



The Materiality of Memory: Affects, Remembering and Food Decisions

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Abstract

Sociology has focused predominantly upon ‘collective memories’ and their impact on social continuity and change, while relegating individual memories to the status of an empirical data resource for research on experiences and identity construction or maintenance. This article suggests, however, that sociology has overlooked the part individual memories play in social production. It applies a post-anthropocentric, new materialist ontology, in which bodies, things, social formations, ideas, beliefs and memories can all possess capacities to materially affect and be affected. To explore the part that personal memory can play in producing the present and hence the future, data from in-depth interviews in a study of adults’ food decision-making and practices are reported. Personal memories deriving from earlier events affect current food practices, and these contribute to the materiality of people’s consumption of food stuffs. The article concludes by reflecting on the wider importance of personal memory for sociological inquiry and memory studies.

Keywords

affect, food, memory, memory studies, new materialism, social production

Introduction

Though there is a substantive sociological literature on ‘collective memories’ (Conway, 2010; Olick and Robbins, 1998), this article invites sociology to take seriously the material role that personal memories¹ (Assmann, 2008: 109) and remembering play in

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producing and sustaining the social world from moment to moment (a process to which we shall refer subsequently as ‘social production’). It addresses this issue by the application of a new materialist and post-human sociology that acknowledges the ‘materiality’ of memories, supplying to them a capacity to materially affect the world (just as they are themselves affected by events). It sets out propositions for the study of personal memory and social production in terms of the micropolitical *affectivity* of remembering and forgetting, and illustrates and explores these via empirical data on how memory and remembering affect people’s everyday food choices. More generally, the article will thereby aim to re-balance the emphasis within the sociology of memory that has privileged ‘collective’ at the expense of personal memories (Conway, 2010: 445; Olick, 2008: 153) in its understanding of continuity and change in the social world. It will consequently also seek to cut across barriers that treat individual memories as the territory of psychology and the collective that of sociology.

After a brief review of how sociology has engaged with issues around memory and remembering, the article sets out a new materialist framework for re-thinking what memory does sociologically. To illustrate this argument, we turn then to the specific topic of food preferences and choices, and report data from a study in which respondents reflect upon the influences on what food they currently consume or prefer. We assess from a materialist perspective how personal memories affect current food preferences, and then conclude by discussing more generally the key part that personal memories play in producing the social world from moment to moment.

Memory in Social Research

Zerubavel (1995: 283–284) has suggested that psychologists’ interests in memory have been individualistic: both in terms of the physiological processes involved in how humans remember past events, and with the specific memories of individuals, typically as these bear upon mental health. Sociologists by contrast have been cautious about personal memories, regarding them either as subjective representations of the social world with an unclear relationship to the ‘reality’ of past events – as has been demonstrated in psychoanalysis and psychological studies of ‘false memories’ (Schacter et al., 2011), or as ultimately socially produced anyway (Erll, 2008: 5). The proper concerns of sociology, Jedlowski (2001) argues, are the social ‘frameworks’ that give meaning to personal memories; collective memories; and cultural attitudes towards memory. Personal memories have consequently been given less weight, and have been treated primarily as empirical data resources to enable researchers to glean information on respondents’ experiences (Jedlowski, 2001: 31) or as constitutive of stories/narratives people use in identity construction or maintenance (Jedlowski, 2001: 33, see also Squire, 2008).

Memory was accorded little attention in classical sociology (Olick and Robbins, 1998: 107), with the exception of Durkheim’s disciple Halbwachs, who developed and researched the concept of collective memory (1992 [1950]), as an antidote to psychology’s individualistic focus. He argued that individuals remember the past only in the context of membership of a specific group, community or other social body (Connerton, 1989: 36; Conway, 2010: 443). Collective memory may be defined as the ‘social representations concerning the past, which each group produces, institutionalizes, guards and

transmits through the interaction of its members' (Jedlowski, 2001: 33). As such, it provides a means for these groups to establish distinctive social identities and differentiate themselves from others (Neiger et al., 2011: 3). It follows that collective memories can possess a 'political' objective (Neiger et al., 2011: 4) that personal memories do not.

The ascendancy of collective memory within sociology may be seen against the backdrop of the discipline's 'cultural turn' (Coser, 1992; Friedland and Mohr, 2004; Miller, 1998: 3) and the emergence of constructionism and post-structuralism (Gannon, 2008; Klein, 2000: 128; Olick and Robbins, 1998: 108; Shahzad, 2011) that explored the part that meanings, symbols and cultural framings played within social processes and institutions and in the social construction of events, experiences and identities. Collective memory has become a dominant research concern of the sociology of memory and 'memory studies', where studies have explored collective processes of remembering and forgetting in material structures and practices such as museums, memorials, ceremonies and traditions (Connerton, 1989; Langenbacher, 2010; Zerubavel, 1995); in material culture (Jones, 2007; Morton, 2007; Schlunke, 2013); the media (Hibberd and Tew-Thompson, 2016; Neiger et al., 2011), and embodied practices such as military drill or ritual behaviour (Connerton, 1989: 68).

This sociological and relational emphasis focused studies of memory upon how the social world produces specific collective memories (Zerubavel, 1995), addressing temporality by linking remembered pasts to the lived present and the imagined future (Conway, 2010: 443). Collective remembering and forgetting has been implicated in the transmission of 'culture' from past to present (Olick and Robbins, 1998: 108); in the macropolitics of how states establish adherence to political doctrines such as 'democracy' or 'communism' (Connerton, 1989: 41–42; Meyer, 2008); and in the emergence of 'individual', group and 'national' identities (Lee, 2000; Olick and Robbins, 1998: 122–126; Sutton, 2008b). Human geography, meanwhile, has also addressed the interactions between collective memories, space and landscapes (Foote and Azaryahu, 2007; Jones, 2011: 877–878).

Within this body of work, some scholars of collective memory have addressed the relationship with materiality, exploring how memories are mediated by material cultures, particularly within museums, monuments and buildings.² Sturken (2016) explored how material remnants housed in the 9/11 Memorial Museum have reconstituted New York's Twin Towers as Ground Zero, with a new narrative concerning loss, grief and terrorism. Similarly, Bach (2016) suggests that the various memorial sites and 'tourist experiences' established after the fall of the former Berlin Wall serve both to conserve memories of the past and to produce a number of distinct and sometimes contradictory narratives for the present (variously around democracy, globalisation, consumption, creativity). The 'Island of Ireland' Peace Park in Belgium is a monument whose design and use aims to mobilise specific memories of the past 'in order to intervene in the political discourses of the present' (Poulter, 2017).

These sociological studies typically establish material objects as constitutive of memories. However, further steps are needed to explore the memory/matter connection. First, all the studies we have just mentioned, and many others like them, retain sociology's focus upon *collective* memories and memorialisation – shared sites of memory – and do not venture into the interactions between 'personal' memories and matter. Second, we

want to query the implied *directionality* of the interaction between matter and memory/remembering. If, as Jedlowski (2000: 30) notes, ‘recalling and forgetting, selecting and processing’ are pervasive in most walks of life, then what are the material effects of these memories in the present? To explore this further, we take advantage of the post-anthropocentric ontology of the new materialisms, in which thoughts, emotions and memories have capacity to materially affect.

A (New) Materialist Perspective on Memory

In the humanities and social sciences, *new materialism* refers to a range of perspectives that have in common a ‘turn to matter’ (as opposed to the focus upon texts and language in post-structuralism) that emphasises the materiality of the world and everything – social and natural – within it. Drawing on a very wide range of disparate philosophical, feminist and social theory perspectives (Coole and Frost, 2010: 5; Fox and Alldred, 2017; Lemke, 2015), the new materialisms recognise materiality as plural and complex, uneven and contingent, relational and emergent (Coole and Frost, 2010: 29). Unlike Marxist sociology’s ‘historical materialism’ that considered an economic base as the foundational driver for social relations, new materialists consider that the world and history are produced by a wide range of material forces that extend from the physical and the biological to the psychological, social and cultural (Barad, 1996: 181; Braidotti, 2013: 3).

The ontology advocated by new materialist scholars has been described as ‘flat’ or ‘monist’ (as opposed to ‘dualist’), rejecting differences not only between Marx’s (1971) conception of ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’, but also between ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ realms, human and non-human, and – perhaps most significantly for this article – between mind and matter (van der Tuin and Dolphijn, 2010). By challenging any distinction between the materiality of the physical world and the social constructs of human thoughts and desires, it opens up the possibility to explore their material interactions, and how things other than humans (for instance, a tool, a technology or even an idea) can be social ‘agents’, making things happen. New materialist sociology consequently shifts humans from centre stage, to engage productively not only with human culture but also with other living things, and with the wider environment of inanimate matter. This ‘flat ontology’ (DeLanda, 2005: 51) re-focuses attention toward ‘events’: the endless cascade of material interactions of both nature and culture that together produce the world and human history, and away from structural or systemic ‘explanations’ of how societies and cultures work (Latour, 2005: 130). Exploring the relational character of events and their physical, biological and expressive composition becomes the sole means for sociology to explain the continuities, fluxes and ‘becomings’ that produce the world around us.

To develop the features of a sociological new materialism, we draw upon the well-developed and widely applied conceptual framework deriving from Gilles Deleuze’s (1988) materialist reading of Spinoza, as developed in the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1984, 1988), by social and feminist scholars such as Braidotti (2006), DeLanda (2006), Grosz (1994) and Thrift (2004), and then applied in empirical social science by Alldred and Fox (2015), Duff (2010), Fox et al. (2018), Renold and Ringrose (2011), Youdell and Armstrong (2011) and others. This DeleuzoGuattarian approach is predicated upon three propositions, concerning relationality, agency and micropolitical capacities.

First, new materialism asserts the fundamental *relationality* of all matter: bodies, things and social formations gain their apparent 'is-ness' only through their relationship to other similarly contingent and ephemeral bodies, things and ideas (Deleuze, 1988: 123; Haraway, 1991: 201). Actions and events are *assemblages* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 88) of these *relations* that develop 'in a kind of chaotic network of habitual and non-habitual connections, always in flux, always reassembling in different ways' (Potts, 2004: 19). For instance, a 'sexuality-assemblage' (Fox and Alldred, 2013) accrues around an event such as an erotic kiss, which comprises not just relations between pairs of lips but also physiological processes, personal and cultural contexts, aspects of the setting, sexual codes and norms of conduct, and – importantly for this article – memories of past experiences (as well as many other relations specific to that particular kiss-event). The relations within assemblages may be identified from sources including empirical data, research literature and our knowledge and understanding of the social and natural world.

Second, a conventional conception of (human) agency is replaced with the Spinozist notion of *affect* (Deleuze, 1988: 101), meaning simply a capacity to affect or be affected. An affect is a 'becoming' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 256) that represents a physical, psychological, emotional or social change of state or capacities of an entity (Massumi, 1988: xvi). All matter has an 'agential' capacity to *affect*, rather than being inert clay moulded by human agency, consciousness and imagination (Barad, 1996: 181; Coole and Frost, 2010: 2): this assessment de-privileges human agency as the means by which the social world is produced and reproduced. Affects produce further affective capacities within assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 400), and because one affect can produce more than one capacity, social production is a branching, coalescing and rupturing (rather than linear) flow. Clough (2004: 15) describes this complex flow as an 'affect economy'.

Third, analysis of this relational ontology is necessarily micropolitical – at the level of assemblages, affects and capacities, as opposed to exterior forces, structures or systems. Affects within assemblages act on bodies, things and social formations to alter their capacities – what they can do (Duff, 2010: 625). Affect economies may limit bodies and things within existing capacities or even close these down – a process of specification or 'territorialisation' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 88–89), or open up new possibilities (capacities) in them (generalisation or 'de-territorialisation'). Deleuze and Guattari argued (1988: 294) that memories are territorialising forces that will tend to shift bodies into habit and repetition.

This non-essentialist relational ontology suggests a framework for how we might conceptualise the materiality of memory. To explore this, consider again the example of a kiss mentioned a moment ago. We may imagine that a qualitative research study has generated an analysis of a 'kiss-assemblage' between two humans A and B on a second date. This reveals (in no particular order) the following relations:

A's lips – B's lips – social and sexual norms – A and B's personal attributes (e.g. physical appearance, personality, job) – dating conventions – immediate material contexts – past experiences and circumstances

These relations assemble because of the affects between them (for instance, the affective power of A's appearance upon B's mind and body, or the impact of dating conventions

that require a kiss at the end of a second romantic date). In our imagined study of first kisses, we might expect to learn from interviews with A and B precisely how ‘past experiences and circumstances’ might affect a kiss positively or negatively. They might describe how what happened during their dates, or how memories of past encounters with other people (including sexual partners) gave significance to, or added or reduced the pleasure provided by the kiss.

From this we may conjecture that memories can materially affect bodies, things and social processes, and it is partly the memories that individuals bring to events that link these events across time and space, in the process producing both social continuities and change. These past experiences are not of course materially present within the current kiss-event, but have a virtual presence via rememberings of earlier events, along with other virtual affects such as expectations, imaginations, fantasies and ideas. It is these rememberings (which may or may not be accurate representations of the events upon which they were based) that contribute affectively – alongside many other assembled relations – to event-assemblages (whether in the relatively trivial example of a kiss or in other events), making that event-assemblage do whatever it does.

However the relational ontology of the new materialist perspective has some further implications for theorising the materiality of memories. From such an ontological position, ‘memories’ should not be considered as pre-existing, essential entities with fixed attributes. Rather, remembering and forgetting are processual and contingent: in terms of their initial production during past events; in terms of the effects they may have in the present; and finally in terms of how subsequent events may affect how they are remembered or forgotten.³ More formally, we may summarise the perspective that new materialism brings to understanding memory, remembering and forgetting in the following three propositions.

1. When human bodies are assembled in a present event, memory traces of past events are materially affective, entering into the ‘affect economy’ of the present.
2. Memory production (‘memorising’) is relational and contingent. Though events leave a corporeal, cognitive and/or emotional trace upon a body, we cannot know in advance what memory-traces an event will generate.
3. Because memories interact with many other relations in an event-assemblage, we cannot predict what effects remembering/forgettings will have within a particular assemblage.

It is these propositions that we set out to explore in the following empirical illustration.

Studying Food and Memory

Social science studies suggest that food is an important ‘site’ of memory (Sutton, 2008a: 176) in which memories mediate social and cultural values and norms that impact on identity, cultural continuity and sense of belonging (de Certeau et al., 1998: 188–189; Holtzman, 2006). Lupton (1994) found that students’ childhood memories of food were linked strongly to family relationships and the rituals of shared mealtimes and the emotions associated with them. These memories could be more powerful in food choice than rational criteria (Lupton,

1994: 682, see also Köster, 2009). In an era of uncertainty, Duruz (1999: 250) suggested, food memories from the 1950s and 1960s supplied Australians with a skein of cultural resources with which to construct 'imaginary places of stability and security' to sustain *fin de siècle* identities. However, recollections of past collective meals among Greek islanders served not only as nostalgia but as 'prospective memories' – cues to initiate practical preparations for forthcoming meal events (Sutton, 2008a: 163).

Other studies document more individual consequences of food memories. Analysis of data from a 1982 Mass Observation survey (Uprichard et al., 2013) found various 'food hates' (for foodstuffs such as tripe, milk puddings or jellied eels) grounded in memories, predominantly from schooldays or childhood. Some of these had endured since childhood, while other respondents now enjoyed foods they had disliked when younger. In a study of memories of forced food consumption during childhood, a survey of US college students found that most episodes were recalled as powerfully negative, with 72 per cent saying they would not willingly eat the foodstuff today (Batsell et al., 2002). Veterans exposed to Asian food during active service in the Pacific during the Second World War had less favourable opinions of Chinese and Japanese food than those who had fought in the European theatre (Wansink et al., 2009).

The challenge of researching memory from a materialist perspective is to apply methods and methodology sensitised to the affective capacities of memories upon present events. We report data from a qualitative study that set out to explore food decision-making and associated practices among families living in the north of England. A sample of 45 adult participants was drawn from the ranks of the South Yorkshire Cohort.⁴ Sampling was random, but stratified according to body weight and family income, based on BMI and Index of Multiple Deprivation scores, to provide 15 'low deprivation obese', 15 'high deprivation obese' and 15 'high deprivation normal body weight' respondents, though in this article we do not differentiate on these variables. NHS ethics approval was granted for the original cohort study, with subsequent ethics approval for this study obtained from the University of Sheffield.

Most participants were interviewed twice. The first interview used the 'free association narrative' approach of Hollway and Jefferson (2000: 53) to elicit past and present narratives around food and associated practices. This methodology is well suited to the purposes of new materialist analysis, as it can provide rich evidence of the physical, social and psychological relations in event-assemblages. The second interview applied a more structured approach, to follow up and probe themes that emerged in the first interview associated with food practices.

Methodologically, new materialism shifts focus from human agents to human/non-human assemblages, attending to the material effects of bodies, things, social formations and other affective relations, including memories (see Fox and Allred, 2015 for more on this analytical approach). For this article, analysis of data focused specifically upon memories associated with food consumption and preferences (though for one respondent we document multiple relations in her 'food assemblage'). Transcripts were trawled for examples where respondents *explicitly* described how food experiences in the past affected subsequent food events, attitudes or interactions, with the assistance of NVivo data management software. No attempt was made by the analyst to inductively link reports of past food-related events in one part of the interviews to their reports of present

food choices in another, or to use as data discussions by respondents of third parties' past and present food choices. In the report of findings that follows, respondents are identified only by number; quotations are referenced using a notation in which, for example, the reference (1.2) means respondent 1, second interview.

Study Findings

In this section we consider the data from this study in terms of the three propositions on the materiality of memories set out earlier.

Proposition 1. Memories are Materially Affective, Entering into the 'Affect Economy' of the Present

Data suggest that memories could be materially affective, influencing present food events in various ways. One respondent in the study – who worked as a school cook – described how immediate recollection of her work influenced her daily food choices at home later the same day.

And I think sometimes when I'm ordering at work, ordering say like the meats and produce that I order, that I use for work, for cooking, I'll come home and because in the back of me head I'll be thinking right I've got mince in at work that was saved for lasagne or for mince pie, whatever I've ordered it for. And so in the back of me head I'm going home and I'll think what can we have for tea and I'll go in freezer and there'll be mince there and I'll go, oh we'll have a lasagne. But it's because I've ordered it from work, you know what I mean, and it's just like the seed's there in the back of your mind and you just think. So it does influence you. (23.2)

In addition to this 'cognitive' remembering, this respondent also gave an example of a corporeal or embodied memory, sometimes described as a 'habit-memory' (Connerton, 1989: 23): a memory that has been so frequently reinforced by repetition that it has a powerful embodied affect on subsequent events.

I can just knock stuff up. I don't weigh a pound. Very rare. Very rare I weigh a pound because I just look at it and think yeah, that's right, and I just throw it all together. And I can do that, you know. But I think a lot of that comes with weighing up 8oz of something for 30 years, you know what 8oz looks like, you know. (23.2)

Few food memories in the study were cognitive and corporeal, however. The overwhelming majority of food memories offered by respondents linked past food experiences to positive or negative reactions or emotions. Thus the following two respondents described remembered likes and dislikes associated with specific foodstuffs, and – in the second extract – how this affected meal-preparation decisions.

I do like pork and nobody ever cooks it like my mum cooked it, and she always did it with crackling and that was always gorgeous. ... I do like lots of seafood but things, I don't like things like octopus, calamari, stuff like that. But I don't mind the fish, different fish, I like skate and I like plaice, bream, anything like that. (26.2)

We don't experiment no, we tend to know what we like, or at the moment we tend to rely upon what we've had previously and heavily depend on that we're going to get through an evening meal okay. (2.2)

Some foods were associated with bad memories from earlier in life. The following demonstrates how a negative food memory from childhood continued to affect present responses to specific foods.

I think it was powdered egg they'd used and there was always this rumour that it was stock left from the Second World War. Now whether that was true or not, maybe not, but it certainly I think it was powdered egg. And I still have problems eating scrambled egg. (10.2)

For respondent 2, one negative experience could be enough to prevent him even tasting a foodstuff again.

I mean I suppose ultimately if I've tasted something for a first time, and then I didn't enjoy it, you've always got the safeguard of just literally just pushing it away from you and saying no I've tasted that, I'll have something else. ... I think it was a question of that maybe an early experience put me off and ... I'm entrenched in that old fashioned belief that no, no, once bitten twice shy, I'm not going up that path again. (2.2)

Proposition 2. Memory Production (Memorising) is Relational and Contingent: We Do Not Know What Memories an Event will Generate

Though the previous examples suggest that sometimes it could be simply the recall of an unpleasant taste or other experience of a foodstuff that affected present food decisions, often the data in this study indicated a more complex process surrounding how food memories had been generated in the first place. For the following respondents, food memories were highly contextual. Negative responses to spaghetti Bolognese and chicken soup respectively were not reactions to the taste of the food, but rather that their frequent serving during childhood had turned them off, so they felt they had 'had enough' of that particular meal.

So every time my dad said 'I'll cook', it was always spaghetti Bolognese, that's the only thing he can cook. ... It's some old family recipe of my dad's side, that my dad's, I don't know where he's got it from, from them, but it's a version of spag bol. ... Heavily laced in garlic and onions, yeah. You can smell it and taste it for days. My mum tends to, when he offers to cook; she'll be like 'no you're all right. I've had enough of spaghetti'. (24.2)

My mum would boil leftovers and use stock, and obviously meat falls off don't it. So now I don't eat, I eat chicken soup made in a tin but I wouldn't dream of making it myself. Because I ate it enough when I was a kid, and we had it every Monday. Plus we had chicken every Sunday. (7.2)

Positive memories of foods might be more to do with the positively valorised events within which the food was consumed. For the next respondent, a relatively unappetising food has positive connotations with meals she had eaten with her father.

I used to like readymade fish pies, them Admiral's fish pies, and if there's half an ounce of fish in them it's a miracle, you know, but it's just the taste of it. And I suppose because it reminds me of me dad, and me dad used to eat it. And I just like the taste of it, and I'd quite happily buy one of them. And they're cheap and they're nasty and they're about a pound a piece and nothing to them at all. But I like them, you know, I just like the taste of it. And I think it's probably because it reminds me of me dad. (23.2)

Respondent 16 claimed that she had not missed sweets, biscuits and crisps during her childhood. Yet this lack may have generated an unconsidered affect that had had an unexpected and unintended consequence later in her life, when she was in charge of her own diet.

We didn't have sweets and things in the house, no, chocolate and biscuits and stuff like that. ... We never felt like we were missing out or anything; that was just the way it was. I thought it was more strange to have them in the house than it was to not have them in the house, but then the minute I could buy these things for myself I sort of went the other way and ended up eating too many of them. (16.2)

For respondent 4, the timing of her Sunday family meal was based on a moral imperative deriving from childhood valorisation of a ritual Sunday dinner.

Most of the time we have it [Sunday meal] at tea time, unless Gareth's mum's coming then we had it at like half past one time, something like that. ... [As a child, we] used to always have it dinner time [i.e. early evening], we always have a Sunday dinner. ... I think Sunday it's well you should have a Sunday, it's Sunday dinner isn't it. (4.2)

Proposition 3. Memories Interact with Many Other Relations in an Event-Assemblage, With Unpredictable Effects

The examples offered so far have sought to demonstrate how a memory associated with food affected present food events. However, the data also reveal that the effects of food memories were often caught up with many other material relations within a current food event, so that the influence of the food memory might not be straightforward. For the following respondent, sharing food events in the present were affected not only by her own food-related memories, but also by the influence of her partner and his family, and their material engagements with food.

I suppose food was, food's a big thing in Tom's side of the family, it's a big social event and they enjoy their food, and they talk about food a lot, and the family centres around the table if you like. And I'd say I was probably heavily influenced by that, because with my side of the family, food's important but you eat to stop being hungry and you eat to be healthy and it's not, you don't indulge in all this naughty food all the time. (28.2)

Sometimes the affectivity of memories was outweighed entirely. This respondent described how the aroma of coffee persuaded her to try drinking it, despite previous experiences.

You go in Starbucks and it's like oh. I can remember once, I think it was when I was having him [child], I had this thing about coffee. So I bought a jar of coffee, I'm like I'm going to drink it, I really, the smell of it, and I drank it. After the first mouthful I spat it out. You know, that's disgusting, it smells nice but it's disgusting. (4.1)

Earlier we noted how memories affected respondent 16's food consumption and choices. However, analysis of the entirety of the two interviews with this respondent supplied an opportunity to identify the wide range of relations that contributed to her present interactions with food. In no particular order, the complex 'food assemblage' of material relations may be summarised as:

husband – work – autistic son – foodstuffs – supermarkets – time – family members – health – body weight – money – cooking equipment – diet – slimming clubs – sugar – peer group – restaurants – memories of food and eating

These relations affected food choices in multiple, interacting ways. Thus for example, food choices were affected by her son's very picky preferences that excluded many vegetables; by the food available in local retail outlets; by notions of 'healthy eating'; by her efforts to lose weight, the guidance provided by her slimming club and peer pressure from other club members; and so forth. So while respondent 16 described the effects of past eating experiences on food choices, the affectivity of her memories was always assembled with many other affective forces. Similar analysis of other respondents' interviews could disclose their own unique food assemblages, within which the effects of memories may play a greater or lesser part. Analysis of such assemblages demonstrates that the affectivity of memories is always contextualised within a broader affect economy, deriving from multiple interacting relations.

Discussion

The data we have offered here provide an illustration of how past events, mediated via personal memories, affect present behaviour, beliefs or attitudes concerning food choice. While the fact that what we have eaten and enjoyed/disliked in the past affects what we eat in the present may seem glaringly obvious, we would argue that it is of far wider significance: for the sociological analysis of social production; for a materialist understanding of continuity and change; and for memory studies' perspective on collective and personal memories. We will consider each of these in turn.

First, this insight into the part that personal memories play in producing the world and history is important because it acknowledges that memories are not just an individual record of people's movement through the events that make up their lives, but also are in themselves a productive force that plays an important part in shaping our present and future. As Yates notes,

Memory becomes accordingly both more and less mental and material, something that flows through circuits, the affective product of a network. Memory happens, turns out to be transitive, takes an object, requires a subject. But it also exceeds all its hosts, seeps in between and through

the join between beings to become more than anyone or anything bargained for. (Yates, 2016: 113)

This understanding of memory challenges the long-held sociological view that personal memories are properly the domain of psychological inquiry, and that sociology should limit its concerns to the sociocultural production of collective memory. A materialist analysis reveals that personal memories are a key element in understanding the forces that sustain continuities in the social world but also contribute to social transformations, as elements within of the mix of affects that shape events. This formulation of memories as affects cuts across the personal/collective memory dualism discussed earlier: it is irrelevant to this analysis whether memories are ‘shared’, or ‘personal’.

We may extend this insight further, into the realm of non-human memory. Animal memories may affect social and economic events – for example, fishes’ recall of their breeding grounds will affect the fishery industry and the nation’s diet; dogs’ and cats’ recollections of their owners and their homes will affect human/animal interactions, pet food retail and so on. Inanimate objects (statues, museums, buildings, photographs, art) or social formations (ceremonies, traditions, rituals) can be regarded as ‘memorising’ past events, as of course do documents, photographs and media, and other physical records of past events (Pinchevski, 2011). All may become affective relations within event-assemblages independent of human-mediated memories, and can be analysed as such.

Second, if doubts over the significance of memory for sociology persist, they are brought into sharp focus for those who wish to embrace the monist or flattened ontology (Fox and Alldred, 2017; Karakayali, 2015) of perspectives including post-structuralism, feminist post-humanism and the new materialisms. Unlike historical materialism, structuralism and critical realism, such perspectives operate without notions such as structures, systems or mechanisms working ‘behind the scenes’ to produce and sustain the world. Analysis instead must be ‘micropolitical’, focusing entirely upon the processes within events to explain the social world. This monism may appear as a limitation of this perspective, rendering it unable to adequately explain social continuities and stabilities. However, the analysis of personal memory in this article suggests how the past may influence the present and future. Remembering (and forgetting), whether personal or ‘collective’, supplies the means for the past to influence current and future events, though as we have seen these affects are unpredictable, and as the illustration showed, on occasions positive past food experiences can transmute into negative forces upon current food events.

At the same time, as we also noted, memories are just one element within any event; consequently, their effects will be balanced out by many other affective relations, many of which will favour novelty, discontinuity and change. Given that memories are not perfect records of the past, but are modified by the contexts at the points of both memorising and remembering, memories could never serve as a means to assure continuity – however much the architects of some collective remembering practices (statues, monumental buildings) might wish. Nor may they be relied on to orchestrate change.

This leads us to the final area of significance: upon memory studies. We believe that insight into the contribution of personal remembering (and forgetting) to social production requires a rebalancing of memory studies away from collective memory toward the

much more common and pervasive realm of personal memories. While the memorialisation of the past through the kinds of materialist events and objects discussed by scholars of collective memories remains of sociological import, we need to begin to design studies that can explore the impact of personal memory upon social production, continuity and change. This is a vast area of potential research, as personal memories encompass cognitive reactions to events, emotional responses and corporeal sensations such as pleasure or disgust,⁵ as well as habitual memory (Connerton, 1989) that range from the most unconscious processes such as walking and eating, to reading and recalling simple multiplication tables, to everyday embodied tasks such as driving a car or mastering specialist tools or musical instruments. At the same time, this link between memory and social production can reinvigorate studies of collective memory, to explore the affective flows within events where collective memories may be invoked or mobilised alongside personal memories. Examples ripe for such exploration in terms of memories (personal *and* collective) and affects include popular uprisings, public mass grieving for celebrities or major sporting events (Fox, 2013, 2015), to generate further insights into the complex ways in which memories affect social processes.

These three consequences of a focus upon personal memory have methodological implications. Many qualitative sociological studies are replete with data on respondents' memories, yet these are usually treated simply as ways to get at the experiences or events that a study wishes to investigate. Instead, we need to develop materialist research studies that are designed to explore personal memories as affective, and use interviews and observations to reveal their part in producing continuity and/or change. Designs that will be suited to this task will obviously include ethnography and qualitative interviews, but these can usefully be augmented by surveys and perhaps social experiments, as well as more creative approaches such as ambulatory interviews that can explore the memories triggered by a neighbourhood, house or work-space; group explorations of memories; and action research that attempts to use memories proactively to effect desired changes. Such studies can begin to bridge the gap between sociology's focus on collective memory and psychological studies of cognitive processes in remembering and forgetting, contributing to the 'post-disciplinarity' of the new materialisms (Taylor and Iverson, 2013: 665).

To conclude, we have shown that from a materialist perspective, personal remembering (and perhaps forgetting) must be taken seriously as a non-human force that affects the production and sustaining of the social world, and a potent source of affectivity that link events and assemblages across time and space. Personal and collective memories serve as a virtual resource for social production, but their actualisation in events is unpredictable and unstable. Along with other psychic products – such as imaginations, dreams and premonitions – memories permeate our lives and our social interactions. As such they need to be acknowledged by sociology as contributory to how the social world unfolds, and no longer treated simply as a means to gain access to respondents' backgrounds, experiences or beliefs.

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Notes

1. The term ‘personal memory’ is used to describe a memory held by an individual person, as opposed to a more widely held cultural or collective memory. We considered terming such memories ‘individual’ (Olick, 2008: 156), ‘mental’ (Erl, 2008: 4) or ‘embodied’, but all these adjectives have problematic or ambiguous connotations. Wherever possible in this article we avoid sustaining the personal/collective opposition and refer to ‘memory’ without further elaboration.
2. The journal *Memory Studies* devoted an issue to memory and materiality in 2016.
3. A more appropriate formulation might therefore speak of ‘remembering’ and ‘forgetting’ as contextual processes. Subsequent uses of ‘memory’ in this article should be understood in the light of this qualification.
4. The South Yorkshire Cohort was funded by the National Institute of Health Research, and comprises more than 22,000 patients recruited from 42 general practices in South Yorkshire in 2010 who expressed willingness to participate in subsequent studies, including the research that this article reports.
5. This adds a further dimension to recent explorations of the part emotions play in social production (Fox, 2015).

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