Article

MEMORY STUDIES

Memory Studies
2015, Vol. 8(2) 169–182

DOI: 10.1177/1750698014547293
mss.sagepub.com
SAGE

Memory, 'madness' and conflict: A Laingian perspective

Ron Roberts
Kingston University, UK

Christopher J Hewer
Kingston University, UK

Abstract

R.D. Laing's investigations into family relationships tell us much about memory as a source of psychological distress. Laing concluded that patterns of thinking and behaviour established in the family over generations are re-enacted whether we are aware of it or not. Using Laing's studies of the family as a framework, we argue that the expression of emotion, identity, thought, belief and behaviour in social settings is subject to the formative nature of memory. The link between memory and psychological distress (of varying severity) becomes evident when individuals are exposed to either (1) an enacted ideology within the family or social group, which is transmitted across generations; (2) denial or concealment in the face of direct experience and/or empirical evidence, for example, injustices in the workplace, war crimes or (3) explicit and incontrovertible actions that destroy relationships and which create painful memories. Any unjustifiable attempt to reconstruct, undermine or eradicate memory may be experienced as an assault on psychological well-being whether in the family, the workplace or the community of nations.

Keywords

family, madness, memory, R.D. Laing, relationships

The physiological mechanisms that govern an association between memory and sanity have become familiar to us. As we hear more about the degenerative neural processes involved in Alzheimer's disease and dementia, the failure of memory to retain identities and grasp consensual reality is widely interpreted as a deficit of mind and brain that constitutes a form of insanity. The biological nature of this research, however, has overshadowed or obscured a *social* relationship between memory and sanity. Whether conceptualised as an individual faculty or as a collective construct, memory is central to our apprehension of reality, and therefore, its content and the social dynamics that govern it have a significant bearing on psychological well-being. This analysis invites an examination of memory that is not so much concerned with functional efficacy, but rather its role in the construction of fractured

Corresponding author:
Ron Roberts, Kingston University, Penrhyn Road, Kingston, Surrey KT1 2EE, UK.
Email: r.a.roberts@kingston.ac.uk

identities, psychological distress, social conflict and disorder. The use of the vernacular term 'madness' in this article encapsulates the broad spectrum of psychological distress ranging from common-sense, non-clinical conceptions at one end, for example, 'I am going mad', to formal clinical observations of severe psychological dysfunction at the other. Using R.D. Laing's studies of the family as a framework, we trace the social dynamics of memory and 'madness' back through the networks of communication and power, identifying correlates and possible causes of psychological and social dysfunction. We further argue that the politics of memory and the psychodynamic stratagems uncovered within the family frequently manifest themselves in social settings and levels of social organisation, including the workplace and the international community.

It is not without irony, however, that Laing's work has itself been subject to misremembering and his theoretical insights and methodological innovations largely ignored by mainstream psychiatry and psychology. The marginalisation of Laing's work and the omission of Laing's family studies from major textbooks of psychiatry and abnormal psychology indicate that the work is thought to have little social, historical or practical importance. Laing's work, if remembered at all, is misremembered as a narrative about 'schizophrenogenic' mothers and 'pathological' families: a conspiratorial, persecutory account of madness in which 'hostile, malevolent parents' (Clare, 1989) and mothers in particular, drive their offspring into a state of schizophrenia (see also Siegler et al., 1972). For Laing's work to meet this fate, it had to be stripped of many of its essential elements, not least the political practices, strategies and operations employed by family members as well as the specific myths and fantasies that underpin family life.

Family memory

The idea that family memory influences thought and behaviour in profound and significant ways stems from Laing's innovative and controversial analyses in the 1960s that brought about a re-evaluation of reductionist explanations within psychological science. Laing's research sought to understand the nature and meaning of mental distress among psychiatric patients, and this approach was based on the notion that the behaviour and experience of individuals diagnosed with 'schizophrenia' could be understood through the study of family dynamics: an idea considered to be 'no less radical than the shift from a demonological to a clinical viewpoint 300 years ago' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 13). For Laing, schizophrenia was not 'a biochemical, neurophysiological, psychological fact', but 'an assumption, a theory, a hypothesis' (Laing and Esterson, 1970:11).

In the course of these investigations, Laing and Esterson developed a social phenomenological method that required the study of each person in the family, the relations between persons in various subsets of the family and the family as a functioning system, which involved hours of direct observation and recording of what people said when alone and when in the company of others. Their work avoided the pitfalls of essentialising defects or deficits and focused instead on the way in which power flows through a given social system (i.e. the family). Influenced by Sartre's (2009) *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Laing and Esterson (1964) drew a distinction between events that were 'deeds done by doers' (praxis) and those that 'had no agent as their author' (process) (p. 8). Moreover, when they examined the patterns of communication between family members, spanning both current and previous generations, they were able to *render intelligible* the behaviour and experience of individuals that had previously been diagnosed as pathological. That is to say, the decontextualised actions of individuals, which may have been interpreted as signs and symptoms of disease, made sense when re-contextualised within the nexus of past and current relationships.

Scripts and dramas

The interpretation of what was being done (praxis) and what was going on (process) in the family was, in effect, a study of individual, dyadic, triadic and collective memory, and reinstating the social context across generations revealed much about memory transmission and re-enactment. Laing argued that social relationships embedded in the nexus of the family generate patterns of social remembering that enable a collective behavioural past to be recalled, relived and re-presented from one generation to the next – often without conscious recognition among those involved in the drama. What may be remembered or forgotten, what may be said or not said, what may be known to others or not known to others determined the nature of these relationships and, most crucially, their emotional consequences. According to Laing (1971), 'we are acting parts in a play that we have never read and never seen, whose plot we don't know, whose existence we can glimpse, but whose beginning and end are beyond our present imagination' (p. 78). However, the degree to which memory is passed down the generations depends on the forms of memory transmission that is enacted. Benign role identities often reoccur across generations in the form of the black sheep, the clown, the eccentric, the brains or the lunatic – identities imputed to others that may be, in a Freudian sense, the tip of the iceberg. Consider the account of 'Paul' taken from '*The Politics of the Family*', which Laing (1971) describes as the 'paradigm of a multi-generational family situation' (pp. 53–54); he experiences himself as follows:

> Right side: masculine Left side: feminine Left side younger than right side. The two sides do not meet. Both sides are rotten, and he is rotting away with them to an early death. His mother and father separated when he was five. His mother told him he 'took after' his father. His father told him he 'took after' his mother. His mother said his father was not a real man. His father said his mother was not a real woman. To Paul, they were both right. Consequently, on the one hand (or, as he would say, on his right side), he was a female male homosexual, and on the other hand (his left side), he was a male lesbian. His mother's father (MF) died shortly after Paul was born. Paul's mother said he took after her father. But the issue of real or not real has been reverberating in the family for several generations. His mother's mother (MM) did not regard her husband (MF) as a real man. Nor did his mother's father (MF) regard his wife (MM) as a real woman.

Laing (1971) went on to remark: 'His body was a sort of mausoleum, a haunted graveyard in which the ghosts of several generations still walked, while their physical remains rotted. This family had buried their dead *in each other*' (p. 52). In this example, what initially appears irrational and bewildering to observers becomes intelligible through an understanding of a myriad network of actions, attributions and operations within the family that reveal what is going on and what has been going on over time. The intergenerational re-enactment of specific family identities, power roles and psychosocial dynamics across time points to an aspect of social memory that is seldom considered in this context; that the recollection, recall, reliving and re-embodiment of the past in the present, which is often more unconscious than conscious, manifests itself in behaviour that denotes the presence of some form of conflict. Memory is thus transmitted through acquired patterns of behaviour so that our present behaviour, emotions and identity may, in some measure, constitute an unconscious re-enactment of memories of personal or collective historical submission or dominance.

Laing also observed the way in which family dynamics affected the identity and mental state of young female 'patients' – an important observation, given the long history of women's behaviour, disposition and state of mind being interpreted through their biology, both real and imagined. From the analysis of 11 families, Laing concluded that 'delusions', 'hallucinations', 'thought disorder',

'bizarre' behaviour, 'social withdrawal' and 'inappropriate' affect presumed to be located in the minds of the women, all made sense when considered in their social, historical and familial context, that is, in terms of what others were saying and doing to them and doing to themselves. For example, there were recurrent features in the interview material across many families concerning those who control the memories, thought processes, identities, social status, education, sexual expression and liberty of others. Consider what transpires within the Blair family. Lucie, the designated patient, says that her father 'doesn't believe in the emancipation of women. He doesn't believe women should support themselves' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 48). Lucie's view, though not much else, is corroborated by her mother, 'I don't like his attitude towards people, especially women' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 42), 'he doesn't like men supporting women, and at the same time he doesn't like women to support themselves' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 55). This antipathy to women in the eyes of Mrs Blair appears to run in the family on her husband's side; 'they were far and away behind the times with their attitude toward women' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 40).

The failure of any kind of alliance to materialise between mother and daughter is central to understanding the way in which Lucie acquired the role of 'mad woman'. Mrs Blair 'sees herself as the subject of a forty-year long persecution by her husband' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 58–59) and is 'too insecure', 'poorly educated' and 'economically dependent' to establish an alternative life away from the home (Chesler, 2005: 154). Ruled by fear, 'terrified to "cross" her husband' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 53) and advised by her own mother 'not to try and leave her husband because the difficulties would be too great' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 38), she surrenders and abandons any prospect of resistance. Furthermore, any signs of resistance in her daughter are crushed in a process of psychiatric mystification so that rebellion is deemed 'impulsive' and resignation is described as 'affective impoverishment' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 49).

With all roads to freedom closed, Mrs Blair is compelled in her husband's presence to shore up his repressive management of family life. 'For many years', Laing writes, 'it has been agreed between them that when he is present' Mrs Blair 'must side with him' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 40). The consequence is that Lucie's experience is invalidated and her behaviour measured by the yardstick of Mrs Blair's own internalised oppression – her subjectivity colonised by the patriarchal mores of the day. Furthermore, the death of her sister 10 years earlier, said to have 'intensified her despair' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 46), rules out the possibility of any other female alliance within the family. This cements her isolation while the parental tryst accomplishes Mr Blair's desire to make her a 'pure, virginal, spinster, gentlewoman' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 52). Mrs Blair's fear and internalised sexism, which are responsible for her subjugation, exert a profound psychological effect on her daughter and further illustrate the way in which oppressive systems of thought, sanctioned by economics and power, and nourished by fear of violence, non-conformity and difference, flourish from one generation to the next. Indeed, as Laing demonstrated, conformity in the guise of a false self-system imperils psychological integrity (Laing, 1965b). Moreover, the antipathy towards the independence of women was a recurring theme in all the interviews, although its expressed nature was historically specific insofar that it reflected a time when women's roles were largely situated within the home. Nonetheless, they revealed how, despite the importance of the mother–daughter relationship, micro-social practices rooted in family beliefs, traditions, myths and loyalties sustain the dynamics of patriarchal oppression and constrain memory, freedom of expression and thought and identity.

The Church family provides another example. From the perspective of Claire, her mother and father were 'not her real parents… but simply a pair of business partners' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 63). Demonstrating an inability to discern the difference between metaphor and truth, the psychiatric system accorded delusional status to these statements. However, this was not an isolated case, and viewed from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, the restructuring and

repositioning of the family as a 'business enterprise' perhaps fails to raise an eyebrow today, given that in the intervening years it has been subject to a process of capitalist naturalisation where monetary values and principles of capital exchange have come to dominate, or even displace, traditional family values of mutual assistance, self-sacrifice, generosity and hospitality.

In addition to the capitalisation of intimate relationships within the Church family, other issues come to the fore. Because 'her daughter does not seem to like what she likes', Claire's mother believes 'there must be something wrong with her' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 72). This example of gender role non-compliance soon becomes a matter for 'the authorities' and is brought to the attention of her family doctor who, from Claire's perspective, becomes an agent of the 'thought police'. The result is that Claire Church, who also lost a sister early in life, exists alone in a family intent on constraining autonomy, confirmation, validation, opportunities for affection and avenues of support. For her sins, she is no longer a dutiful, obedient and 'sane' member of the family.

Mrs Church's actions ensure that her daughter's existence is forced into a mould that had been forged across generations and into which Mrs Church has already been set. This re-enactment of memory moves Claire's mother to seek an alliance with her on the grounds that they both acquiesce to feminine powerlessness – a strategy that Mrs Church learned from her own mother. For this to function as smoothly as it had for Mrs Church in relation to her own mother, she has to undermine Claire's rebellious strivings through the denial of 'her own perceptions' and through inducements proffered to 'Claire to deny her experience' and 'moderate her behaviour' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 72). Unwilling to go along with this, the endgame for Claire was a visit to the psychiatrist.

Confronting family dramas

The Laingian perspective that family dramas render intelligible acute disruption to psychological well-being is further illustrated by the families of prominent Nazis (see Frank, 1991; Himmler, 2007; Lebert, 2001). In the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) documentary, *Hitler's Children* (Ze'evi, 2012), interviews with selected members of the families of Herman Göering, Heinrich Himmler, Amon Goeth and Rudolf Hoess reveal the ways in which they have each dealt with their legacy, which range from denial, withdrawal and sterilisation to decisive and active moral confrontation. What is noteworthy from these accounts is that the nature of family memory is so shocking that it has affected individuals *born decades after World War II*. It may seem irrational or illogical to feel guilt or moral responsibility for the maligning actions of deceased relatives, but family memory in this context is sufficiently potent to provoke re-enactment that manifests itself not in a desire to repeat the behaviour but by placing subsequent generations into corresponding roles. Sons and daughters of victims feel like victims and sons and daughters of perpetrators feel like perpetrators. In one scene, the grandson of Rudolf Hoess, the former camp commandant at Auchswitz, meets a group of Israeli students. Through an accident of birth, both parties are cast into the role of victim and perpetrator (see Weissmark, 2004) demonstrating that, despite the passing of generations, we are conjoined to some family relationships back through time as much as we are to others in the present. In this exchange, the Holocaust becomes 'family history' and the events carry all the hallmarks of a deep-rooted and unresolvable family crisis. Indeed, to conceptualise the Holocaust as *the family history of all humanity* explains why so many people from all parts of the world, three generations later, are still wrestling with its implications and psychological consequences.

Memory and relationship breakdown

Ideally, the legacy of family memory should provide a firm foundation to a meaningful existence. However, an association between family memory and psychological dysfunction often reveals

itself in various forms of relationship breakdown. Notably, in cases of betrayal where the whole fabric of social reality is undermined, the victim is left asking questions about the meaning and veracity of the past. Such an acute rupture of reality is often psychologically debilitating as notions of trust, friendship and loyalty – qualities that bind people together – are replaced by a more unstable view of the world, which posits that all human relationships are fluid, transient and self-serving. In the world of contemporary relationships, names and images are easily added or deleted on social media web sites as part of an identity project that is facilitated by the transience of digital memory and the wholesale disregard for interpersonal memory. Out of necessity, memories are renegotiated, rationalised or forgotten (not regularly brought to mind) in order to mitigate psychological distress (see Connerton, 2008). Moreover, given that the sanity/insanity continuum is bound up within the cluster of memories associated with significant relationships, it is no surprise that such a comprehensive restructuring of reality (i.e. the reconfiguration of system of meanings in personal relationships) proves difficult for many who later find themselves in therapy or behaving in an uncharacteristic manner.

However, instead of acknowledging the serious psychological consequences of 'memory loss' in cases of relationship breakdown, these issues are generally regarded as matters of personal choice and preference. By default, the cultural emphasis is on the need to forget – to 'get over it and move on' – a view that conveniently allows the culture to maintain its core belief in non-intervention in the free market of serial sexual relationships. Given the dominance of this discourse in the West, extreme or violent reaction to relationship breakdown is often construed as pathological, criminal, evidence of culpability or confirmation of mental and moral unfitness even though *the behaviour is intelligible from the standpoint of the current state of significant relationships*. Laing's original study revealed ways in which human actors reconstruct memory through action in the present, but both the transmission of the past onto the present and *the destruction of the past by the present* reveal a significant bridge between memory, sanity and social order.

However, the extent to which a 'relationship breakdown narrative', whether explicitly told or not, is assimilated and re-enacted by the next generation remains unknown. The formative nature of memory may indeed conflict with our deepest longings, which may give rise to unexpected, irrational, counterintuitive or paradoxical consequences. For example, a child who experiences parental divorce may long for a happy (marital) relationship but may later enact a subliminal self-fulfilling prophecy that makes divorce or separation inevitable. Or someone who has been abused who vows never to allow anyone to have power over them again may from thereon encounter the world as hostile and thus subliminally invite hostility from others, after which, life becomes a catalogue of perceived attacks and confrontations. Re-enacting memory may also explain the behaviour of some victims of child sex abuse who later become perpetrators or the anecdotal evidence of counterintuitive behaviour reported among some victims of domestic violence who, having left one violent relationship, enter into another.

It may be that all modes of interaction are laden with historic overtones and that the task of recovering family memory provides a model for collective social memories in other social settings. Laing's (1968) view, expressed at the Dialectics of Liberation Conference was that

> 'the apparent irrationality of behaviour' on any scale 'takes on a certain form of intelligibility when one sees it in context'. One moves for example from the apparent irrationality of the single 'psychotic' individual to the intelligibility of that irrationality within the context of the family. The irrationality of the family in its turn must in be placed within the context of its encompassing networks. These further networks must be seen within the context of yet larger organisations and institutions. (p. 15)

Laing (1971: 3) had always questioned the distinctiveness of the family in relation to other social groupings. 'The more one studies family dynamics', he wrote, 'the more *un*clear one

becomes as to the ways *family* dynamics compare and contrast to the dynamics of other groups not called families' (italics original). Laing was aware that in confining his investigations to the nuclear family – a matter of convenience – the work was limited and 'transitional' (Laing and Esterson, 1964: 13) and that many of the dysfunctional patterns of attribution and interaction painstakingly described in the reported experience of 11 families, had their origins in the lives of preceding generations. Beyond the family, Laing's work calls attention to the intergenerational passage of attributions, stratagems, roles and identities in which people become vehicles for mapping the behavioural past onto the present.

'Family memory' in the workplace

What goes on in families in terms of the pattern, content and function of interpersonal relationships and the actions of individual members to maintain, disrupt or break these relationships is, in principle, no different to what occurs in a variety of other social networks whatever their scope or level of complexity. Business organisations or indeed organisations of all sorts that require people to work together share one important feature with the family: *the desire to preserve specific forms of collective memory and identity.* The realm of public relations can be considered an institutionalisation of this project. The workplace is indeed a neglected site when it comes to studying the manufacture of madness. We recognise, however, that the scene is already set when we consider that the power relationship between managers and subordinates has rarely been a source of human happiness. Furthermore, because most employees seek financial advancement and self-enhancement, those who wish to prosper are obliged to carry out the implicit or explicit wishes of those who hold institutional power. Thus, the competitive work environment is often characterised by old enmities, shifting loyalties, game playing (see Berne, 1964), empire building and incessant policy change. We might also add another layer of complexity to the situation – the proposition that, *in some circumstances, family memory is re-enacted within the workplace* – that the working environment becomes an extension of the theatrical realm in which some or all of the emotional and interpersonal complexity caused by past events is played out with an unsuspecting cast so that, for example, a co-worker who acts in an overly domineering or abusive manner likely becomes objectified as a composite representation of all previous abusers.

In this bizarre social milieu, discerning the truth from the lie becomes a difficult task and even when matters are committed to writing they are not absolute in the world of meanings. As one manager once remarked, 'Just because I've written something (in an email) doesn't mean you should assume that I believe it'. Workers may become confused and disillusioned as they observe the private abandonment of publicly endorsed principles, and any attempt to resist or challenge the dissemination of untruths or dissonant rationalities is usually met with organisational disapproval. How is one supposed to engage with this and retain one's sanity? All becomes clear when we recognise that to work in an organisation is to embed oneself in a fantasy system as complex as any found within the family. Indeed, because of the shifting and unstable dynamics within the working environment, a bout of 'madness' in the form of 'work stress' is often responsible for extended periods of absence or for transporting older workers into early retirement.

Furthermore, in many organisations, appearances may be deceptive. If we take the university as an example, one might assume that the academic hierarchy is highly qualified, that lecturers teach and carry out meaningful research while students study, engage in debate and take exams. The physical geographical infrastructure including libraries, computers and lecture halls in conjunction with the espousal of values, an institutional history and the roll call of illustrious alumni adds to the sense of belief in the 'reality' of the institution and one's place within it. The internalisation of these relationships, artefacts and institutional history forms a basis for the belief that the university is 'real'. However, what if the image fails to map reality? What if professors do not hold

high academic qualifications or are not leaders in their field? What if principles of meritocracy are abandoned in favour of other political or social criteria? Having relatively low achievers at the helm may produce an organisational culture that makes it difficult for academics to do research, given the bureaucracy created by those who are not research active. High fliers in the research game, instead of being rewarded, pose a threat to their underachieving superiors and therefore research is constrained and subtly discouraged, so that a conflict ensues between what is said through every organisational channel of corporate communication and the daily experience of academic staff.

Some universities may perceive the principle of academic freedom as a threat to deeply held political beliefs or policies. Consequently, there may be a widening disparity between the collective fantasy, publicly presented, of the university as a dispassionate seeker of truth and its existence as a corporate entity seeking to satisfy its consumers in order to survive. According to Tucker (2012: 108), places of learning are now run by managers 'failed academics, and clerical and secretarial staff' who follow a model 'that resembles the late Soviet model of industry during the Brezhnev era' (p. 102). Tucker (2012) describes the demise of the university as an institution of free thinking and intellectual liberty:

> The centrally managed university is a parody of a university, a Potemkin village that has the facade of a university. Instead of teaching, it has cheating; instead of Socratic dialogues, it has bullet points; instead of a community of scholars united by a search for truth, it has atomized individuals suspicious of each other and informers for the manager; instead of intellectual and spiritual life in truth, academic life is devoted to the implementation of absurd, senseless, immoral, and harmful policies that percolate down through an anonymous, unaccountable bureaucratic hierarchy. (p. 118)

The confusion resulting from the de-rationalisation of reality in the name of bureaucratic, autocratic and corporate power is a way to create 'psychosis' or, as Laing (1971) remarked, it is 'to indicate that this confusion is a sign of illness' (p. 74). As in the family, commonplace within organisations is the process of mystification, which Laing (1965a) describes as

> … the substitution of false for true constructions of what is being experienced, being done (praxis), or going on (process), and the substitution of false issues for the actual issues … If we detect mystification, we are alerted to the presence of a conflict of some kind that is being evaded. The mystified person … is unable to see the authentic conflict … He may experience false peace, false calm, or inauthentic conflict and confusion over false issues. (pp. 344–345)

For Laing (1965b), as for Marx, the function of this was to enable

> … a plausible misrepresentation of what is going on (process) or what is being done (praxis) in the service of the interests of one socioeconomic class (the exploiters) over or against another class (the exploited). (p. 343)

At the root of mystification is memory. Underlying many unresolved conflicts in the workplace is a strategy, conscious or otherwise, on the part of those who hold institutional power to forget – to resist memory – a process that is often facilitated by changes in management structure and personnel. Intra-organisational conflict may then reflect an ontological divergence between formal accounts of organisational memory and the 'lived' experience of employees (see Tileagă, 2012a). One of the main objectives of management is to shape reality; therefore, what may or may not be remembered or discussed, or the ideological or political slant with which it may be remembered is structurally determined and imposed by the implicit or explicit threat of disciplinary action or threats to employment status or career prospects. The consequence is that two competing versions of the past continue

to circulate – an official version and its vernacular equivalent – a phenomenon characteristic of political dictatorships (see Tileagă, 2012b). The consequence in organisational terms is a fearful, dehumanised, unproductive and stultified culture in which appearances become more important than substance and adherence to corporate policy more important than free expression.

In the family, we learn very quickly that honest and open expression is not the way to gain parental approval and that bringing up past or lingering injustices in polite circles only creates social disjunction. Indeed, opposition to organisational policy – the failure to abide by the 'family consensus' is, as Laing observed, often severely punished and dissenters often described as 'paranoid' or 'irrational'. The resort to psychiatric language in the face of disagreement is now commonplace in social life and far from accidental: it is a potent means of invalidation. 'They think anyone who wakes up, or who, still asleep, realizes that what is taken to be real is a "dream" is going crazy' (Laing, 1971: 74).

The dysfunctional organisation has indeed modelled itself on the dysfunctional family where the emphasis on forgetting becomes a strategy to disempower the relatively powerless in the name of saving face, a version of 'what would the neighbours think?' transposed to the domain of public relations. In addition, in the wake of organisational conflict, attempts to revisit past grievances may be further deflected by a policy to create *structural amnesia* (see Connerton, 2008). Hiring new people for whom the past has no functional relevance might seem to be a reasonable strategy to dilute the 'toxicity' of the situation. However, in Laingian terms, the risk of re-enactment remains. Particularly, those who choose to ignore the psychological significance of 'family memory' in an organisational setting are likely to become channelled by its flow so that errors of the past – the fundamental 'acts in the play' – are repeated. 'The evil that men do' as Shakespeare knew well, 'lives after them'.

International memory

The complex dynamics of 'family memory' identified by Laing may further extend to the international community. The same unease and distress found in the family and the workplace can be observed among victims of conflict and war crimes where the denial of memory presents a significant threat to sanity. Indeed, state denial in its many forms (see Cohen, 2001) disrupts international or inter-ethnic relations by creating a system of dynamics characteristic of a dysfunctional family. These often entail identification with fantasy as well as justification, denial and fabrication – psychological techniques that seek to preserve identity and reputation. Consider, for example, the impact of daily denial of the past upon Bosniak returnees to their former homes in what is now Republica Srpska (RS), the Serbian entity established in Bosnia as part of the Dayton Agreement. Vulliamy (2012: xli) describes the Serb responses to their war crimes as an 'oxymoronic waltz between denial and justification' (p. xli), while Ramet (2007: 53) describes Serbia as a 'neurotic, even psychotic society' that celebrates war criminals as national heroes. Halilovich (2011) provides an unsettling summary of the situation on the ground:

> While forgetting those who do not qualify for its version of history, the RS government has been inscribing the official memory in public space, renaming streets and squares to represent and remember some of the fiercest nationalists such as Zoran Karlica, Jovan Rašković or Nikola Pašić, as well as erecting grandiose monuments in the form of exclusive religious symbols and introducing new public holidays and commemorations. The town's official holiday, Prijedor's Liberation Day, celebrated on 30 April, is the same day the Serb militias started the campaign of 'ethnic cleansing' of non-Serbs from the area in 1992. (p. 44)

In response to this, many Bosnian people have come to feel 'alone, abandoned and forgotten' (Halilovich, 2011: 49). Many describe feelings of unreality, that they are living another life, are not

themselves; they are 'Nowhere. Lost', (Vulliamy, 2012: xlii). They feel 'ruined', and speak of having to 'close' themselves 'down as a human being' (Vulliamy, 2012: 107). There is also talk of those who have 'cracked up' and retreated into a world where others cannot reach them, their 'minds defiled, memories overrun and dreams eroded' (Vulliamy, 2012: 323). Their pain and their world that was destroyed is described by the other side as 'liberation', (Vulliamy, 2012: 180), and their narratives are dismissed as 'unfounded' and 'irrelevant' (p. 140). The invalidation of their experience induces a profound sense of derealisation akin to that observed in the family members in Laing's studies. The Bosnians are confused: they cannot understand why their neighbours cannot simply acknowledge what was done and begin the process of reconciliation. Furthermore, they have been forgotten, even disavowed by the West, which has also disavowed its own role in these tragic events (Glaurdić, 2011; Roberts et al., 2011) and, notwithstanding war crimes trials at The Hague, the West has continued with its own form of mystification by persistently alleging moral equivalence to both parties with an imperative to 'forgive, forget and move on'.

On this matter, both sides need to consider that the trauma is likely to extend across generations and that the route to recovery, that is the restoration of meaningful, trustworthy respectful relations, is linked to memory. For the individual, however, personal recovery is not synonymous with reconciliation; an individual reckoning with a traumatic past differs from a social reckoning, the latter of which requires the reconstruction of public space and *public history*. Appeals for reconciliation, as Cohen (2001) notes, explicitly assume that perpetrators, victims and bystanders have already acknowledged what happened. But, as has been noted,

> It is impossible to expect reconciliation if part of the population refuses to accept that anything was ever wrong, and the other part has never received an acknowledgement of the suffering it has undergone or of the ultimate responsibility for that suffering. (Letter from Human Rights Watch to President F.W. de Klerk; cited in Cohen, 2001: 239)

On that matter, the perpetrators of any wrongdoing, and indeed their descendants, have a 'duty to respond', to honour truth and pay the 'debt to the past' (Dimitrijevic, 2011: 196). As difficult as that may be, Laing's work reminds us that the evocation of memories can follow unexpected and unpredictable paths, and despite the knots into which a culture may become entangled, the past can never be hermetically sealed. How will this memory be played out across subsequent generations? Welzer's (2005) research into the transmission of historical awareness in a group of 40 German families may provide some clues. The study design has many parallels with Laing and Esterson's family research – a social phenomenological investigation in which interviews took place 'in the context of a whole family discussion and in separate interviews with at least one member of the eye witness, child, and grandchild generations in the family' (Welzer, 2005: 2). Eyewitnesses were questioned about their wartime experiences in the period after 1933, while their children were asked to relate what they had heard from their grandparents and parents about the same period.

The study, intergenerational in character, provides evidence that even where perpetrators have provided honest accounts of their participation in Nazi crimes 'family loyalties' prevent this information from being absorbed and assimilated. Instead, 'wartime memories are preserved in the family's lore as stories that can be reshaped to an idealized vision' whereby grandparents are transformed into 'people of constant moral integrity' (Welzer, 2005: 7, 8). Their relatives are constructed as 'good Germans' in opposition to 'bad Nazis'. That succeeding generations within families have managed to distort the past in a country that has done so much to address it does not bode well for those that have not. Both parties are already caught in an intergenerational memory game in which the perpetrators claim no memory of their crimes and in so doing are serving further psychological problems on their children. As the truth emerges, perhaps long after the war generation has died,

children and grandchildren may well have to come to terms with the actions of their own family and community. Indeed, whether in the context of war crimes or other destructive human events, subsequent generations – those born after the events have long ended – may be subject to 'hauntings' as recipients of 'ghostly transmission' across generations (Frosh, 2013).

Theoretical reflections: an integrated psychosocial model of memory

A figurative sketch of the dynamics of social remembering, which we propose, links psychoanalytic insight to familial, social and historical legacies, is provided in Table 1. Not only does correspondence between disturbed ideation/behaviour and patterns of group/family interaction provide a basis for the deconstruction of mental distress, it also provides a model of social memory and socially mediated distress that extends beyond the family. Recurrent family, community, institutional, national or international issues may thus be considered as a remembering or re-enactment of a collective behavioural past and the failure to break free from its influence. If, as proposed here, the dynamics of individual, family, institutional and national memory are similar, then we can expect the repetition–compulsions of individual psychopathology to be mirrored in two broader Freudian contexts – first as enacting the relational past in the present, and secondly, insofar as the propensities for repeating such behaviour remain unaddressed, by providing a template for the repeated re-enactment of the past – repetition–compulsion as social destiny. Marx's ([1852] 2006) noted reference to the repetition of history, not only concerned his descriptions of the broader human tragedy recycled as farce, but also alludes to a possible mechanism by which this is achieved: through the weight of 'the tradition of all dead generations … upon the brain of the living' (p. 15) – dynamic (unconscious) processes of memory that ensure that we become vehicles for 'the living dead' (see Curtis, 1995). In locating the source of repeated historical 'failure' in the presence of the past, Marx anticipates Freud and later Object Relations theorists – the unresolved conflicts of history will continue to generate unsuccessful solutions until the original issues are addressed. Little wonder that some see in Marx a programme for continuous revolution.

The 'repetition–compulsion' present in the social sphere is a cornerstone of Laing's psychoanalytic analysis of family roles, identities and relations, both within and between generations. And since family relations have much in common with international relations (Roberts, 2007) and individual trauma with social catastrophe, the analysis provides a structural framework suitable for the analysis of larger social entities including the family of nations. The conscious and unconscious activity of traumatic remembering may therefore be envisaged as the same dynamic process at work whether these actions flow through an injured individual, or constitute the dynamics of family, institutional, national or international history. Thus, it might make sense to consider the total world system (see Laing, 1968) within which all social organisation is captured and all power flows, not only as the level of abstraction where all contradiction is reconciled but also as a repository for all human memory. Lovelock proposed the Gaia hypothesis to bring us to see the earth as a living organism – Laingian psychodynamics of intergenerational memory provides a model of the dynamics of mind and culture that allow us to see our broader human connection to each other. Caught as we all undoubtedly are in an enormous collective intergenerational memory game, our first steps in constructing for ourselves a measure of freedom from it must be to acknowledge that we are in it. After this, we need to review the theoretical conclusions of Laing and Esterson's work, which suggests that three conditions are sufficient for psychological disturbance to take root: (1) conflict of such a nature that important roles and traditions are challenged or undermined and (2) the employment/enactment of particular political manoeuvres and tactics in the face of this conflict, which aim to maintain or restore the desired status

Table 1. The behavioural and psychodynamics of memory and identity preservation.

Domain	Defensive operations employed	Object and desire of defence
Psycho-analysis		
Self (object relations)	Memory control (repression, denial)	Preservation of psyche
Acting out (self injury, violence)	Ego integrity, self esteem	
Family (family relations)	Memory control (mystification, repression, denial)	Preservation of family reputation
	(The use of psychiatric force, hospitalisation, treatment)	Family integrity
Group dynamics		
Workplace (workplace relations)	Memory control (mystification, public relations)	Preservation of institutional reputation (community relations)
	The use of force (Bullying, intimidation, disciplinary action, dismissal)	Stability of business/financial interests
Geo-analysis		
Nation (international relations)	Memory control Preservation of national esteem (Modification, falsification of history, propaganda, diplomacy, public relations) Use of military and economic force: power	Stability of political/business/financial interests

quo, which often involves the manipulation and control of memory. Such political operations involve the denial, mystification and invalidation of the experience of family members or co-workers deemed responsible for disturbing the favoured axes of orientation and a denial that their actions are indeed mystifying, invalidating the experience of others, and (3) the absence of sufficient support/solidarity within the family or group to oppose these operations so that individuals are rendered alone, confused and uncertain about what is real and what is not.

Conclusion

There remains a parallel between children in a dysfunctional family, frightened or demoralised employees, victims or relatives of war criminals and those who experience relationship breakdown, insofar that they are all subject to the formative power of memory. However, the invocation of memory as an explanation of unconventional behaviour and psychological distress is currently overshadowed by behavioural genetics. The notion that we are at the mercy of our genes has become a common-sense cognitive heuristic for all human preferences, orientations, events and states of mind, and the dominance of physiological determinism in science, psychiatry and psychology has only served to obliterate memory or historical transmission from our explanatory repertoire. Indeed, Laing (1976) was sceptical that the 'social fact' of *behaviour* deemed schizophrenic could ever be satisfactorily explained outside of its socioeconomic and historical context. Sceptical of the biologism and dogmatism inherent in much behaviour genetics, he maintained that one 'cannot make a statistical silk purse out of a clinical sow's ear' (Laing, 1976: 154). The conclusion we draw from this is that behavioural genetics cannot account for the broad, complex and seemingly irrational nature of human experience, and yet while we argue that behavioural genetics is not the 'whole story', neither should the forces of memory be conceptualised as an alternative ideological meta-narrative. To recognise the formative nature of memory is not a blueprint for dramaturgic determinism; and to acknowledge its influence is not to subscribe to a belief in its absolute nature or power. The Laingian perspective advanced here simply provides an alternative way of thinking about social conflict, behaviour, experience and distress situated in a variety of milieus across a trans-generational landscape and impresses upon us the need to be vigilant – ready to interrogate the dynamics of power in the flow of memory in all social contexts. At its most basic, power seeks to physically and psychologically restructure both the present and the past.

References

Berne E (1964) *Games People Play: The Psychology of Human Relationships*. New York: Ballantine Books.
Chesler P (2005) *Women and Madness*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
Clare A (1989) A divided view of madness. *The Guardian*, 25 August, 89.
Cohen S (2001) *States of Denial*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
Connerton P (2008) Seven types of forgetting. *Memory Studies* 1(1): 59–71.
Curtis A (1995) *The Living Dead*. London: BBC.
Dimitrijevic N (2011) *Duty to Respond: Mass Crime, Denial and Collective Responsibility*. Budapest: Central European University.
Frank N (1991) *In the Shadow of the Reich*. New York: Knopf.
Frosh S (2013) *Hauntings: Psychoanalysis and Ghostly Transmissions*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Glaurdić J (2011) *The Hour of Europe: Western Powers and the Breakup of Yugoslavia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Halilovich H (2011) Beyond the sadness: memories and homecomings among survivors of 'ethnic cleansing' in a Bosnian village. *Memory Studies* 4(1): 42–52.
Himmler K (2007) *The Himmler Brothers*. London: Pan Macmillan.

Laing RD (1965a) Mystification confusion and conflict. In: Boszormenyinagi I and Framo JL (eds) *Intensive Family Therapy: Theoretical and Practical Aspects*. New York: Harper & Row, pp. 343–363.
Laing RD (1965b) *The Divided Self*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Laing RD (1968) The obvious. In: Cooper D (ed.) *The Dialectics of Liberation*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 13–33.
Laing RD (1971) *The Politics of the Family and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage Books.
Laing RD (1976) A critique of Kallmann's and Slater's genetic theory of schizophrenia. In: Evans RI (ed.) *R.D. Laing: The Man and His Ideas*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc, pp. 97–156.
Laing RD and Esterson A (1964) *Sanity, Madness and the Family: Families of Schizophrenics*. London: Tavistock Publications.
Laing RD and Esterson A (1970) *Sanity, Madness and the Family: Families of Schizophrenics*. 2nd ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
Lebert S (2001) *My Father's Keeper: The Children of Nazi Leaders: An Intimate History of Damage and Denial*. London: Abacus.
Marx K ([1852] 2006) *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Rockville, MD: Wildside Press. 2006)'.]
Ramet SP (2007) The denial syndrome and its consequences: Serbian political culture since 2000. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 40: 41–58.
Roberts R (2007) Power illusion and control: families, states and conflict. In: Roberts R (ed.) *Just War: Psychology and Terrorism*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books, pp. 160–169.
Roberts R, Bećirević E and Paul S (2011) Truth and denial: psychological perspectives on reconciliation in Bosnia. In: Elford RJ (ed.) *Just Reconciliation: The Practice and Morality of Making Peace, Volume 6: New International Studies in Applied Ethics*. Oxford: Peter Lang, pp. 129–146.
Sartre JP (2009) *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. 2nd ed. London: Verso.
Siegler M, Osmond H and Mann H (1972) Laing's models of madness. In: Boyers R and Orill R (eds) *Laing and Anti-Psychiatry*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 99–122.
Tileagă C (2012a) Communism and the meaning of social memory: Towards a critical-interpretative approach. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 46: 475–492.
Tileagă C (2012b) Communism in retrospect: the rhetoric of historical representation and writing the collective memory of recent past. *Memory Studies* 5: 462–478.
Tucker A (2012) Bully U: central planning and higher education. *The Independent Review* 17(1): 99–119.
Vulliamy E (2012) *The War Is Dead, Long Live the War: Bosnia–The Reckoning*. London: The Bodley Head.
Weissmark MS (2004) *Justice Matters: Legacies of the Holocaust and World War II*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Welzer H (2005) *Grandpa wasn't a Nazi: The Holocaust in German Family Remembrance. International Perspectives 54* (trans. B Cooper). New York: American Jewish Committee.
Ze'evi C (2012) *Hitler's Children*. London: BBC.

Author biographies

Ron Roberts, PhD, C.Psychol, is Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Kingston University. Having studied at the universities of Sheffield, London and Leicester, he has held previous posts at the Institute of Psychiatry, University of Westminster, King's College Medical School, University College London, St Bartholomew's Medical School, Queen Mary College and the Tavistock Institute. He is the author of numerous articles as well as four books, including *Just War: Psychology & Terrorism* (2007) and *Reel to Real: Psychiatry at the Cinema.*

Christopher J Hewer is Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology at Kingston University. His principal research interests social memory, national and cultural identities in Europe and the relationship between history and psychology.