundamental and enduring goals. It was about this time, shortly after in fact, that I decided to study psychology at university and much that occurred subsequently in my life stemmed from that decision. In fact I now vividly remember the moment when the idea of becoming a psychologist came to me, and that remains a memory of a self-defining moment of enduring significance for me (Pillemer, 1998; Singer, 2005). Interestingly, this apparently dull memory of reading a book with its fanciful evocations of a younger self also quite cleverly covers up the difficulties of that

time when I had little in the way of an income, relationships, or a future. It screens those troubles with an image of a young man as some sort of glorious outsider in his fortress of solitude sitting by his desk reading Freud – another outsider (see Freud, 1925). Indeed, Freud's realisation that some childhood 'memories' were more fantasy than memory, more like the vainglorious stories of the foundation of Rome rather than accurate memories of difficult and powerless times, does seem to rather depressingly fit my memory. Despite that, such memories serve several purposes and can also be rewarding in the way that they confirm important parts of one's own personal myth (Kris, 1956/1975). They are also a resource of self (Robinson, 1986) that underpin current desirable self-images and which motivate goal-completion in the present. Memories, then, are peculiar experience-near symbols of the self that both reveal and conceal goals, purposes, desires, and images of the self in the past.

For Freud these complex mental representations were distributed over several different processing systems (incidentally a view that modern memory research has only come to in the last 25 years): 'It may be surmised that the architectonic principle of the mental apparatus lies in a stratification – a building up of superimposed images' (Freud, 1901, p.147). Because of this distributed form of representation different features of a memory can be differentially available to recall and conscious awareness. This could lead, for example, to the inexplicable emotional experience of accessing the emotion-generating aspects of a memory but not the actual content (cf. Freud, 1915). This is a type of recall Freud found to be prevalent in neurotic patients. We considered the other possibility earlier: access of content without emotion, leading to perplexing memories which seem to lack significance for the self.

More generally, Freud's emphasis on the experience of remembering, which permeates the analysis of memory errors in the PEL, strikes a particularly contemporary note because conscious awareness of memories and the experience of remembering are currently major areas of memory research. Freud noted the feeling of being blocked when a name cannot be recalled, the feeling that can arise just before a 'lost' object is located, and the feeling when an action cannot be recalled. As we might expect, his

theoretical interpretation of these everyday failures of memory was in terms of motivation: unpleasant experiences and ideas are 'forgotten' for good reasons. Their recall is resisted, their content inhibited, because they threaten, in both minor and major ways, the stability of the self (my own most recent experience of this was when I was totally unable to recall the surname of colleague which, it was soon pointed out to me, was 'Dye'). Indeed, in extreme cases repetitive recall of negative information can have serious consequences and it is, for instance, a major feature of depressive illness. Clearly, it is important for a person's experience of well-being that negative material is resisted and a positive experience of the self and memory maintained.

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One important memory-feeling related to the experience of remembering is that of the sense of loss. In an outstanding post-Freud psychoanalytic essay on memory, Loewald (1972/1980) proposed that the first organisation of memories in the infant centres around feelings, and especially the feeling of loss or absence. This affect-based form of organisation is later added to and eventually superseded by forms of organisation in which conceptual knowledge structures provide the access route, and cognitive context, for sensory-perceptual episodic memories (Conway, 2005). Episodic memories represent short-time slices of conscious experience and although most frequently accessed through conceptual knowledge structures may also be organised and accessed quite separately along a feeling/emotion dimension (see Conway, 2005, and Moscovitch, 1995, for highly related contemporary theoretical suggestions).

Indeed, in recent work we have come to refer to 'cognitive feelings', signalling to the experiencer particular cognitive states. For example, the simple 'feeling' of remembering allows the rememberer to experience (part of) the current contents of consciousness as a memory. Cognitive feelings let an individual know by experience what mental state they are in. When the integration between cognitive feelings and cognitive content is disrupted then abnormal states of consciousness may result: for instance, having the experience of remembering when no memory is in mind (Freud, 1936; Moulin *et al.*, 2005).

Freud's attention to the feelings that accompany states of conscious awareness (throughout the PEL and in other writings too) is an important and overlooked part of his work. Relatedly, an important aspect of consciousness and memory that once featured quite centrally in psychoanalysis but which is currently out of fashion is the notion of reconstruction (there are two excellent essays on this by the Kris Study Group: see Fine *et al.*, 1971). The particularly interesting idea here is that during psychoanalysis moments may arise in which the patient literally re-experiences a previous state of consciousness. Inducing such states was thought to be important in overcoming long-standing maladaptive patterns of activation/inhibition of memories, knowledge, and feelings. But inducing reconstruction is difficult and possibly not as effective as originally thought, and in any case the current focus

in psychoanalytic practice is on transference and the dynamics of the interaction between patient and analyst.

Nonetheless, the idea that it might be possible to recreate a previous state of consciousness, perhaps from infancy, is a bold conjecture. Is it possible? If so it would have interesting and complicated implications for our understanding of human memory. After all when we remember we do not typically reinstate a previous moment of consciousness. On the other hand in certain psychological illnesses, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, the intense flashbacks to moments of trauma (often referred to as 'reliving') do seem to have the character of reconstruction. Possibly the imagery experienced in other forms of mental illness, schizophrenia, for example, might also reinstate earlier states of consciousness but in a dysfunctional way in that the imagery is not consciously experienced as being part of a memory.

Perhaps there are also other situations in which reconstructions occur more normally. A specific and potent cue that maps directly on to an episodic representation of a previous state of consciousness might lead to the experience of that previous state of consciousness – an intense and vivid moment of recollection, still perhaps best described by Proust (1925/81) but present in healthy individuals in the form of self-defining memories (Singer, 1990, Singer & Salovey, 1993), vivid, and flashbulb memories (see Conway, 1995, for a review).

These sorts of memories – in which a previous state of consciousness may, possibly, be reinstated – often seem to be associated with the generation of great works of literature and art (see Conway *et al.*, 2004). More commonly they are the type of memory which when present in awareness unexpectedly place our consciousness in the past. They cause feelings of surprise, recognition, perplexity, even wonderment, and trigger an intense sense of the self in the past. They leave me wondering where they came from, how they are represented, how they have their effect now, and what they mean. Thoughts I have when reading Freud.

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