

Collective Forgetting in a Changing Organization: When memories become unusable and uprooted

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Abstract

How is collective remembering inhibited by organizational changes which were not intended to manipulate it? And how does collective forgetting affect workers' power and sense of identity? We rely on an ethnographic study of a charitable organization that went through recent organizational changes to study two processes constitutive of collective forgetting. The first process consists in the past becoming unusable because once-useful memories lost their practical usefulness for participants' new activities. The second process consists in the past becoming uprooted because the social relations through which memories used to be shared had changed beyond recognition. Our findings provide insights into the organizational processes through which memories cease to circulate. They also help understand the complex relations between memory, power relations and participants' sense of identity.

Keywords

collective forgetting, Halbwachs, identity, memory, silence

In management and organization studies, loss of memory is often associated with politics of forgetting (Nissley & Casey, 2002; Mena, Rintamäki, Fleming, & Spicer, 2016) whose main purpose is to use the past strategically to win consent for change (Ybema, 2014) or maintain and legitimize the status quo (Anteby & Molnar, 2012; Booth, Clark, Delahaye, Procter, & Rowlinson, 2007). We know, however, relatively little about *unintended* collective forgetting. That is, when collective

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forgetting is not engineered by direct and intended memory work, but results from seemingly unrelated societal/organizational changes. By ‘unintended collective forgetting’, we do not mean loss of organizational knowledge due to accidental destruction of documents or other artefacts (de Holan & Phillips, 2004). We mean instead forgetting resulting from the unintended erosion of collective cultural frameworks that people use to reconstruct and circulate memories of specific events.

The phenomenon of unintended collective forgetting has been acknowledged in memory studies (Assmann, 1995; Connerton, 2008). Nonetheless, we need to understand its organizational context and dynamics (Casey & Olivera, 2011), especially when lost memories matter to people and forgetting affects people’s power, worth and sense of identity. For instance, Linde’s (2000) otherwise remarkable field study of organizational history becoming memory and identity ends precisely when unintended collective forgetting might start to manifest itself. Linde traces how members of an insurance company shape their sense of identity and trajectory through ‘paradigmatic’ career stories of long-standing members of staff (especially the story of old Bob). She remarks towards the end of her account that Bob’s career story has lost its relevance for younger members of staff who face novel social circumstances. However, the events that follow the obsolescence of Bob’s story are left to speculation: ‘The most serious question is whether this paradigmatic narrative will be replaced by a new one, or whether such rapid and continuous changes will be necessary that a narrative identity will not be possible’ (pp. 627–8). Linde’s immersion into the organization ends just when an important story is about to be collectively forgotten or replaced by another one. She does not raise the question of what is likely to happen to the group of people who used to cherish the story and rely on it to produce their sense of identity. Nor does she examine the specific processes through which collective forgetting operates.

We found two other papers in organizational studies which provided some insight on the unintended mechanisms of collective forgetting: Gabriel’s (2012) study of ‘Organizations in a State of Darkness’ and Ciuk and Kostera’s (2010) study of ‘Organizational Oblivion’. Gabriel (2012) describes a situation in which the past was rarely mentioned in an organization that went through a sudden ‘miasmatic’ change. But forgetting plays a marginal role in Gabriel’s study as he focuses on theorizing the organizational miasma as a consequence of sudden and traumatic changes. Ciuk and Kostera (2010) similarly describe an organizational situation where the past was recalled only in a laconic and blurred way, as a result of which the organization suffered identity loss. These studies show that collective forgetting is conducive to identity loss. They do not, however, attempt a detailed investigation of the causal mechanisms of collective forgetting. Nor do they analyse how micro-processes of collective forgetting influence identity shift or power relations. This is a task that we have taken on our ethnographic research in a charity organization, inspired by Halbwachs’ (1980/1950; 1992/1925) pioneering work on collective memory.

We examine the dynamics of collective forgetting by asking two related questions: How can the process of recounting memories be inhibited by organizational changes which were not intended to influence collective memories? And what are the consequences of collective forgetting on workers’ power and sense of identity? We believe these questions are important both because we are arguably living in times of social acceleration (Rosa & Scheuerman, 2009) and because members’ ability to recount memories affects their organizational power and sense of identity (Linde, 2000).

To generate insight on our (empirical) questions, we conducted a year-long ethnography in an organization that had gone through wide-ranging changes. While the latter had been intended to professionalize the organization’s activities and secure regular streams of public funding, they also resulted in reconfiguration of existing groups and changes in participants’ sense of professional identity. Strikingly, these organizational changes and group reconfigurations also seemed to happen concomitantly with (unintended) collective forgetting of previously significant memories. We

discovered that many memories which used to be celebrated and lionized were silenced and almost forgotten, and we wanted to understand why and with what consequences for participants.

We struggled, however, to find in management and organization studies a straightforward theoretical framework to study the link between, on one hand, organizational changes that do not purport to manipulate memory and, on the other hand, phenomena of collective forgetting. For this, we returned to Halbwachs (1980/1950, 1992/1925) who theorizes remembering (including individual remembrance) as a social activity that is deeply dependent on the social groups with which the individual identifies. Halbwachs argues that people can recount memories only if they can also place themselves in the perspective of a group that shared these memories and is still interested in them. Yet, this condition of possibility had been disrupted in the organization we studied. We could, therefore, trace and theorize some of the likely organizational causes of collective forgetting. In particular, we understood that collective memories can be ‘uprooted’ when the social group is dissolved, and that they can become ‘unusable’ when participants engage in new activities for which past experience is of little use. Furthermore, the disruption of the organizational conditions of remembering allowed us to identify significant effects of collective forgetting, both on the structure of power relations through which participants interact and on their sense of identity and worth.

We make three contributions to organizational memory studies. First, we discuss Halbwachs’ contribution in detail and explore possibilities opened by his conceptualization of collective memories to study forgetting. Despite a recent and welcome spell of organizational memory studies which links with social memories studies (e.g. Rowlinson et al., 2010, Ybema, 2014, Mena et al., 2016), seminal texts, such as Halbwachs’ works, remain under-exploited. As Rowlinson (2010) put it, Halbwachs is often cited ritualistically, but not discussed properly in organization studies. In fact, a recent paper in the *Journal of Classical Sociology* reports a similar pattern in Social Memories Studies and invites scholars to return to Halbwachs’ original writing to generate new insight (Gensburger, 2016). Our paper shows how revisiting Halbwachs can inspire research on organizational dynamics of collective forgetting.

Second, we advance the understanding of forgetting in organizations by discussing the micro-process of collective forgetting. The concepts developed in this paper, ‘unusable memories’ and ‘uprooted memories’, allow us to locate personal-level and group-level dynamics of forgetting within the contextual background of a changing organization. By studying how organizational changes unintentionally affected forgetting, we also shed light on novel ways through which collective memories can be manipulated in organizations. More specifically, we study these processes by following connections between ‘unusable’ and ‘uprooted’ memories experienced at the personal level, social identifications formed at the level of the group, and changing power structures operating at the organizational level. This multi-level analysis shows that dynamics of collective forgetting are not restricted to a single ontological level. They involve instead a complex interplay of mechanisms operating at the individual, group and organizational levels.

Finally, our empirical findings help us understand how silence stemming from collective forgetting can affect participants’ sense of identity and worth, and cause suffering. In particular, we link back to the works of Gabriel (2012) to explain how ‘miasmatic’ changes can silence organizational members in ways irreducible to ‘psychic repression’.

Our paper is structured as follows. The first section draws largely on Halbwachs and provides the basic concepts and ideas that are mobilized throughout the study. The second and third sections present our ethnographic research design and provide an overview of the organization’s changes from its launch in the mid-1990s till 2012, the year when the fieldwork was conducted. The fourth section presents three examples of collectively forgotten memories. Section five discusses collective forgetting by identifying two mechanisms putatively responsible for it in the organization:

unusable memories and uprooted memories. The last section discusses our findings' significance for studies of memory, forgetting and identity in management and organization studies.

Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework is indebted to the works of Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) who is widely regarded as a founding figure of social memory studies. Rather than summarize the entirety of Halbwachs' thought, this section concentrates on the ideas and concepts most relevant to our study of collective forgetting in a changing organization.

Collective memory and collective forgetting

We theorize collective forgetting as the erosion of collective memory, a concept central to Halbwachs' works on memory. A student first of Bergson and then of Durkheim, Halbwachs studied memory as a collective construct, an approach that would later inspire Assmann, Schwartz, and much of the recent memory studies literature in which we inscribe our present contribution. As Mary Douglas notes in the preface to the English translation of *La Mémoire Collective*, Halbwachs' project entails a sociological reversal of a central tenet in Bergson's philosophy of time. While Bergson assumes the unity and completeness of past experience stored in the unconscious, Halbwachs makes the reverse assumption: remembering is not so much an individual act of fetching stored memories in spite of unconscious obstacles as it is an act of (re)creating past experiences in light of present ones. Furthermore, the recreation of memories, even those that seem most intimate, is an eminently social activity. Remembering presupposes a subject who is immersed in one or several social groups and who borrows from these groups' conventions to structure memories and endow them with detail and vividness. As Halbwachs has it, 'no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve recollections' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 43). Without the support of social frameworks, our memories are condemned to be at best indistinct and partial, 'a pile of rough-hewn materials with superimposed parts heaped one upon the other, only accidentally achieving equilibrium' (1992, p. 42).

Social frameworks and social groups

Following Halbwachs, we understand the social frameworks of memory as 'the totality of thoughts common to a group, the group with whom we have a relation at the moment, or with whom we have had a relation on the preceding day or days' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 52). However, this succinct definition prompts further clarification. First, the relation between the remembering person and her social group, or mnemonic community,¹ does not necessarily entail chronological or geographical proximity. A person is in relation with a group whenever she can place herself in the perspective of the group, that is, when she adopts the group's interests and follows the slant of its reflections. Time and geographic distance do matter, but only to the extent that it is usually easier to place oneself in the perspective of a group of persons with whom one is regularly in contact.

Second, the typical case is that of a person belonging simultaneously to several groups but also of memories initially formed, and subsequently recreated, at the intersection of several groups. In his later works, Halbwachs even proposes that the location of memories at the intersection of several groups accounts for the widespread illusion of purely individual memories, that is, of memories whose recreation is believed to be independent of social frameworks. Thus, while the distinction between individual and collective memory provides a useful first approximation, detailed scrutiny blurs this distinction. On one hand, memories assumed to be purely individual do in fact depend

for their formation and recreation on collective memories shared by a social group. And on the other hand, collective memory does not exist in a vacuum since 'it is individuals as group members who remember' (Halbwachs, 1980, p. 48).

Third, while Halbwachs attends to the recomposition of groups, we add to his approach by examining explicitly the changes in power relations and in participants' sense of identity that are constitutive of group recomposition. Halbwachs occasionally hints at links between memory, identity and power, yet these links remain implicit and are not a focal point for his studies of collective memory. Our study, however, seeks to explore and clarify some of the complex links between memory, identity and power.

Finally, Halbwachs' approach breaks the dichotomy between forgotten memories and those available for recollection. His approach opens instead the possibility of studying *silent memories* that have ceased circulating within the social group while remaining, at least *in potentia*, within the grasp of individual members. These silent memories provide a focal point for understanding collective forgetting in our paper and to them we now turn.

Silent memories

The expression *silent memories* is our own rather than Halbwachs'. Nonetheless, it refers to a type of memory that fascinated Halbwachs, memories that have not completely fallen into oblivion but that individuals find difficult to remember because the social frameworks sustaining them have eroded. We theorize the production of silent memories as one aspect of unintended collective forgetting.

While there may exist many processes through which memories are unintendedly forgotten in a group or organization, our study focused on two of these. The first process consists in the formation of *uprooted memories*, that is, memories that became silent either because individuals have lost touch with the social group in which the memories used to circulate or because the social group has disappeared or transformed beyond recognition. In these cases, the memories are uprooted from the social frameworks that allowed individuals to recreate them. While Halbwachs does not explicitly use the expression uprooted memories, the uprooting process is central to many situations he studies: the person waking from a dream (1992, pp. 41–2), clinical cases of aphasia (1992, pp. 43–51), putatively individual childhood memories (1980, pp. 66–73), and so on.

The second process of collective forgetting that we study consists in memories losing their former usefulness, to the point of not circulating any more in the group or organization. Memories can become silent where elements of the past lose meaningful relation to the present (Assmann, 1995, p. 366; Connerton, 2008). While Halbwachs does not study this process in detail, his discussion of the family's collective memory inspired us to pay attention to *unusable memories* resulting from situations in which memories became silent because members of the organization did not deem them useful any more. Indeed, Halbwachs remarks that 'of the life of our parents, we know from direct experience only the part that begins several years after our birth. What precedes hardly interests us. In turn, when we ourselves become husbands and fathers (sic), we pass through a series of states through which we have seen them also pass, and it seems that we can then identify ourselves with what they were at the time' (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 80).

While Halbwachs discusses this observation by highlighting the importance of identification, we also draw from it that our capacity and propensity to remember is partly conditioned by the practices in which we ought to engage. Memories, at least some memories, also have an instrumental value. It is precisely when the new father or mother has to engage in practices of parenting that

the experience of his/her parents becomes particularly precious to her. And conversely, we will argue in the rest of the paper that memories relative to obsolete practices lose much of their appeal and may end up as silent, unusable, memories.

Research Design

Our analysis is based on empirical material collected during fieldwork in Help the Children (HCH, pseudonym), a children's charity operating in a large British city, for 12 months, starting in January 2012. We approached HCH due to its relatively long history (20 years) and small to medium size (~ 100 employees) which made it suitable for an ethnographic study of remembering and forgetting. After HCH managers gave their consent for the project, one of us (the first author) started the fieldwork as a volunteer. Staff members were aware of our ongoing research. The second author was consulted at various stages of the research project to ensure that we had a mutual understanding of the research's direction. (While only the first author accessed the organization, we narrate the ethnography in the first person plural for stylistic reasons.)

The ethnographic material was collected over six months on a daily basis, followed by intermittent visits over the following six months. We had the flexibility to visit different work groups at HCH and take part in different activities (e.g. home visit, assessment, paperwork, meetings and training events). This flexibility provided an opportunity to engage in numerous informal conversations with a wide range of staff members. Much interesting information was gained from 'hang[ing] around' and 'soak[ing] up relevant data' (Mason, 2002, p. 90). Besides this, 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted to ask participants more specific questions to probe and refine the findings from earlier phases of the fieldwork. Interviews lasted 45 minutes on average, with a minimum of 35 minutes (on one occasion), and a maximum of 75 minutes. The majority of these interviews were conducted in the fifth and sixth months of the research. Given that only a handful of staff members had worked in HCH for more than five years, we interviewed most long-standing staff members (seven out of nine). The remaining interviewees were reasonably representative of full-time staff members in different organizational roles and from different gender and background.

The initial aim of the study was to investigate workers' memories of their organization. The questions asked in conversations were initially designed to capture participants' view of the organization's past and congregate their recollections, impressions and stories. But as we progressed, the topic of collective forgetting seemed particularly interesting and we probed further why some memories had become silent. During the interviews, our stance was that of 'a fellow-traveller on the narrative, someone keen to engage with it emotionally, displaying interest, empathy, and pleasure in the storytelling process' (Gabriel, 2000, p. 138). This attitude, in combination with our contribution as volunteers/ethnographers, proved particularly fruitful in eliciting stories/memories that otherwise would have been remained untold. As we reflect back on what happened during the fieldwork, we wonder whether, through interest and patience, we might have recreated, unknowingly and for a short while, the social frameworks that were precisely lacking in that organization for silent memories to be voiced again.

Our overall approach to the analysis of our empirical material was abductive (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). In the first step, the empirical material gathered from a wide range of qualitative research instruments was transcribed and subsequently analysed using plot analysis (Gabriel, 2000) and thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). We tried to identify pivotal organizational changes and narratives at HCH. When reflecting further on our material, rather than relying only on aggregate similarities (as one does in typical thematic analysis), we remained attentive to differences between various accounts and tried to make sense of these disparities (see Gabriel,

2000). We looked at the interviews not only for their memory content but to understand which organizational dynamics facilitated, or hindered, remembering. We thus paid particular attention to elements that appeared in the interviews while remaining untold in day-to-day conversations in the organization. We gradually became interested in the position of HCH's long-standing staff members and their fading memory of the past. This interest was shaped both by our reading of social memory studies, which discussed the politics of memory for marginal groups, and by our own scepticism towards the excessive rationalization the organization had been through.

Once we had identified collective forgetting as a focal topic we began the process of detailed analysis by 'trawling through the transcripts', identifying instances in which participants talked about memories that had ceased to circulate. We then compared and contrasted these accounts to generate tentative theories of how collective forgetting had occurred, what were its conditions of possibility, and what were its effects on participants. In line with the abductive nature of the research, the phenomena and associated explanations that emerged during this process were not fixed at the outset (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The categories presented in this paper (i.e. unusable memories and uprooted memories) evolved by investigating various tentative explanations, which were developed by moving iteratively between the literature (especially Halbwachs's work on collective memory), the empirical material we had collected and our understanding of the organizational context.

The presentation of our findings is anonymized to protect the identity of the organization and its members.

Organizational Context

We now present an overview of the main organizational changes that unintendedly affected collective forgetting in HCH. While we also witnessed differences in the interpretation of the past, this summary recoups a relatively widespread narrative based both on official stories recounted by management, various organizational documents and the accounts of the participants we interviewed.

The early days

HCH was established in the mid-1990s in an unused storage house in a deprived neighbourhood of Cheningham to provide emotional and practical support to youth people to help them cope with their day-to-day needs. The majority of HCH users were in their late teens or early 20s, many of whom were involved in crime, mistrusted the authorities and often exhibited violent behaviour at the centre. HCH was known for its unconventional way of working with youngsters. While HCH founders were trained psychotherapists who previously worked with statutory services, they were critical of its bureaucratic procedures and over-reliance on 'professional' judgement. They advocated instead an unconventional model of support where the emphasis was put on building a relationship with users before any intervention is made. They thus aimed to relax the boundaries between service providers and service users (HCH booklet). HCH also adopted an unconventional approach by hiring staff without academic or professional credentials. Most of HCH recruits in the early years were members of the local community who, while lacking academic credentials, knew the youth culture in inner cities by virtue of growing up in the same underprivileged communities, and were enthusiastic to help the local community. These staff members helped the organization gain the trust of the community. They also helped the organization deal with youth violence on its premises.

Organizational changes: public funding, bureaucratization and professionalization

When we started the fieldwork in 2012 it was clear that the organization had changed significantly compared to the early days. The size of the charity had grown from a handful of local staff members to about 80 full-time staff members, the majority of whom were professionally trained and had a relevant university degree. The charity had developed various bureaucratic procedures and layers of accountability, which were previously absent in the organization. The pace of change had accelerated after 2008 when the charity successfully raised a substantial governmental grant. The share of governmental grants in the charity's annual budget, which was under 10% before 2005, increased to an average of 30% after HCH secured a major grant in 2008 (HCH annual reports). Similarly to what has been observed in other charities (Jenkins, 2005), upon receiving these substantial funds, HCH developed its structures and processes to become accountable in terms defined by the state. The number of service users and the variety of services offered at HCH grew, but at the same time, these services became more conventional, aligned with government rationales and structured around professional categories (e.g. psychotherapy, counselling, legal advice).

As a part of the new strategy, HCH started to focus on younger children under 16, who were less involved in criminality compared with the misbehaving youth and adolescents who constituted the majority of service users in the early years. This change in the client groups was perceived to be a critical step for the transition of HCH to a mainstream professional charity organization. Our discussions with various staff members indicated that altercations were much less frequent and intense, which was welcomed by the majority of staff members who wanted to work in a more contained and professional work environment. However, some staff members found this trend upsetting as they saw this as a sign that HCH had become a mainstream charity organization, unable to serve the most challenging users.

Over the same period, HCH substantially increased recruitment of new staff members with university degrees and professional qualifications. By 2012, more than two thirds of the staff members at HCH's original centre, which was previously dominated by local workers without qualifications, had degrees in disciplines related to childcare and therapy such as psychotherapy and social work. HCH also developed bureaucratic structures to formalize (and intensify) members' accountability while ensuring their adherence to rules and regulations adopted from codes of conduct of professional bodies, such as the UK Council for Psychotherapy. After 2008, organizational policies on interventions were formalized further and staff adherence to rules and regulations became closely monitored.

The contested adoption of professional norms

Besides changing practices, post-2008 changes impacted different work communities and their position at HCH. The long-standing staff members who had dominated the centre in the early years were now largely sidelined and were commonly designated as 'old-school'. The label 'old-school' was largely articulated in opposition to the 'professional work identity' of new university educated staff members. Instead of declaring adherence to standard codes of conduct in therapeutic professions, old-school staff members typically justified their views, values and conduct with reference to their life experiences in underprivileged communities. While such views were dominant among staff in the early years, the value of non-professional intervention based on life experience had started to fade out after the 2008 reforms when the charity had to show its compliance with requirements set by various professional bodies and state departments. The organization became significantly more vigilant of workers' practices and introduced stricter regulations in recording their work and monitoring their conduct while limiting their discretionary powers.

In the wake of these changes, many of the long-standing members of staff who did not feel comfortable with the new work environment gradually left the organization. Out of 30 'long-standing' staff members who had worked at HCH pre-2008, only nine remained in the organization in 2012. Among these, two were sent to other centres, and rarely visited the main centre. All remaining long-standing staff members, even those who were somewhat critical of the changes, had to adapt to the new structures and new procedures that were often imposed from above through a reporting and monitoring system. In addition, long-standing staff members were encouraged to take university courses and professional workshops to 're-train' themselves. Long-standing staff members were further socialized into the professional culture and engrained new professionalism through their increasing interaction with the therapeutic professionals who dominated the centre post-2008 and brought their occupational culture with them.

In 2012, when we conducted our fieldwork at HCH, we found out that the use of professional language, for example referring to children as 'service users' or 'client groups', was equally common both among long-standing and new staff members. Though some long-standing staff members were reluctant about the imposed changes, they had adopted 'professionalism' to various degrees. They routinely used therapeutic language (e.g. boundary, attachment, disclosure) and psychological abbreviations (e.g. ADHD, DID) in daily conversations. They were also given new organizational roles (e.g. 'Keyworker'; 'Duty Keyworker') with a new set of responsibilities and expectations and were subject to new measures against which their performance was appraised.

Silent memories as we managed to hear them

It is in the aftermath of the organizational changes described above that we attempted to hear silent memories. While different groups can have their own silent memories, we focus here on silent memories of long-standing staff members at HCH. Although the latter had experienced long, eventful times at HCH, they rarely talked about the old days. Investigating silent memories involved a lengthy, gradual yet unpredictable, process. It often took several attempts at questioning about the past to elicit concrete memories of a specific incident. When participants started sharing the memories, their stories appeared unrehearsed. They often paused while telling a story. Quite often, we had to probe further to encourage them to re-situate themselves in relation to their memories and bygone social settings.

We now recount three silent memories and indicate how we came to hear them. These three memories have in common that, while they used to circulate and were even cherished before HCH's professionalization, since then they have ceased to circulate. Participants who could still remember them had to be patiently and sympathetically encouraged before they could recount them.

Silent memory #1: the forgotten bench. The first memory relates to a colourful wooden bench that few visitors can miss. The bench was one of several other benches in the courtyard but its unusual shape distinguished it from others. It was also inscribed with large capital letters: B.I.G.F.O.O.T. In our first few visits, we were curious about the bench, but could not gather any clues about its significance, or what the letters B.I.G.F.O.O.T. could symbolize. As we got familiar with the settings during our first three months of fieldwork, the wooden bench also became just another object, part of the décor, and the experience of work at HCH. It appeared largely forgotten and indistinguishable. Since the bench was in a relatively quiet corner, we often used that space to strike up conversations with HCH staff members about their work at the centre, their memories at work as well as significant events in the history of the organization. Besides providing a physical space, the bench

did not seem at first to be relevant to the discussions. It was only during one of the recurrent conversations with a long-standing staff member that the bench became a significant *aide-memoire*.

Ademar: well, many things that happened in the past are not necessarily talked about much.
— What do you mean? Can you give me an example?

Ademar: Have you seen the wooden bench in the courtyard as you enter the centre?
— Yes, the one with carved letters on it?

Ademar: The bench is a memorial for 'Big Foot', a young person who was killed in a drive-by shooting about 7 years ago. It was a huge thing and impacted many of us when it happened. But now very few know the story or know even what the bench represents.

This provided a cue to investigate this in discussions with other staff members. Javel, another long-standing staff member, also shared his memory of the event.

I was at the centre when we heard the news. I remember when I got here I found many staff and children were crying. It was a dramatic event that upset many of us; especially that he was a good guy. When they told us what happened, everyone was in shock. Big Foot was walking down the street with a couple of younger clients. When they were attacked, he used his huge body as a shield to protect his friends.

Both Javel and Ademar suggested that these memories did not circulate any more in the organization when we conducted the fieldwork. Although the memory of the incident was objectivized in material mnemonic traces which are expected to maintain the memory of past events, the majority of new staff members who joined HCH after 2008 simply did not register the bench as a commemorative monument. When they were asked about the bench, new staff members seemed unaware and indifferent:

I do not know anything about it really. (Charlotte, joined in 2011)

The wooden bench?! Oh yeah, what was it, I cannot remember. (Zoe, joined in 2009)

Not only did they not seem to have heard the story, but also they appeared disinterested in memories of such events.

I am not quite sure. I think I heard something about him when I joined HCH three years go. Maybe it's a name of a boy who died back then. That's all I can think of. (Jennifer, joined in 2009)

But collective forgetting extended beyond the silent memories surrounding this particular incident. Despite the extraordinary success of the charity in its early years, the early phases (pre-2008) were rarely brought up in conversations. Any occasional references to this past period were laconic and transient.

Silent memory #2: the forgotten hero. Duncan was one of the long-standing staff members with whom we regularly interacted. He had worked at HCH for over 10 years. Despite having a managerial position, he often appeared reticent and somewhat quiet. In our first attempt at asking him about the practices of HCH in the past, he only gave a brief and plain answer.

Well, yes, it is an interesting idea to look at the history of HCH. Many different things happened in the past. But, I'm not really sure, what can we say about the past. I can definitely say that the place used to be much tougher! The kids used to be tougher. So it was quite different.

In our next attempt, we had to probe further how long-standing members of staff used to deal with rough situations.

Duncan: Well, we had to intervene. [pause]

—What do you mean?

Duncan: Things like you know, separating people. I would go in the middle of their scuffle and stop them

Duncan then moved on to other issues. Only at the end of the interview session when we returned to the topic, did he share a more specific memory of particular interest for our study:

I remember an evening where I saw two of our young people [about to get into a fight] just outside the centre. One of them was waving a knife toward the other one. It could have been a tragedy for us, you know. I had to do something. It was quite dangerous as both had a knife with them. Someone had to act immediately. I went there in the middle and tried to calm them down. They [initially] resisted giving up. I remained firm, but calm, until finally they listened to me and stopped. You know, it is important to know how to behave in these situations. Things can go really bad. The worst thing you can do is to threaten them by force or sanction.

We felt puzzled when we realized that such a vivid memory had not surfaced spontaneously in the many conversations we had had with Duncan. Since we had got to know him through regular collaboration, we could not attribute his silence to shame or excessive modesty.

Silent memory #3: the forgotten cock-up. A couple of other terse narratives were exchanged in interviews with other staff members, which pointed to heroic memories of long-standing staff members in old 'tougher times'. But they would usually not elaborate spontaneously on this topic. We elicited, however, another story by following one of these cues, and by showing enthusiasm to hear the story. This once, the heroism of staff was tinted with their vulnerability to police misjudgement, largely because of the formers' resemblance to the youths they had in charge. Mierra, a staff member who was working in the centre for more than 10 years, shared a reminiscence of the old days of violence.

One day a young person came into our site to pick a fight; he had a knife with him and so we called the police. In the meantime, Jo tried to save this young person [from trouble]. Despite the danger, he tried to talk to him, and calm him down before the arrival of the police. Before we knew it, the street became full of policemen. There were maybe three or four vans. They did not realize that Jo was a member of staff – as we did not have staff badges at the time – and so they started beating him. [Laugh] Oh my god! Then all of a sudden the police were on one side fighting members of staff. It was hilarious!

The story starts as an epic tale in which one of the staff puts his life in jeopardy to save the offending young person. However, the story becomes comical when the police mistakes Jo for the aggressor, thus producing undeserved misfortune, a typical comic trope (see Gabriel, 2000). The story ends in a comic tragedy; a full fight between staff members and the police force. This story's hilarity may not be entirely evident to an external observer and it may well be that the jocular effect is the price the story has to pay for its release from a silenced state. Beyond its comical value, the memory seemed to convey two messages. First, that at the times staff were identifiable with the youths, which emphasized the formers' identity as community members rather than as professional charity workers. Second, that staff members could only count on themselves and could not afford to rely on help from external institutions, to the point where even the police did not feature as a benevolent force able to guarantee justice and security.

In summary, these accounts of the past – which did not circulate any more in the organization – expressed long-standing employees' passion to help the children so far as to risk their own lives to save angry young adults from trouble. For the rest of the organization, however, the past seemed to have been stripped of such heroic acts. The stories of Duncan and Mierra, just as the memories surrounding the wooden bench, constitute examples of silent memories and exemplify the type of unintended collective forgetting that is the subject of our research. The memories we managed to hear were silent because, although they had not been entirely forgotten, those participants who could still remember them did so faintly and could not voice these memories spontaneously. We had to actively and recursively encourage members to recollect and retell these memories. In the next section, we examine two organizational mechanisms through which collective forgetting was unintentionally produced at HCH.

Explaining unintended collective forgetting in HCH: two organizational mechanisms

During our fieldwork, we found no evidence that participants felt shameful of their past or traumatized by the incidents they had lived. In fact they appeared proud of their actions once they finally spoke about them. These memories were thus unlikely to have been psychologically repressed as in the case of traumatic memories. Nor were long-standing staff members under explicit management pressure to withhold those memories. We observed in several occasions that staff members openly criticised senior managers. There was no indication that people might be worried about speaking up, at least among their peers. In fact, staff members recalled that, only a few years back, heroic memories such as those of Duncan and Mierra used to circulate more widely in the organization and with no visible interference from management.

We now attempt to explain HCH's collective forgetting by conjecturing two organizational mechanisms that were not intended by management: unusable memories and uprooted memories. These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive as they may occur concurrently and even reinforce each other. Nor are they exhaustive, as we have no reason to rule out the significance of other mechanisms conducive to silent memories.

Unusable memories: when memories are disconnected from practices

The idea to attend to the dis/connection of memories with organizational practices was inspired by Halbwachs (see conceptual framework, above). While attempting to understand silent memories at HCH, we conjectured that it is, partly but significantly, because employees were absorbed in everyday concerns that they were not interested in stories seemingly irrelevant and unusable for their activities. This conjecture was confirmed and refined when discussing further with Mierra, the long-standing staff member who recounted the disastrous, yet somewhat comical, encounter with the police. Mierra believed people should learn about long-standing workers' sacrifices and the history of the organization. But she also recalled how long-standing staff members gradually realized that their stories did not relate to new staff members, and abandoned storytelling after several unsuccessful attempts.

We do not want to talk about the past and say 'back in my day, blah and blah!' Because new people have got their own concerns as well, which are quite different from the old ones. I really believe we should share this collective history, but if we go on and on about the old times, [a second of silence]. We used to have a particular member of staff [who used to be] going on and on talking about the past, saying 'It used to be like this and we did such and such', but what he was saying was quite lost because people could not share that experience!

When she was directly asked about long-standing staff members' silence on matters of the past, Mierra seemed puzzled. She indicated nonetheless that changing practices could have made their heroic memories insignificant and irrelevant.

Well, I'm not sure. Perhaps, those stories are not significant any more! I mean they represent the degree of difficulty that we were dealing with in our work. But those stories are not relevant any more!

Other long-standing staff members too were ambivalent about the value or usefulness of narrating the days of violence. When they were probed further, they clearly explained that the past is not silenced intentionally by management, but rather that they found their memories unusable in current organizational settings.

Well, yes, we do not talk about those times any more. But I'm not sure why. It's not that we are forced not to talk about the past. [In my case] I guess I just have not recently been in a situation which I thought it would be useful to talk about those days. (Ademar)

These accounts from old-school workers converge to suggest that the absence of circulation of memories of days of violence is partly explainable in the light of organizational changes affecting HCH's practices and user groups. This proposed explanation is also advanced by Jo, yet another long-standing worker, who responded in these terms to our queries about silent memories:

I do not know. Things are different. You know, our memories won't relate to the new conditions. We have different client groups, different practices.

Stories such as Duncan's (forgotten hero) or Mierra's (forgotten cock-up) are drawn from past experiences. Before the major organizational changes incurred in 2008, these memories were useful to those members hearing them as they conveyed high levels of complexity and tacit knowledge, for example about dealing with angry mobs and violent youth with little or no support from external institutions. These memories could provide a recipe or frame that served both as a scheme of interpretation and as a scheme for action. Moreover, such stories of violence and undeserved misfortune are sometimes useful in warning and preparing employees for the imminent dangers in a high-risk work environment, such as in the military (Gabriel, 2000). Yet, the connection between the present and the past was broken in HCH when the working environment changed beyond recognition (cf. organizational context).

Stories about the violent encounters with client groups were not relevant any more to work practices in 2012. They did not help new employees make sense of the job or the organization, nor were they useful as a vehicle for knowledge sharing and learning. Moreover, the practical advice contained in heroic stories, i.e. how to deal with gangs or 'angry kids' carrying a knife and so forth, was obsolete. First, these incidents were so rare post-2008 changes (literally non-occurrence) that staff members did not find those experiences relevant or useful for doing their job at the centre. Second, staff members were advised to follow formal procedures and policies that were in stark contrast with previous practices. Therefore, new employees were not curious to know about details of the stories, such as Duncan or Jo's physical interventions, cf. silent memories #2 (forgotten hero) and #3 (forgotten cock-up). Third, the organization's increased dependence on and accountability to external institutions diminished the value and credibility of the injunction to only count on oneself, cf. silent memory #3 (forgotten cock-up).

In summary, the combination of the above changes meant that stories about the old days of violence had lost much of their former usefulness, as they did not help new members of staff make sense of their job, or prepare them for challenges they could reasonably expect to experience at work.

Uprooted memories: when mnemonic communities are dissolved

So far, our explanation of Duncan's silent memory (#2, forgotten hero) has rested on that memory having become unusable. But while this mechanism alone might explain why the memory stopped circulating, it does not explain why Duncan experienced difficulties recollecting and recounting this story of which he was a central protagonist. Neither does loss of usefulness alone clarify why we had to probe Duncan several times to elicit the story. Similarly, with regard to the overlooked commemorative bench (silent memory #1), it is not clear whether and how changing practices at HCH could have rendered Big Foot's story unusable. Despite changes in the HCH client portfolio, many HCH clients in 2012 were nonetheless victims of gang and street violence notwithstanding their young age, so the story of Big Foot could not have lost its relevance in the same way as Duncan's heroic stories of dealing with violence on HCH's premises.

It is another idea advanced by Halbwachs that inspired in us a complementary explanation capable of illuminating the above puzzles. As we indicate in the theoretical section (above), Halbwachs (1980) argues that memories remain alive only if they have the support of a group delimited in space and time. The corollary is that memories are prone to be forgotten following the dissolution of the groups within and through which they initially formed and circulated. This idea resonated with discussions we had with staff members at HCH. A number of them reported that the past was frequently talked about just a few years back but changes in the composition of staff contributed to silencing the old memories.

When I joined [five or six years ago], some people constantly referred back to the old days. Specially, there was a guy, Rikki, who would have talked about the past a lot. Other people [long-standing staff members] also would have joined him. Javel was another person who was also quite vocal about the past. He was always like 'I have been there and I know how things work!' But, recently, he is rather quiet. I am not sure why, but I think, since some of the guys, like Rikki left, others stopped talking about the old times. (Jude, art therapist)

Jude's account indicates that it is not only the departure of a vocal member of staff but its cascade effect on other members of the mnemonic community, which seemed to have silenced long-standing staff members at HCH. During fieldwork, we observed that workers, like Javel, who had previously been vocal about the old days, no longer made noticeable reference to it. When in a private conversation we asked Javel about Big Foot, he was clearly surprised. Yet, he recalled without further prompting how staff members commemorated the event ritually.

Javel: We used to commemorate his death every year. You know, the place he got shot at is not far from here. We used to gather on his anniversary to mark the day, it was an important event for many of us.

Q: Are you guys doing the same this year?

Javel: I would like to, but most people who cared about him are not around any more. Many left HCH, you know; a couple of other old-timers have been transferred to other centres, so there are not many of us around any more.

Javel's response specifies that the fragmentation of the community of long-standing staff members at HCH made it more difficult to engage in commemorative activities. This fragmentation could also explain Duncan's difficulty in recollecting and narrating his memories (cf. #forgotten hero memory #2). Surrounded by staff members who did not experience the original events and, more importantly, who were unlikely to share the emotions of those who did, long-standing staff

members could not find a narrative standpoint for their old epic stories. Thus, their stories remained unstaged, unrehearsed and largely silent.

To recap, the accounts of Duncan, Javel and Mierra led us to identify *uprooted memories* resulting from participants' inability to place themselves in the perspective of the social group where these memories first formed. Organizational changes at HCH fragmented and dissolved the community of long-standing staff members, and in this sense uprooted their memories. In the next section, we discuss the organizational significance of communities of memory further and elaborate its link to identity shift and power relations in HCH.

Collective Forgetting, Identity and Power at HCH

Group dissolution: geographical dispersion and loss of identity

As we investigated collective forgetting prompted by the group dissolution, we realized that the uprooting of memories of days of violence involved more than mere geographical dispersion and depended on long-standing staff's un/willingness to identify with the now-scattered group. We questioned whether and why long-standing staff members, such as Javel, Duncan and Mierra, could not place themselves in the perspective of the same social group ('old-school') when recalling the past. Our discussion with long-standing staff members indicated a growing disparity between long-standing staff members who supported post-2008 changes and aspired to a professional identity and those who were still loyal to past practices and 'old-school' values. While many long-standing staff members, such as Mierra and Ademar, did not express much interest in re-enacting the past, there were still a couple of staff members who cared for the past. Javel, for instance, referred to the past as a golden period, when staff cared and held almost familial relations.

We were about 30 staff. Everyone genuinely cared for the children, and we were all in it together. We were all in one building. We celebrated our birthdays together; we would go out together often. In many ways, we were like a family. But that family essence is completely depleted now. Although we are still colleagues, but it's not the same! Some seem to have forgotten the key ingredient of what made us what we are today.

In the previous section, we showed that despite being largely quiet about the past in public meetings, Javel had a clear memory of staff members' heroic encounters in dealing with past violent incidents as well as the loss of clients, such as Big Foot. In another conversation with Javel, we queried the significance of Big Foot to understand why his tragic death was not commemorated any more at HCH.

I am not sure, maybe others do not care any more. For those of us who still value the type of work we did in the past, Big Foot represented the type of clients we used to work with. He was expelled from school when he was 12. When he came to HCH, he was already involved in drug dealing, but, with our help, he managed to put that history behind him. He had just signed up for college a few months before he got shot.

In the excerpt above, Javel criticizes other long-standing staff members and suggests that they did not care about the memory of Big Foot because they no longer valued the type of work HCH did in the past. Their apathy for remembering (and re-enacting) the past was, in Javel's opinion, linked to their growing divergence from old-school norms and practices. The meaning of Javel's remark can be further discussed in relation to the pervasive professionalization at HCH. When we asked some of the long-standing staff members whether they consider themselves 'old-school', they appeared uncomfortable with the suggestion. Ademar, for instance, quickly pointed out his formal qualifications to evade the label's pejorative connotations.

Many people think all of the older [long-standing] staff members are not professional. That's not true. I had a rough upbringing, but I did my degree. I got my certificate as well, I'm a qualified youth worker!

Mierrra tried to play down the difference between professional and 'old-school' work ethics, emphasizing that old-school staff are now integrated into the professional work environment:

You know people talk a lot about the clashes between academic and non-academic values. Yes, we have had our differences, but I think this is exaggerated. For non-academic staff, or if you like it 'old-school' staff, there has been a transition from their street life experience to a professional work environment. There have been difficulties along the way, but you know we have been evolving over time. ... We understand the ethos, but also the requirement of being a professional and we are thinking that way.

As indicated in Ademar and Mierrra's accounts, several long-standing staff members tried to reconstruct their work identities as professional workers. They emphasized their professionalism both in their conduct and conversation, and rarely thought of themselves as 'old-school' staff members. To use Halbwachs' terms, they would not place themselves in the perspective of the group retrospectively labelled as 'old-school'. They were not interested in the old memories in the same way as, say, Javel who still identified with the 'old-school' identity category and seemed to have more attachment than others to memories of the old days of violence. In the case of Ademar, Duncan, Jo and Mierrra, though arguably less so for Javel, these memories had been uprooted not only because the group in whose midst they had experienced the events was physically scattered, but also because the previously strong group identity had dissolved.

Collective forgetting and changing power relations

Our study suggests that collective forgetting, as production of silent memories, was at once a consequence of shifts in power relations in the organization and a cause for further changes in relations of power. The silence enveloping the episodes of the forgotten hero (silent memory #2) and of the forgotten cock-up (silent memory #3) is, on first analysis, attributable to the obsolescence of the practices to which these memories referred. Yet, the obsolescence of practices is itself an effect of changes in power relations rather than the result of apolitical processes: formerly useful memories would not have lost their usefulness had practices not been transformed, and practices would not have been transformed had the configuration of power relations remained unchanged. Indeed, by seeking and then accepting grants from the state, HCH entered a relation of power and accountability with a number of state organizations to which it was not previously accountable. Following the grants obtained in 2008, HCH was expected to report on its activities in terms defined by the state, which led to a restructuring of its activities around professional categories. Moreover, to avoid downsizing the workforce at the end of any grant period, HCH was bound to continuously secure additional grants. In order to comply with the state's norms and standards, HCH's management were required to formalize further HCH practices while discouraging informal or improvised practices. Finally, they recruited new participants who complied with the new requirements but had little regard for 'street life experience' and associated practices.

The establishment of a relation of power and dependency between HCH and its public funder is also a significant cause behind the dilution of the old-school social group that uprooted their memories. As we indicated above, this group was diluted in part because some of its individual members left and were replaced by newcomers. But it was also diluted because it became all the more difficult for the individuals that were once part of it to take this group's perspective when

advancing their interests. By 2012 the 'experience of life' and 'growing up in the street' had ceased to confer authority and had been displaced by the credibility of degrees and formal qualifications.

While collective forgetting was a result of power shifts, it also contributed to reinforce subsequent reconfigurations of power relations. For instance, while silent memories #1, #2 and #3 granted quasi-heroic status to their protagonists as long as they circulated in the organization, this status seems to have eroded when the memories ceased to circulate. As an unintended result of collective forgetting, long-standing members saw their status melting from heroes to old-school to less-than-professional workers. As Bill, another long-standing staff member, confided:

We need more Sarahs! [the founder of HCH] We need heroes. The emotional literacy of other key staff [long-standing staff members] has not been taken into account. We need to PR [raise awareness] about people who dedicated their life to the kids. It's not just Sarah! There are other staff, like Duncan and Jo, who also should inspire new staff, but they are invisible.

While these shifts can and should be interpreted as identity changes, they also constitute significant changes of power. Justifications articulated within the 'old-school' social framework lost precedence over justifications articulated within the 'professional' social framework. As a result of these power shifts induced by (unintended) collective forgetting, HCH members felt they had lost much of their power to make a positive difference to children's lives through ad hoc or discretionary interventions. Furthermore, they were burdened with novel obligations such as writing reports and had lost much of the power to resist professionalization by articulating arguments rooted in now obsolete social frameworks.

Conclusion and Discussion

Unlike past research which investigates forgetting in organizations as the intended result of managerial tactics (Anteby & Molnar, 2012; Mena et al., 2016), the combination of our ethnographic approach and a theoretical framework drawn from Halbwachs allowed us to observe and explain instances unintended collective forgetting. In particular, we followed two variations of silent memories sketched in the works of Maurice Halbwachs. We found that even when management-led professionalization and bureaucratization does not aim to induce collective forgetting, the former can nonetheless unintentionally produce the latter through silent memories. Some previously cherished memories can become silent because they are no longer relevant or useful to participants' new activities. Other memories can become uprooted because the groups where they developed and circulated have since dissolved.

These processes were intertwined because they were concomitantly triggered by major changes in a call to turn HCH into a professional organization accountable to various external professional bodies and state departments. This calls into question what types of organizational changes are likely to prompt collective forgetting. In our study, organizational changes had made old-practices obsolete, devalued certain skill-sets and modified the social relations and social identities within the organization. We may therefore speculate that changes with the above characteristics tend to produce silent memories. This is, however, an argument that future studies will have to probe and refine further.

Another important question is whether these silent memories can regain currency if changes are reversed. While our empirical findings do not answer this question directly, our approach to collective forgetting, drawn from Halbwachs, challenges a more conventional construct of 'forgotten history' which implicitly assumes that forgotten memories are permanently lost (Casey & Olivera, 2011; Ciuk & Kostera, 2010; de Holan & Phillips, 2004). Our concept of silent memory allows us,

in principle, to explicate how memories may resurface in another epoch whenever their social frameworks are restored (see also Hatch & Schultz, 2017). Future longitudinal research is needed to understand in detail how silent memories can resurface in an organization, and at what cost in terms of participants' efforts and mnemonic distortion.

In what follows we discuss how our study of silent memories contributes to understanding of identity shift, psychic suffering and managerial control in changing organizations.

Collective forgetting, silence and identity shift

We can trace the effect of collective forgetting on identity narrative construction at multiple levels: organizational identity, group identities as well as individual identities of staff members. We did not explore organizational identity as such as it was not a focal point of this study; however, our observations indicate that HCH was experiencing a gradual identity shift as the previous identity narrative shaped around unconventional and anti-establishment attitudes had lost its appeal in the organization. Previous research has described how the process of organizational identity change involves a passage through a state of ambiguity, temporal identity discrepancies and fragmentations (Ciuk & Kostera, 2010; corley & Gioia, 2004, Ybema, 2010). Similarly to what Linde (2000) reports, old paradigmatic memories at HCH (e.g. heroic actions in a violent context) ceased conferring meaning to workers in the new setting and became unusable for their purposes. Forgetting of significant, and previously cherished, memories may facilitate the shift to more 'professional' identities, but it could also result in an incoherent and fragmented identity narrative (Ciuk & Kostera, 2010; Linde, 2000).

Our research helps untangle the relationship between collective memories and collective identities by showing how group-level processes of forgetting are enacted in episodes of identity transition and loss. Previous research argued that organizational members' efforts at making sense of discontinuities are manifested in nostalgic identity talk (e.g. Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Our research examines another possible outcome: unintended collective forgetting through the production of silent memories. But while collective forgetting can lead to fragmented identity narrative, confusion and loss of one's sense of purpose in an organization (Ciuk & Kostera, 2010), our research also indicates that collective forgetting can be experienced differently across the organization. Those long-standing staff members who no longer attempt to identify with a vanishing social group become less concerned about enacting heroic memories of the old days which associate them to that particular identity category. Because they have moved on, they are not too bothered about the past being gradually forgotten and they do not attempt to bring it back to life. The situation is different, however, for long-standing staff members who still identify with past practices and values. These members seemed keen about the past and saddened by its oblivion.

Collective forgetting is thus experienced differently depending on whether or not a person identifies with identity categories articulated within vanishing social frameworks. In particular, members who prefer to identify with the identity categories articulated within the new organizational order do not resent the production of silent memories. The latter are bearable, and perhaps even welcome, as they do not help perform the new roles or identify with the new professional identity categories.

The experience of silent memories is very different, however, for staff members who still identify with a vanishing identity category (e.g. Javel). For these, the erosion of silent memories is experienced as a form of exclusion from a (disappearing) social group to which they wished they could still belong. When older staff members' claims to be organizational heroes and knowledge bearers are rejected or ignored by other members of the organization, the story space (Boje,

Rosile, & Gardner, 2007) for staging their identity narrative diminishes accordingly. This diminution challenges long-standing employees' ability to depict a 'distinctive and favourable image' of themselves, and questions their previously valued self-image. Unable to find a sympathetic audience, they no longer lionize the old heroic days, but find themselves overtaken by history and are made to feel irrelevant and out of place.

Collective forgetting and psychic suffering

The experience of unintended collective forgetting may lead to frustration with the status quo, identity displacement and depression (as was shown in the case of Javel). Gabriel's (2012) work on employees' suffering after a 'miasmatic' corporate downsizing displays striking similarities. Building on Freud's discussion of mourning and melancholia, Gabriel suggests that repressed emotions, resulting from individuals' inability to mourn for the bygone past, can lead to a climate of depression and to the creation of organizational spaces void of buzzing stories from the past. But while Gabriel focuses on the psychological mechanisms leading to widespread depression, his rich field study nonetheless features snippets which resonate with the processes identified in our research. Gabriel discusses for instance how, similarly to the changes we observed at HCH, a sharp discontinuity separated the new organizational order from the old, leading to denigration of old colleagues and old practices. Old staff members' knowledge and experiences were subsequently deemed unfitting, with 'no intrinsic value' (Gabriel, 2012, p. 1140). This situation is not dissimilar to the one described in our research where memories became 'unusable'. We can imagine that in the organization observed by Gabriel, memories had also been 'uprooted' following 'the dismissals of visible [long-standing] members of staff' (Gabriel, 2012, p. 1148), which had reportedly scattered and dissolved the core group of old staff members, and hence eroded the social framework of memory.

The above examples show that attention to silent memories may help understand 'miasmatic' changes. We therefore invite researchers interested in psychic suffering in organizations to pay particular attention to unusable and uprooted memories and to examine the psychological impact of these processes in detail. This is a task that we admit we have not been able to cover extensively in this paper. Future research reliant on psychoanalytic theory (e.g. theories of depression, self-esteem and miasma) could help explore further the psychological implications of unusable and uprooted memories.

Collective forgetting and managerial control

Lastly, our research has important implications for the study of how managerial decisions affect collective forgetting. Whereas previous literature in management and organization studies mostly explains forgetting by reference to excluded material (Nissley & Casey, 2002), distorted text (Booth et al., 2007) or wilful elimination or subversion of traces of the past (Anteby & Molnar, 2012; Mena et al., 2016), our study reveals that forgetting can also be caused by seemingly innocuous organizational changes, such as engaging with new clients and novel routines and practices. These changes provide the conditions for collective forgetting by affecting a mnemonic community and its relation to fading memories.

One important implication of this argument is that research on forgetting in organizations should look beyond the deliberate manipulation of mnemonic traces (e.g. texts, artefacts) and explore surreptitious mechanisms that transform mnemonic communities in deeper and broader ways. While in our case study the silencing processes occurred unintendedly following change management programmes, it is possible to imagine situations where powerful actors directly seek to silence a

memory by attempting to dissolve its mnemonic community or by changing established practices so as to make the memory unusable.

A noteworthy, and perhaps unsettling, observation about silent memories at HCH is the speed at which the old epic tales ceased to circulate following the organizational changes engaged in 2008. These memories, including the memorial ritual for Big Foot's tragic and heroic death, had been widely talked about and celebrated just a few years before we started our study. While it has been suggested that organizational story space is an unmanaged terrain where management has relatively little sway (Gabriel, 1995), our findings suggest that change management programmes can powerfully, if indirectly, silence certain old stories. Silent memories are not necessarily produced through direct pressure (Milliken & Morrison, 2003) or discursive domination (Brown & Coupland, 2005). Rather, by abolishing old practices and disbanding social relations, change management programmes may silence certain employees (e.g. those sceptical about change) by making their memories unusable and uprooted.

While we subscribe that control over employees' memories is largely a managerial fantasy (Gabriel, 1995), our study indicates nonetheless that managerial decisions seeking to control the practices and composition of groups tend to generate collective forgetting. This tendency is not an ineluctable necessity as it can be resisted by employees keen to preserve collective memories they cherish, and the associated identities and prerogatives. Our point, however, is that unless employees engage in collective activities through which they preserve the social frameworks sustaining their collective memories, the latter are destined to become silent memories and then vanish into oblivion.

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Note

1. Halbwachs uses indiscriminately the expressions 'groupes', 'sociétés' or 'milieux'. To our knowledge, he does not use the expression 'communautés' (communities) except in an apocryphal sub-title (Halbwachs, 1980, p. 30). In our paper we use the term mnemonic communities because it is commonly employed in several of the works on memory with which we engage.

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