Marcin Biernat

Laboratorium Analiz Społecznych i Marketingowych

MEMORY – IDENTITY – FAMILY.
NOTES FROM THE SOCIOLOGICAL
RESEARCH OF IDENTITY AND MEMORY
IN LOCAL COMMUNITY

STRESZCZENIE

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie idei i koncepcji leżących u podstaw socjologicznej analizy trzech pojęć, którymi są pamięć zbiorowa, tożsamość zbiorowa i rodzina. Uznaje się, że te trzy pojęcia są ściśle ze sobą powiązane i powinny być analizowane w odniesieniu do siebie nawzajem. Rodzina jest uważana za instytucję socjalizacji, a tym samym miejsce, gdzie nabywane są społeczne normy i wartości. Jest to także przestrzeń dla budowania i pielęgnowania zbiorowej pamięci i tożsamości. Problem tożsamości staje się szczególnie istotny, gdy omawia się bieżące zmiany zachodzące w społeczeństwach oraz kwestie globalizacji i uniformizacji. Prezentowany artykuł jest przede wszystkim rezultatem badań przeprowadzonych we wsi Rudzica na Śląsku Cieszyńskim w 2015 roku. Zawiera on uwagi z projektu badawczego koncentrującego się na problemach pamięci zbiorowej i tożsamości zbiorowej społeczności lokalnej. Autor opracowania przeprowadził częściowo ustrukturyzowane wywiady wśród członków Towarzystwa Miłośników Rudzicy, którego celem jest pielęgnowanie i promowanie lokalnej i regionalnej kultury oraz historii.

Słowa kluczowe: pamięć zbiorowa, tożsamość zbiorowa socjalizacja, globalizacja, uniformizacja
Keywords: Family, collective identity, collective memory, socialisation, globalisation, uniformisation

1. INTRODUCTION

It was Auguste Comte who suggested that family is the basic element of the society. It is probably one of the most important statements in the history of sociology or at least may be such if we look into the variety of problems that sociology is concerned with. "The true social unit is certainly the family – reduced, if necessary, to the elementary couple which form its basis. […] the family presents the true germ of the various characteristics of the social organism. Such conception is intermediate between the idea of individual and that of species, or society."[1]

It may sounds as a generalisation but for many problems in sociology, the notion of family is often referred to as relating to them. The problem of socialisation is strictly connected to family. Other problems may include class, work, health, etc. Family, being the core of people's lives, need to be considered at least as a significant notion in social sciences. Although it is not the purpose of the article to introduce the importance of the term we should note that family is often in the centre of many ongoing debates in social sciences.

The problem of the family is also considered important in such disciplines as psychology, anthropology or philosophy and sociology only adds some crucial issues and concepts to the debate and discussion. It is essential to notice that an individual is brought up within the family and that the latter is considered a significant part of local communities. It is where the person spends most of his or her lives.

Family is an institution of socialisation and upbringing. It is the place where people acquire and learn social norms and values. Family home is a centre of constructing and cultivating collective identity (local, regional, ethnic and national). Family home is a place where the memory of the past is being nurtured. Hence it is the space where the

---

[1] A. Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte,* translated by Harriet Marineau, New York: William Gowans, (1868), p. 502.

collective memory is being constructed. It is without a doubt a very important institution not only for the whole society but for the individual him- or herself. Of the most important functions of the family, the socialising function shall be underlined because this one is of special importance to this analysis.

We could now focus on the notion of family itself in the sociological debates, but rather then present the term it would be better to signalise some important matters in relation to the family and its problems in the contemporary world. For it is the globalisation and increasing speed of today's world that highlight the changes in the family lives.

Today, the family is facing number of transformations within its structure, its values and its stability. "At the core of contemporary concerns about the family are changes in family living and household composition. These include the growth of domestic partnerships and decline in popularity of marriage, as well as growth in the number of divorces, remarriage (serial monogamy), re-formed or step-families, single parenthood, joint custody, abortions, and two-career households."[2]

Can we still think of a family as a stable environment consisting of married parents and their children? Is it still possible to imagine a family like the one from mid 20th century commercials in the United States with a housewife taking care of children and a husband being the provider, the breadwinner? We may focus on some other aspects that still make it possible for a family to grow. And the research on memory proved that family is still an important institution. But when we look into the problems of the family studies we still notice that the most common views comprise the issues of marriage, child rearing and hence the analyses are focusing mainly on these topics. "Researchers investigate the formation and dissolution of relationships, the quality of marital and parental relationships, and the effects of marriage and changes in

---

[2] G. Jagger, C. Wright, *Introduction. Changing family values* [in:] Jagger G., Wright C. (ed.), *Changing Family Values,* Routledge, (2004), p. 1

marital status on individuals. […] Scholars have provided new insights into family relationships by broadening their studies to include greater emphasis on nonmarital relationships."[3]

But as far as more and more couples decide to live in a cohabitation instead of marriage, scholars are facing the new forms of families and child raising in nonmarital relationships. The changes in family lifes made it necessary to rearrange the visions surrounding the family itself. Family is rather built around parents with children rather than married couple with children. There are, of course, other problems and matters in the family studies. It should be also noted that society is facing the problems of single parents, abandoned children living in foster families or public institutions. Nevertheless, the aim of this article is only to highlight the problem rather than to present a comprehensive study of contemporary family.

2. MEMORY AND IDENTITY – THE TWO POPULAR NOTIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATES

The memory and identity may seem to be important notions in contemporary public debates across the world. It may sound obvious for social scientists that the world is constantly changing. We hear so much about globalisation and uniformization in many debates around the globe. We can observe the growing importance of mass culture and technology. There are also voices of resistance which are described by Castells as: "the widespread surge of powerful expressions of collective identity that challenge globalization and cosmopolitanism on behalf of cultural singularity and people's control over their lives and environ-

---

[3] J. A. Seltzer, *Families Formed Outside of Marriage,* Journal of Marriage and the Family 62 (November 2000), p. 1247

ment."[4] When people realise that the global culture which surrounds them is not what they wanted, they may turn to other marks of identity.

Memory is the other notion growing in popularity. "We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left"[5]. It is also the case of the globalising forces and the power of consumerism that try to make people look up to the present, to things that are important now and only for a short period of time. It is why Bauman writes that we live in a 'liquid modernity' and we use our 'liquid identities' just for a short period.[6] Gordon Mathews writes that people "may painfully struggle to comprehend who they are between self as defined by national culture and self as defined by the global cultural supermarket"[7]. The global supermarket, being the place of consuming uniform culture and its products, is an extremely powerful concept that can be adopted to the analyses of identities in the contemporary world. But as far as identity may encompass collective memory it is important to investigate these two notions further.

2.1 BETWEEN COLLECTIVE AND COLLECTED MEMORY

The problem of memory is probably one of the oldest in sociology as it dates back to Durkheim's and his students, of whom Maurice Halbwachs is remembered as the one who presented a substantial work on collective memory. Halbwachs wrote: "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories"[8]. He also suggested that memories

---

[4] M. Castells, *The Power of Identity,* Blackwell Publishing, (2007), p. 2

[5] P. Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,* Representations, No. 26 (1989), p. 7

[6] Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity,* Polity Press, (2000)

[7] G. Mathews, *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket,* Routledge, (2002), p. 25

[8] M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, edited by Lewis Coser. University of Chicago Press, (1992), p. 38

"are recalled by me externally, and the groups of which I am part at any given time give me the means to reconstruct them".[9] It is important to notice that memory is not only a process of memorising but also a result of upbringing in society which influence the way we remember and what we remember. It is the history which comprises the facts and dates whereas the collective memory is rather the group's visions of the past.

The term collective memory has been a part of public debates for a reasonable amount of time now. It has been merged with politics and used as a weapon in political battles. It has also been used by different groups to emphasise their right to construct their own, very often exclusive identities. Nevertheless, if the term is overused it becomes blurred. Among many views and concepts of collective memory it is important to become aware of Jeffrey K. Olick's perspective on two approaches to collective memory: collected and collective. "The first kind of collective memory is that based on individualistic principles: the aggregated individual memories of members of a group. […] the fundamental presumption here is that individuals are central: only individuals remember, though they may do so alone or together, and any publicly available commemorative symbols are interpretable only to the degree to which they elicit a reaction in some group of individuals."[10]

The above mentioned approach is very often used in research as it makes it possible to engage quantitative methods such as surveys or qualitative such as interviews. It brings the picture of group's memory made up of its members' statements, opinions and views of the past. It is important to bear in mind that memory is constructed socially so individual's recollections are in some way influenced by the group's frameworks. But it is worth noticing, and Olick makes this statement clearly, that: "Nevertheless, the collective – as opposed to collected – memo-

---

[9] *Ibidem*

[10] J. K. Olick, *Collective Memory: The Two Cultures,* Sociological Theory, Vol. 17, No. 3. (Nov., 1999), p. 338

ry tradition offers a number of powerful arguments that demonstrate the inadequacy of purely psychological (individual or aggregated) approach."[11]

Olick's perspective is a way to avoid the problem of individualisation in social sciences. He also adds that: "… it is fairly common to assert that collectivities have memories, just like they have identities, and that ideas, styles, genres, and discourses, among other things, are more than the aggregation of individual subjectivities."[12]

To sum up, the discussed term may be used in a way that Olick mentions: "to refer only to what I have called genuinely collective memory, that is, to public discourses about the past as wholes or to narratives and images of the past that speak in the name of collectivities."[13]

Hence a researcher is faced with a very demanding task of investigating and discovering the discourses, narratives and images which represents the images of the past. Nevertheless, one may also study the individuals' recollections of the past as they could be considered people's feelings about collective memory constructed on the basis of discourses or attitudes towards institutionalised memory or history itself.

2.2 THE MYRIADS OF IDENTITY

The term identity is a complex notion. Sociology brings a lot of definitions and explanations to this term making it hard to understand. It is "a difficult term: more or less everyone knows more or less what it means, and yet its precise definition proves slippery. […] And yet notions of identity are at the heart of many of the contemporary «troubles» of Western – and especially anglophone – cultures."[14]

It is also vital to note down that the growing popularity of this notion has been observed in the beginning of this century. "Identity,

---

[11] *Ibidem,* p. 341

[12] *Ibidem,* p. 342

[13] *Ibidem,* p. 345

[14] S. Lawler, *Identity. Sociological Perspectives*, Polity Press, (2009), p. 1

it seems, is bound up with everything from political asylum to credit card fraud, shopping to sex. And the talk is about change, too: about new identities, the return of old ones and the transformation of existing ones. About shape-shifting, on the one hand, and the deep foundation of selfhood, on the other."[15]

Although the term identity is often perceived as complicated, it is mainly because of many understandings it brings with itself. Among many definitions and descriptions one may seem especially appealing. "Identity is our understanding of who we are who other people are, and, reciprocally, other people's understanding of themselves and of others (which includes us). It is a very practical matter, synthesising relationship of similarity and difference."[16]

It may be agreed that the two issues mentioned in the last sentence are considered the most important topics in the 'identity debates'. Identity, especially collective identity is also understood with its connection to 'sense of belonging' to the group and identification with it. Sztompka notes that collective identity is "a sense of community and identification with members of a collectivity expressed subjectively «we» accompanied by the awareness of separateness from outsiders, who are referred to as «they»."[17]

One of the other important issues comprise the problem of constructivism and essentialism concepts of identity. Some consent that identity is being constructed. "It is easy to agree on the fact that, form a sociological perspective, all identities are constructed. […] The construction of identities uses building materials from history, from geography, from biology, from productive and reproductive institutions, from

---

[15] R. Jenkins, *Social Identity,* Routledge, (2008), p. 28

[16] *Ibidem,* p. 18

[17] P. Sztompka, *Socjologia. Analiza Społeczeństwa*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków (2007), p. 198 (translation mine)

collective memory and from personal fantasies, from power apparatuses and religious revelations."[18]

Anthony D. Smith, who represents the ethnosymbolic approach defines national identity (which is a type of collective identity) as "continuous reproduction and reinterpretation by the members of a national community of the pattern of symbols, values, myths memories and traditions that compose the distinctive heritage of nations and the variable identification of individual members of that community with that heritage and cultural elements."[19]

The other important matter in the discussion on identity is the question of individual and collective identities. When it comes to the former, Burke and Stets proposes a very upright explanation of the notion: "An identity is a set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person."[20]

But then, it is also noted that identity is used in different ways and hence this notion carries three different meanings. Stryker and Burke specify that: "Three relatively distinct usages exist. Some use identity to refer essentially to the culture of people […]. Other use identity to refer to common identification with a collectivity or social category […]. Finally, some use the term, as we do in the work underlying this paper, with reference to parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies."[21]

---

[18] M. Castells, *The Power of Identity,* p. 7

[19] A.D. Smith, *Nationalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2010, p. 20

[20] P.J. Burke, J.E. Stets, *Identity Theory*, Oxford University Press, New York (2009), p. 3

[21] S. Stryker, P.J. Burke, *The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory*, Social Psychology Quarterly, Vol. 63, No. 4, (Dec., 2000), p. 284

The problem of collective identity is brought up whenever socio-logical perspective is involved as it is assumed that this should be the main concern of sociology as opposed to individual one.

2.3 EXCERPTS FROM THE RESEARCH

Family memory should not be perceived only in terms of individ-ual visions of the past. It may also be viewed as an important part of the family's and community's values. Memory is strongly influenced by the community and its norms and values. The genuine centre of sociolog-ical focus should therefore be forms of remembrance, forms of acquir-ing memories and not just simple historical facts. The question is what people remember and when they get the memories from, so for example how memory is transferred.

Presented excerpts come from the research of the place of local sacral places in collective memory conducted by means of semi-structured, qualitative interviews with the members of Towarzystwo Miłośników Rudzicy aged sixty-five and over. Ten interviews were conducted in August and September 2015 and lasted from thirty minutes to over an hour each. Such research sample was chosen in order to gather the statements and recollections from the people regarded as 'guardians of memory' or 'depositaries' of local memory and history.

The research has shown that individual's recollection is often relat-ed to family memory. In other words respondents have often mentioned that their memories and, what they remember about the specific sacral places in their village, is an outcome of family memory. It proves that an individual is being transferred the resources of collective memory, often the family memory in course of the process of socialisation.

> So what my parents used to tell me about the Wendelin… That one day, the Sheppard had prayed, for instance, this story that is now written in Wendelin [Chapel] and everything that the priest had found somewhere, he looked for it… But our parents used to tell us that it was a terrible

> drought and this Sheppard prayed, and his name was Wendelin. And the
> cows grazed, but they didn't want to graze anymore, because they hadn't
> had anything to drink, like during the drought. So he hung Mother
> Mary on the tree, there were trees, but there aren't anymore now. And so
> he prayed and the stream of water came out, so that is how my parents
> used to say… (Respondent 7, 75 years old)

This is one of many examples a researcher of collective or collected memory shall find during his field work. The official memory, public memory or institutionalized memory differs many times from the family memory or some people's memories about the place or an important event. This is why the studies of collective memory are so interesting and important at the same time. Their aim is to find out how people perceive the past, how they perceive the history of their local communities.

Many of the local sacral places such as wayside chapels, shrines and crosses located near the buildings or actually on the buildings are strongly attached to the history of the family. It is often the case that the chapels or crosses had been raised in the memory of some important events or as a thanksgiving gesture for the blessings:

> My father, they used to live next to us, … so the house burnt during
> the war, but he survived. He worked in Auschwitz and survived. So as a
> form of "thanksgiving" for coming back home safely, he has a chapel in
> his house, he built it. And to this day, as a thanksgiving, […] in this way
> he showed it […] It's on the house, my parents' house, where my brother
> lives currently. (Respondent 10, 66 years old)

The memory of the sacral places, which are very important not only in the community but for the people as well, is transmitted in an intergenerational way. It is often possible when two generations of the same family still live together in the same building or in the very close neighbourhood.

> It is something that we talk about at home, so we try at many different
> [occasions] but we continue. We are actually connected generationally,

always, the family always lives together, not only grandparents themselves, not only parents themselves, we rather try to make it two-generational family, at least until they don't throw us out. (Respondent 10, 66 years old)

Family memory about the sacral places is actually a 'living' process of transmitting recollections from the past to the younger generation. It usually takes place during many occasions, but also during the relatively common activities such as field works.

A lot is being told about renovating, the cult of this wayside shrines, which are in every village, at least some. In Rudzica, there are probably around 10 chapels, so as it looks, in Iłownica and Landek as well. So about the St. Wendelin's Chapel there were these messages most common, also because in my family, near the chapel my in-laws had their fields so practically when we used to go to these fields you walked near the St. Wendelin's Chapel, and so a lot was said about it. We prayed to Wendelin for the harvest, good harvest, good weather for harvest and other field works. (Respondent 4, 66 years old)

Local communities like the one studied may face threat of losing its identity, its sense of being different from other places. In the era of globalisation where everything seems to be so similar and uniform, it is important for such communities to root their sense of belonging in symbols and values connected with the land and objects situated there. Hence the research investigated the importance of sacral places and objects and also their meaning for the people.

The St. Wendelin's Valley, I also underline it, I think that many inhabitants feel a bit, well maybe it's not a good word, not just proud but it's more like "we do have St. Wendelin". [When they ask us] So what do you have here in Rudzica? [I answer] Well we have Wendelin, there is miraculous water, good for the eyes. Come, there's a celebration also. It is a sort of our distinguishing point and this makes us sure that Rudzica is not just any other village. (Respondent 1, 72 years old)

The Wendelin's Chapel is one of the most important places in Rudzica. It was mentioned several times by the respondents that it makes a significant object for the entire community. It also seems to be deeply rooted in both collective and collected memory.

> Well it is in every Rudzica man or woman's blood that he knows there is a chapel and it brings many people there. They go there, a lot of people visit the chapel especially in free time, mostly on Sundays. Because it is an important place, for it is the only chapel in Poland, of this Saint. (Respondent 3, 74 years old)

> It is a distinguishing place, and what I know from my life's experience, and I spent some time away from this place, because eighteen years in Grudziądz and five years in Olsztyn, and I walked around Mazury District […] and you get to see a lot of chapels like this, but it's not common in many towns and villages that these chapels were so distinguished or worshipped by society. (Respondent 4, 66 years old).

The study of collective and collected memory conducted in a place like Rudzica proves that there are communities which take care, nurture and cultivate their history, memory and hence construct a form of collective identity that may oppose the globalising forces. Sacral objects localised in this community serve many functions not only religious. They are incorporated in collective and collected memory. They also a place where people can meet each other and feel the sense of belonging to the same community. A large amount of work is also done by the mentioned local association which is a depositary of local memory and promotes local culture and traditions.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Family and family home can be perceived as important for not only socialisation and upbringing but also for nurturing family memory and

collective memory. It is also where collective identity is cultivated and transferred across generations.

Nurturing collective memory within the family and the local community serves an important function of constructing identity. The construction of collective identity is important for the local inhabitants to differentiate themselves from others, to clearly state "we" opposing to "them".

In the presented research it became apparent that family provides a space for the dissemination of local history, memories, recollections about the past events, people and places. Hence it helps create the common, shared memories and also a sense of belonging to a broader community.

The presented excerpts from the research may serve as signposts or markers for the future researches and studies of collective memory and identity in relation to the family. It has never been the aim of this paper to propose a straightforward and generalising explanation of the problems of memory, identity and family. It is rather to suggest the importance of conducting such studies and it should be noted that the results presented in this article are only a part of a bigger research project that is carried out in the local community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

BIOGRAPHY

The author is a sociologist interested mainly in the notions and problems of collective identities, collective memory, memorialisation and local communities in general. He is currently conducting a sociological research in a local community of Cieszyn Silesia focusing on the above mentioned problems of identity and memory.

REFERENCES

[1] Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity,* Polity Press, (2000).

[2] P.J. Burke, J.E. Stets, *Identity Theory*, Oxford University Press, New York (2009).

[3] M. Castells, *The Power of Identity,* Blackwell Publishing, (2007).

[4] A. Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte,* translated by Harriet Marineau, New York: William Gowans, (1868).

[5] M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory,* edited by Lewis Coser. University of Chicago Press, (1992).

[6] G. Jagger, C. Wright, *Introduction. Changing family values* [in:] Jagger G., Wright C. (ed.), *Changing Family Values,* Routledge, (2004), pp. 1–16.

[7] R. Jenkins, *Social Identity,* Routledge, (2008).

[8] S. Lawler, *Identity. Sociological Perspectives*, Polity Press, (2009).

[9] G. Mathews, *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket,* Routledge, (2002).

[10] P. Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,* Representations, No. 26 (1989), pp. 7–24.

[11] J. K. Olick, *Collective Memory: The Two Cultures,* Sociological Theory, Vol. 17, No. 3. (Nov., 1999), pp. 333–348.

[12] J. A. Seltzer, *Families Formed Outside of Marriage,* Journal of Marriage and the Family 62 (November 2000), pp. 1247–1268.

[13] A.D. Smith, *Nationalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2010.

[14] S. Stryker, P.J. Burke, *The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory*, Social Psychology Quarterly, Vol. 63, No. 4, (Dec., 2000), pp. 284–297.

[15] P. Sztompka, *Socjologia. Analiza Społeczeństwa*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 2007.