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# Narrative productions of memory: reflections on collective memories as knowledge about the past

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## ABSTRACT

This article proposes the Narrative Production Methodology (NPM) as a suitable methodology in the field of critical collective memory studies. Firstly, we discuss the narrative dimension of collective memory, exploring possible articulations between the critical perspective of the Social Psychology of Memory and NPM. We call this articulation Narrative Productions of Memory and we develop its potential through an example of research on the memories of migrant struggles for rights in Barcelona. We argue that Narratives of Memory produce knowledge by linking remembered experiences with present repertoires of interpretation, elaborating an understanding of current contexts and power relations that need to be challenged, and promoting alternatives. The strength of NPM in collective memory studies, we argue, lies in the production of horizontal and legitimate knowledge about the past, blurring the distance between researcher and participant, data and interpretation, memory and history.

## KEYWORDS

Narrative productions;  
collective memory;  
qualitative research;  
Barcelona; Spain

## Introduction

In this paper, we reflect on the confluences between the Narrative Productions Methodology (NPM) (Balasch and Montenegro 2003; see this special issue for an English translation of the original article) and critical studies of collective memory. To do so, we adopt the perspective of the Social Psychology of Memory (SPM) (Piper, Fernández, and Íñiguez 2013), which understands collective memory as a social process and product through which meanings about the past are constructed. Researching from an SPM perspective implies thinking about memory as a social practice and interpreting the meanings it constructs. The elaboration and analysis of collective memories carried out in the research turn out to be a strategy for reconstructing meanings about the past to understand the present (Piper, Fernández, and Íñiguez 2013). In this process, it is essential to pay attention to the relationship between researcher and participant, as both assume agency in the production of memories.

The NPM consists of the elaboration of texts that gather the point of view of participants on a particular social process. The procedure is recursive. First, the researcher and participant have a meeting to discuss the topic of study. Then, the researcher textualizes the discussion into a coherent narrative, which the participant later revises, modifies and/or deepens. These stages are repeated until the participant endorses the Narrative and authorizes its publication, becoming its author.

The NPM and the SPM overlap through four core parallels: a non-representationalist epistemological perspective, a concern for building horizontal relationships between researcher and participant, the importance given to reflexivity and responsibility, and the interest in promoting political and social transformation. These elements make the NPM a consistent and suitable methodological option in the research practice of an SPM.

In developing our argument, we reflect upon the narrative dimension of collective memory and the way it has been approached in the field of memory studies through strategies of testimony and autobiography. We then delve into possible articulations between a critical perspective of collective memory and the NPM by showing its use in the research ‘Collective Memories and Migrations: Political meanings of the migrant struggles in Barcelona’.<sup>1</sup> Finally, we argue that the NPM produces legitimate knowledge about the past. As such, it is essential to establish a dialogue with other versions of events that, as a result of the power relations conferred on academic institutions, are considered ‘authoritative knowledge’.

### **Collective memory, narrative and knowledge**

From an interpretative perspective and following Piper et al. (2022), we understand memory as a social process and product through which personal and collective histories are given meaning based on the conditions of the present (Halbwachs 2012; Piper, Fernández, and Íñiguez 2013; Vázquez 2001). In remembering, experiences are narrated by appealing to the symbolic and material resources available in the culture, which act as frameworks for memory organisation (Halbwachs 2012). Hence, analysing the meanings that memories construct about the past allows us to understand their conditions of possibility, which are always part of the present.

The relationship between memory, language and the construction of narratives is a question that has been widely addressed in the field of collective memory studies. As early as 1925, Halbwachs argued that language is the condition of collective thought and that ‘it is language and the whole system of

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social conventions that are in solidarity with it, which allows us at every moment to reconstruct our past' (Halbwachs 2012, 279). Drawing on Ricoeur's (1984) approach, researchers (Vázquez 2001) have affirmed that we remember by crafting a narrative articulation of events, ordering them around a sequence and plot that are fundamental for understanding and organising heterogeneous events into a unifying temporal synthesis. Memory does not simply emerge from the faithful reproduction of events but is constructed by assembling sequences, establishing relationships, providing details, introducing socially shared knowledge, moving through time and taking advantage of the virtuality that narration has when it comes to reconfiguring time (Ricoeur 1984).

The reading of memory as a narrative process has led various authors to develop strategies for constructing narratives, such as testimonies and autobiographies (Brockmeier 2009; García 2005; Hammack and Pilecki 2012; Muñoz 2003). These are particularly important in the field of oral history (Portelli 2015), which seeks to constitute an alternative to historiography – as a positivist science – by defending the legitimacy of memory and the importance of a situated, diverse and polyphonic view of the past (Serna 2009). As a counterpoint to historiography's search for objectivity, the narratives of the past developed by the actors themselves are understood as an expression of subjective experiences that allow us to learn about events denied or excluded by 'official history' (Arfuch 2013; Brockmeier 2000; Gatti 2016; Sarlo 2005). Understood in this way, narratives of the past assist us to confront the grand historical narratives that present themselves as true, objective and universal (Hernández 2012).

In confluence with the NPM, those aspects of the field of collective memory studies that highlight its narrative character seek to highlight the creative potential that memories of experiences – individual or collective – have in the interpretation and critical analysis of the past (Arfuch 2013, 2016; Sarlo 2005). It is also possible to find – albeit to a lesser extent – a concern for the relationship between researchers and participants in the research process (Cruz 2018; Cruz, José Reyes, and Cornejo 2012).

Although there are shared concerns about these questions in the fields of collective memory, oral history and narrativity studies, the truthfulness of testimonial and biographical narratives is often affirmed across all these fields (Blair 2008; Jelin 2002), highlighting the importance for the subject of the recognition of their memory as true. For Sarlo (2005), the use of testimony as proof of truth in trials and public debates, as well as the autobiographical accounts of victims denouncing crimes silenced by hegemonic versions of the past, have contributed to giving these genres the status of truth. The author points out the dangers of crystallising single senses of the past and underlines the importance of recognising that all narratives are made in the present.

The reification of the past and the character of truth given to memory narratives distances such visions from the NPM. The conviction that the narrative must be interpreted (Andrews 2007) and that it operates as an account from which experts construct history, contributes to rendering invisible the researcher's place in the production of the account itself. Developing a critical perspective on oral history, Portelli (2015) emphasises that the narratives of the past produced in research have resulted from a joint construction between narrator and researcher (Portelli 2015). The dialogue between the two seeks to generate a narrative that clearly articulates meanings and events of the past, paying special attention to the hidden meanings and opacities of the narrative (Muñoz 2003). However, the researcher must create the frame that gives historical value to the narrative produced (Muñoz 2003; Portelli 2015). As Calveiro puts it, the testimony is considered a 'raw account' that expert knowledge would then 'use, interpret and finally validate to construct a "truer truth", which subordinates memory to history, as a structured and "truly" comprehensive account' (Calveiro 2008, 84).

In short, in the field of collective memory studies, there is an active search for concepts and research methods that overcome the dichotomies between language and reality, memory and history, researcher and researched. However, the narrative is still treated as 'raw data' that the expert position must interpret to produce knowledge about the past and its relation to the present. In this way, the participant's agency in the production of knowledge is secondary.

### **Narrative productions and collective memories**

Some authors (Gatti 2016; Piper and Montenegro 2017) problematise these hierarchies between data and knowledge, between object and subject of knowledge, by proposing a performative understanding of memory, in which the boundaries between narrative, theory and experience are blurred. An example of this is the work of García (2005), who in her reflections interweaves narratives of memory and theories of political violence, articulating her experience of violence in Argentina with the understandings she constructs about it (Arfuch 2013). Her work reveals the potential of the narrative to strain and scrutinise versions of the past revealed, as well as hegemonic subject categories and their enunciative repertoires. Categories such as 'the victim' or 'the academic' blur their limits through the production of narratives that relate the testimonial and analytical dimensions of the remembered experience. In the act of narrating, subjects simultaneously recount experiences, situate memory in a certain discussion context and offer an understanding of their memories and the conditions of their production, assuming the agency of constructing theories from their own experience without an authorised other necessarily doing so on their behalf (Piper and Montenegro 2017; Sarlo 2005).

Following the postulates of SPM, we understand memory as a narrative process of constructing meanings about the past that seeks to make sense of the present and project the future (Piper, Fernández, and Íñiguez 2013; Vázquez 2001). We argue that the construction of narratives about the past that takes place within the research framework is both a production of memory and a research practice (Piper et al. 2022). The NPM thus becomes a methodological strategy that, placed at the service of this process, which enables us to give legitimacy to the voices of research participants as producers of knowledge about the past. The Narrative produced through the methodology puts forward a view of the world that the narrator wishes to present (Balasch and Montenegro 2003). In a Narrative of memory, it is knowledge about the past, a remembered experience that is recognised as having the same status of truth as historical knowledge. This view moves away from approaches that understand testimony as a representation of past experiences and empirical data, which acquires truth value only when interpreted by an expert authority (legal, psychological, historical or social) (Gatti 2016).

In this regard, the NP of memory is a narration of the past carried out comprehensively from the present. The interpretation of past experiences is, on the one hand, a theoretical reflection on the phenomena being remembered, and on the other, a narration as ‘true’ as any other. What differentiates an NP of memory from a historiographical account is not its relation to the reality it remembers but the position of power from which it is enunciated, which does not equate to an academic positionality. Thus, the NP of memory seeks to give legitimacy to the version that emerges out of the methodological procedure, recognising in it an epistemological value equivalent to that of scientific and supposedly objective versions of the past.

### **Memories of migrant struggles: a research experience with NP of memory**

The studies developed in the intersection between collective memories and migrations often overlook the history of migrants mobilising to defend rights in contemporary societies (Álvarez and Montenegro 2020; Varela 2015), as well as the relevance of memories about migration in host societies (Kleist 2017). The authors concerned with this double invisibilization (Glynn and Kleist 2012) have affirmed the need to create opportunities for migrants to tell and write these stories (Cappiali 2016). This turns them into subjects and actors in the process of memorialisation, rather than ‘object[s] of study’ (Hintermann and Rupnow 2016).

In the research ‘Collective Memories and Migrations: Political meanings of the migrant struggles in Barcelona’<sup>2</sup> we took up this challenge based on the use

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<sup>2</sup>The Narratives of memory carried out in this research were conducted in Barcelona between 2018 and 2021, each of them taking between 6 and 9 months, from the date of the first meeting to the publication of the final text.

of the NPM in the study of migrant memories, with the participation of 7 people – migrants and locals – who have been activists in these struggles.<sup>3</sup> The Narratives were carried out in three meetings involving conversation, textualisation, revision and approval. Under the initial invitation of ‘tell us about the migrant struggles in Barcelona and your experience of them’, and ‘how does memory intervene in these struggles’, the participants narrated milestones, dates, actions, political articulations and political objectives that were significant to them. The final texts were published on the website of a wider project looking into migrant solidarity in Barcelona (Cartografia Solidaritat 2022), making them available as public accounts of memory, which can be easily circulated and form part of available records of the struggles in the city. Making the Narratives public takes these memories beyond the realm of academic research and the possible uses that the researcher or author can make of them.

To illuminate the potential of the methodology we will refer to examples related to three Narratives of memory of this research, which also allow us to account for the specificity of the theorized past. Considering the NPM focus on connecting with diverse positions on a subject of study, explicitly seeking to produce critical interpretations, the participants were convened to remember experiences silenced by dominant memories, inviting them to reflect on the vision of the migrant collective as passive and isolated from society as a whole (Varela 2015). The objective of the experiences recreated in the Narratives of memory was to defy these visions, leading to the elaboration of the texts through a reflexive process between researcher and participants to achieve this goal.

The productive relation embedded in the methodology allows for the descriptive or content dimension of memory to be more complex by articulating a set of original interpretations that have the power to question and modify the initial positions of both the research team and the participants. By way of example, when analysing the first versions of her narrative on a political organising process during 2005 in Barcelona, the researcher asked Norma about the relevance of this memory. Norma answered by reflecting on present-day democracy, thus linking past and present in the analysis of the struggles in which she participates. In this respect, she states: ‘The memories of migrant struggles are a wake-up call about the need to keep fighting for agreements because we are always out in the open. Democracy is very weak, and if it is already weak for its citizens, it is worse for us’ (Norma 2021, 27).

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Participants signed an informed consent form based on the ethical guidelines of the Autonomous University of Barcelona, in which they approved their participation, the elaboration of the text and its subsequent publication.

<sup>3</sup>The authors of the Narratives are Karina (2018), Clara (2018), Lamine (2019), Ibrahi (2018), Núria (2018), Àurea (2022) and Norma (2021). To perform the horizontality between theories, we cite these narratives throughout the text in the same way that academic publications are cited.



In this regard, the NPM is not interested in the participant telling the ‘truth’ about their experience, maintaining the researcher in a distant and ‘objective’ position. On the contrary, the methodology embraces the relational character of memory, understanding the connection between participant and researcher as a potential reconfiguration of the conditions for memory production itself.

The reading that participants make of the product under construction, as well as the dialogue established about the Narrative between researcher and participant, implies an exercise in reflexivity that allows participants to problematise and understand the Narrative itself, paying attention to the positions of enunciation it promotes, and to assume a political responsibility concerning its impacts. Some Narratives produced in this research give particular relevance to the cycle of mobilisations known as *Encierros Migrantes*, or migrant sit-ins in Barcelona taking place in 2001 and 2005. In these, hundreds of migrants locked themselves for over a month in churches in the city, in response to a government announcement concerning the mass expulsion of migrants in an irregular administrative situation (Ibrahi 2018; Norma 2021). These are remembered as foundational milestones for migrant struggles in Barcelona as well as an exemplary victory, as they resulted in the administrative regularisation of thousands of people by the Spanish state.

The memories of the *Encierros* dialogue with the prevailing vision that centres the passivity of the migrant collective in the face of institutional violence, allowing for their early characterization as subjects in resistance. However, the centrality given to the triumph of the sit-ins in terms of regularisation and citizenship contributes to making invisible other practices of resistance and organisational processes part of the framework of migrant struggles. This issue, which Norma (2021) addresses after discussing with the researcher the centrality of these processes in the first textualisation of the Narrative, is problematised later on by her given her concern over the effects of discontinuity that this may generate. Thus, she decides to incorporate other experiences that were initially left out of the narrative. In Norma’s words, ‘When remembering the struggle, we make time jumps that do not account for these continuities and complexities, especially considering the 2001 and 2005 sit-ins. It is as if everything we have done is encapsulated in them as if it is only through them that migrant collectives in resistance exist’ (2021, 22–23).

In the Narrative, she describes how a migrant person, who was in the struggle to recover the abandoned military headquarters called *Casernas de Sant Andreu* in 2002, pointed out to her the oblivion around this very significant experience, which in her own words, represented a rebirth in their lives. In response to this, Norma notes

The *Encierros Migrantes* of 2001 consolidated us as a political movement, collectivising the struggle for rights, losing the preponderance of national organisation and becoming a social subject with its own political decisions and spokespersons. The *Encierros* of 2005



reinforced this position. However, before 2001, we also mobilised, and we continue to do so to this day, with very important actions that, like the sit-ins, are part of the struggles in Barcelona. (2021, 22–23)

The NPM invites the researcher to give special importance to the active participation of the participants in the production of theoretical knowledge about their experiences. Although these dialogues are not portrayed in the Narrative because priority is given to the fluidity of the textualisation and not to the reproduction of the conversation between the two positions (García and Montenegro 2014), the NP of memory is a record of the understandings that are generated by remembering.

In that sense, the NPM leads participants to narrate the past, paying attention to the effects of certain ways of memory-making, including their own. In the process, the participant becomes a critical thinker of collective memory, identifying the reproductions and potentialities that memory construction limits or enables about the present. Through this reflexivity, the responsive and strategic quality of memory production emerges, and its capacity to reshape reality through meanings, as seen in the case above, in discussions about the continuity of migrant collective actions.

The methodology strengthens the dialogue between memories during the production of the Narratives, intervening in the meanings produced in them. For example, in the process of textualizing a Narrative, new questions emerge, establishing new conversations between the researcher and other participants. Continuing with the example of the sit-ins, the researcher asked – considering what was said in Norma’s Narrative – another participant for her view on their centrality. In response, Núria recalls the struggles of the past to the present about organisational processes centred on autonomy, which seek to distance themselves from ‘citizen’ or ‘rights-’ centred movements. This is pointed out to critically engage with the memories of the sit-ins as part of available strategies of resistance:

The demands are diverse, and each collective has its forms of struggle, so we study different forms of action. We can do a “sit-in”, which is an interesting way of exerting pressure, but it is very exhausting and requires a lot of infrastructure. In 2001 or 2005, this worked because the objective was to make a situation visible and to generate a kind of migrant “strike” to pressure the administration regarding regularisation processes. These sit-ins are always remembered as a success, a conquest of certain demands, so it is a strategy that is always available. However, they turned out well because there was a very clear objective. If there were one now, what would we focus on? (Núria 2018, 9–10)

In the examples above, the NP dialogues about the memories that endorse or problematise the crystallization of practices of resistance and certain forms of organisation. Those meanings render more complex the relation established between researcher and participants, playing a role in how they relate to different narrations of the struggles as knowledge of the past and present. In

this regard the NPM does not seek to integrate memories into a totalising temporal narrative to explain the progression of social phenomena but rather to diffract (Haraway 1995) such understandings by addressing different experiences, which are given value by creating a narrative and reflecting on them.

Finally, the research process turns into an instance which leads the participant to produce memories in a specific sense as well as to discuss the concepts that the researcher uses. This dissolves the pre-existing consideration of the issues to which each position may refer, discussing the experiences remembered but also the theories used to understand that production. Related to this, Karina (2018) in her Narrative recalls the process of organising migrant women in the struggle for labour rights for house and care workers. Offering more than a chronological account of the organization process, the author interprets the formation of the organization as a strategy to change the existing regime of representation for migrant women in Barcelona, related to victimization, depoliticization and the folkloric stereotype. The focus on the theory production of the NPM, allows the NP author to reflect theoretically on memory construction, pointing out that memory generates a 'space for recognition', different from the hegemonic one (Karina 2018). The narration of this process recreates experiences that put forth this vision, for example, about the artistic performances they carry out in Sindihogar, the female house and care workers' union, of which she is a member, affirming the relevance of these practices relates in Karina's words,

to creating other aesthetics, to make it clear that, as one of our colleagues says, migrant women can also perform and build from another place. At the same time, it means opening up the spaces with which we think of ourselves and thus leaving the very limited margins that the system has prepared for us. From there comes our intention to make, think and reflect together not only in terms of the political but also in terms of the political aesthetic to explore other aesthetics of manifestation and action. (Karina 2018, 12)

This NP defines critical memory construction as a theoretical-political positioning that seeks to go beyond the traditional configurations of the subject in this field of relations. In that way, the subject of study itself becomes more complex through the Narratives, questioning the hierarchical relationship between the subject who remembers and the remembered fact, interpretation and data, memory and history, reflecting on them as the conditions in which the construction of meaning about past and present takes place.

### ***Final reflections***

In this article, we have shown, the relevance of the use of NPM for the study of collective memory processes, pointing out the epistemological and ethical-political confluence of the principles of the methodology with the assumptions

of SPM. We have reflected on how the relationship between memory and narrativity is approached in the field of collective memory studies, focusing on strategies such as testimony and autobiography. They share with NPM the relevance of narratives in scrutinising hegemonic versions of the past. However, NPM contributes to reshaping the relationship between researchers and participants in the research process, generating horizontal connections in the production of memory and knowledge.

The use of the NPM in the research on memories of migrant struggles that we have explained shows how this methodology constitutes an important contribution to both the field of collective memories, and to this field's intersection with the study of political struggles and migration. Moreover, we have pointed out the importance of highlighting the memorial dimension of any narrative and how research using the NPM is at the same time one that constructs collective memories.

As we can see from the research presented, Narratives arrange heterogeneous events, narrating past experiences of collective action and their relation to the present of migrant struggles. At the same time, through argumentative logic, the Narratives elaborate on an understanding of current contexts and the power relations that need to be challenged by promoting alternatives. The results of this and other research on collective memories with NPM (Fernández, Jorquera, and Ramos 2015; Piper and Margarita 2021; Piper and Montenegro 2017) show that the methodology allows the participants' gaze, ideas, values and actions to be highlighted, making visible dissident perspectives that are usually excluded from public memories.

On the one hand, the methodology contributes to generating conditions of possibility to build resistant memories, that is, those that put in a state of tension the hegemonic versions of the past and the present as well as the prevailing relations of domination. In this way, Narratives are narrations about the past that acquire a fundamental role as critical constructors of meaning (Gandarias, Montenegro, and Pujol 2019), delving into the experiences of people who embody the subject positions that we seek to understand. On the other hand, the principle of horizontality in the construction of knowledge is brought into play in consideration of the Narrative produced, transforming the status traditionally accorded to narratives about the past. In other words, the distance between the positions of a subject who remembers and a researcher who analyses and constructs knowledge is abridged or even upended. Constructed memories are not considered mere testimonies or pure data to be analysed by an expert but are themselves knowledge constructed from experiences recalled in a version of the past that is just as valid as that constructed by experts in historical research.

The Narratives of memory as a theoretical proposal encourage us to broaden the discussion that we establish as researchers when understanding a social process, going beyond the hierarchy which affirms academic

knowledge as the ‘only adequate way’ to understand reality. The Narratives equip us to generate significant knowledge by articulating the research with discussions concerning the participants and contributing from there. This potential of the NPM is an important resource for a critical perspective on collective memory, as it foregrounds the symbolic power of memory and its place in the present.

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