

How Memory Shapes Identity

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Abstract: Memory and identity exist in a dynamic, mutually constitutive dialectical relationship. As a neutral biological carrier of information, memory inherently lacks any predetermined value orientation. However, through social practices such as group cooperation, cultural inheritance, and emotional resonance, individuals gradually internalize memory into the psychological foundation for self-awareness and group belonging, thereby imbuing their present lives with meaning. As groups expand beyond the limits of direct interpersonal experience, shared memory systems must be constructed through historical narratives, cultural symbols, and public rituals to transcend temporal and spatial constraints and consolidate collective identity. Confronting the natural tendency of memory to fade, groups rely on the daily immersion of symbols and the periodic activation of rituals to continuously revive shared memories, forming a virtuous cycle in which “memory shapes identity, and identity reshapes memory.” This mutual construction mechanism reveals the spiritual operating logic underlying social integration and the long-term continuity of communities.

Keywords: Memory; Identity; Cultural identity

Online publication: August 14, 2026

1. Memory is the prerequisite for identity

Memory is inherently neutral; its transformation into identity is rooted in the dual evolution of the biological and the social. At the biological level, memory is a fundamental physiological function shared by all living organisms. Originally, it served merely as a tool for processing survival information, devoid of inherent value orientations or cultural preferences. Its core value lies in serving as an open “information container,” whose ultimate function is entirely determined by the content of social practices acquired after birth. Once humans enter the stage of socialization, through collaboration, interaction, and cultural inheritance within specific groups, individuals’ unique experiences and emotions become internalized as memory^[1]. These contents are far from disordered fragments; instead, they gradually converge into a stable value framework and a sense of cultural belonging, shaping members’ identity boundaries and behavioral logic, and spontaneously orienting them toward a particular collective.

From the fundamental logic of biological evolution, memory is a basic physiological function common

to all organic life forms. Over the course of millions of years of human evolution, it has gradually crystallized into the core vehicle of consciousness that carries the subject's cognitive abilities and essential powers. In the earliest stages of biological evolution, the memory mechanism existed as a neutral information-processing tool, serving only the basic functions of storing survival experiences and avoiding environmental risks. It bore no inherent value biases, carried no fixed identity orientations, and was never innately tied to any particular cultural affiliation. This primordial neutrality dictates that memory is merely an open information repository, whose ultimate functional trajectory is fully shaped by postnatal lived experiences. Once humans enter the stage of socialization, the unique experiences accumulated by individuals in specific practical contexts—such as collaborative production, community interaction, and cultural transmission—along with the emotional resonance triggered and the value guidance received, undergo continuous internalization, sedimentation, and reconstruction in the depths of consciousness through the encoding mechanisms of memory. This acquired experiential content is not disjointed information fragments. Instead, it gradually forms a cohesive cognitive framework that subtly forges one's distinct cultural identity, anchors long-term value orientations, demarcates group affiliations within social networks, and even subconsciously governs the logic of real-world behavioral decisions. This is precisely why people currently regard memory as the core prerequisite for identity. Memory, as a vessel, possesses no innate stance; which group it ultimately points to and which values it embraces are entirely determined by the specific content stored through postnatal practices. Without vivid experiences and emotional bonds infused into people through postnatal social interactions, memory remains nothing more than physiological data storage, unable to produce group-specific identification ^[2].

Human memory acts as the foundation for present-day meaning-making; it is not simply an archive of past data, but a dynamic system constantly engaged in constructing reality. While humans always inhabit tangible reality, their perceptual frameworks, value judgment criteria, and—crucially—the anchor of their existential worth are all molded by accumulated life experiences. These disjointed experiences are encoded, synthesized, and stored as memories, eventually internalized into a stable cognitive framework that—through one's worldview, life outlook, and value system—guides daily decisions and interpretations of meaning. Thus, when facing unfamiliar circumstances or pivotal real-life decisions, humans do not judge solely based on immediate sensory input. Instead, they automatically draw relevant past experiences from their reservoir of memories to adapt, granting their present actions traceable rationales. This system of meaning, constructed from memory, is neither a fantasy detached from reality nor the result of passively accepting external discipline; rather, it is a unique cognitive anchor generated by the individual based on their own life trajectory. It provides individuals with a stable behavioral reference point in a rapidly changing reality, allowing them to autonomously calibrate the value of their actions without constantly relying on the coercive constraints of external rules. This internal system of meaning, built upon memory, enables individuals to naturally develop an identification with their own life trajectory through daily practice. Without needing to deliberately confirm their identity through comparison with external groups, they can anchor their own existential worth in every real-world action, providing sustained internal motivation for long-term survival and development.

The needs of human survival and development determine that memory leads to an identification with one's social group. As Marx argued, individuals can only subsist within social groups and develop into free, all-round individuals through continuously evolving social relations. Throughout human history, due to limitations in productive forces and the social nature of human beings, the material means of production

upon which human survival and development depend have not only been scarce overall but have also been distributed on a group basis. Faced with a general scarcity of material means of subsistence, groups inevitably compete for survival, a rivalry that may even escalate into armed conflict. Therefore, in order to obtain the necessary material resources and security to sustain themselves, people must use memory to establish a sense of group identity and externalize it into concrete behaviors in daily life. By doing so, they declare and reinforce their identity to their group, thereby gaining the group's recognition, protection, and access to the various conditions essential for survival. At the same time, while a group provides individuals with material resources and a living environment, it also inevitably constructs the various social relationships necessary for their growth, shaping their ideological understanding, value systems, and inner emotions. Driven by the need for survival and shared cultural expression, individuals thus develop a sense of community with their group—one in which they are interdependent and share a common destiny. These ideas and emotions are stored in consciousness in the form of memory, becoming the psychological foundation of their identification with the group. Therefore, the emergence and development of human identity are related not only to the instinct for memory but also to the social nature of humanity ^[3].

2. Groups drive the development of memory out of a need for cohesive identity

Owing to the inherent physiological limits of human memory, an individual's brain can only form emotional bonds with a finite number of people through direct personal experience. This is a fundamental, objective constraint that all groups must face from their very inception. As the growth of productive forces expands group scales, memory-based bonds forged through direct interaction gradually fray. As memory constitutes the foundational prerequisite of identity, these relational gaps inevitably create fractures in internal collective identification, directly endangering the stability and survival of large communities. To overcome this inherent limitation, a group must establish a shared memory system that encompasses all members, enabling individuals scattered across different times and places to align their identities through a common historical narrative without the need for direct contact, ultimately achieving the construction of large-scale collective identity that transcends geographical and generational boundaries.

Due to inherent physiological constraints, the number of entities that human memory can naturally connect to is limited; therefore, the size of groups formed through memory-based connections is inevitably bounded. However, with the development of productive forces and the influence of other factors, group size has shown a trend of continuous expansion. The number of members requiring memory connections inevitably exceeds this physiological limit, preventing them from forming memory connections with other group members at a distance. This results in a rupture. Since memory serves as a prerequisite for identity, the points where these connections are severed are precisely where identity cannot be formed within the group—and indeed, where the group's identity crisis begins. Therefore, in order to integrate a larger membership base to compete for essential social resources and ensure its own survival and development, a group must enable human innate memory to transcend the limitations of time, space, and physiological conditions, thereby constructing a collective identity that is broader in scope, larger in number, and stronger in cohesion, thus guaranteeing its own continuity. To achieve this goal, the group conveys important historical figures and events from its origins and developmental history into the minds of its members through various means. As members internalize this knowledge through memory, their consciousness transcends time and space to connect with ancestors they have never met and other group members they have never seen in

person, thereby fostering intellectual identification with and emotional resonance toward the group. In this process, individuals not only clarify their sense of identity and belonging but also gradually develop a social understanding and set of values that align with the group's cultural core.

Shaped persistently by shared memory, group members gradually develop a firm conviction that they belong to a single collective ^[4]. Through a layered network of knowledge transmission, the group breaks down its unique historical context and developmental trajectory into tangible, everyday content. As each member receives this information, they precisely confirm their own point of origin, clearly understand their cultural roots, define the boundaries of their group's identity, and establish future expectations aligned with the group's direction of development. As the scope of these memories continues to expand—from single historical events to detailed records of collective production and public life—members' perception of the group will gradually evolve from abstract conceptual descriptions into tangible life experiences. Once these shared memories are embedded within individuals' cognitive frameworks, they will naturally adapt to the diverse upbringings of different members. Without relying on external coercion, they will align previously disparate individual perceptions, transcending the limitations of fragmented identities based on kinship or geographical ties, and forming a holistic consensus on identity that encompasses the entire group. This cognitive alignment, generated from shared memories, naturally fosters emotional bonds that transcend geographical and generational boundaries, enabling members who are strangers to one another to quickly establish an unspoken understanding of shared identity in public settings and proactively develop a sense of responsibility for safeguarding their common interests.

Memory lays the foundation for people to distinguish themselves from the "Other" and thereby strengthen their group identity. To grasp one's own identity, one must first recognize what one is not; self-definition fundamentally relies on differentiation from the Other. "It is precisely through comparison with the Other that the self can recognize what it has in common with and what distinguishes it from the Other, thereby achieving a clearer understanding and grasp of its own characteristics or identity." ^[5]. People's group identification often hinges on cultural traits that set them apart from the Other, breeding subtle exclusive inclinations in daily life. Groups, in turn, typically highlight their own cultural distinctiveness by emphasizing their differences from other groups, thereby constructing and reinforcing a cultural identity that is co-created, shared, and common among group members, and strengthening the sense of commonality among them. "It is precisely historical narratives that create collective memory and collective experience, making history a form through which cultural traditions reproduce themselves." ^[6]. Through memory, group members internalize the cultural significance embedded in the group's history. While understanding the past, clarifying the present, and affirming their sense of belonging, they form a self-image as members of their group. Nurtured by the group's culture, they subsequently develop similar understandings of social norms and value systems, ultimately constructing a shared cultural identity among group members. In summary, memory provides a unique arena for cultural comparison among groups. While fostering the formation of a unique spiritual core among group members, it also shapes their internal consistency based on a shared culture. By reinforcing a common identity and highlighting group characteristics, it simultaneously distinguishes the group clearly from others, thereby enhancing group members' sense of belonging and identification with their group through the "distinction between self and Other."

3. The co-construction of memory and identity

Human memory operates under the inherent rule of the primacy of forgetting—a trait that fundamentally means collective identity cannot endure through individual memory alone. As shared group experiences gradually fade over time, the consensus on identity within large-scale communities will continue to erode, potentially leading to a generational fracture in identity. To counter this natural tendency toward dissolution, a group must establish a proactive mechanism for preserving memory. By relying on cultural symbols that permeate daily life and periodic public rituals, it can continuously reawaken dormant memories, ultimately forming a self-sustaining cycle in which memory and identity mutually reinforce one another, thereby achieving long-term identity cohesion across generations and regions.

Jan Assmann, the German founding scholar of cultural memory studies, argues that “in its natural state, forgetting, not remembrance, constitutes humanity’s primary mode of memory.”^[7] This reveals that memories continuously fade with the passage of time until they dissipate, inevitably leading to the blurring and disappearance of identity. Consequently, groups must repeatedly stimulate the content of their memories to maintain and strengthen their collective identity. An individual’s biological memory is naturally constrained by physiological limits; it gradually fades and dissipates over time. Even deeply etched personal experiences, in the absence of external stimuli, will see their details gradually blurred and their contours simplified over the course of years or even decades, ultimately leaving only fragmented and vague impressions. When collective memory—which carries the group’s shared experiences—naturally dissipates in this way, the once-clear boundaries of group identity become loose and blurred. Members’ sense of belonging gradually fades, ultimately leading directly to the dissolution of collective identity. To counter this natural tendency toward forgetting, groups must actively intervene in the process of memory preservation, repeatedly reactivating dormant shared memories through sustained external intervention to maintain the stability of their identity. This proactive behavior, spurred by the crisis of forgetting, is precisely the reverse starting point of the logic that “memory shapes identity.” It is precisely because the natural dissipation of memory directly undermines identity that groups proactively establish memory-preservation systems spanning the entire life cycle. These systems provide a foundational support for the ongoing consolidation of identity, transforming what were once loose individual memories into stable public cultural resources capable of sustaining the cohesion of groups numbering in the hundreds of thousands or even millions.

Within the collective memory-preservation system, various symbols—carefully constructed through cultural processes—have become the core vehicles for evoking memories and reinforcing identity in everyday contexts. Such symbols permeate nearly all spheres of daily life: public landmarks, street signs, everyday objects such as currency and stationery, and distinctive lexical items embedded within language itself. They embody both the concrete form of the “signifier” and the deep cultural significance of the “signified,” permeating every stage of an individual’s development, from early childhood to adulthood. When members interact with these symbols in their daily lives, the cultural connotations attached to them naturally collide with the individual’s existing cultural memories, awakening dormant historical experiences without the need for deliberate external instruction. This interaction enables individuals to transcend the limitations of their immediate, personal perceptions, establishing emotional connections—at the level of consciousness—with the group’s distant history and unfamiliar members scattered across different locations, thereby sparking a shared sense of collective emotion. Members of the same group, living long-term in a cultural environment shaped by shared symbols, see similar historical perceptions and emotional experiences continuously spread and diffuse within the group, constantly reinforcing the emotional foundation of collective identity.

In turn, this continuously reinforced group identity further solidifies the cultural authority of the symbols, continuously enhancing their ability to evoke memories and creating a virtuous cycle in which “symbols evoke memories, memories reinforce identity, and identity consolidates symbols,” allowing identity to permeate every detail of daily life.

Whereas symbols enable subtle, everyday cultural infiltration, rituals constitute the core practical mechanism for periodically reawakening memory and closing the identity formation cycle. Through a fixed, repeatable procedural structure—combined with distinctive scenography, standardized behavioral norms, and accompanying narrative guidance—rituals create a consistent and instructive cultural atmosphere unique to the group. This allows all participants to experience memory activation, value transmission, and emotional reinforcement through an immersive experience. Unlike the fragmented reminders provided by symbols, rituals require participants to engage fully through physical practice. Through synchronized bodily gestures and a unified collective narrative, participants engage their senses, emotions, and cognitive faculties all at once. During the ritual, individuals can personally perceive the continuity and consistency between their present lives and the group’s history; they clearly recognize their common origins with figures in the historical narrative, internalize a cultural lineage that flows unbroken, and re-anchor their communal identity within concrete, practical settings. This cyclical embodied experience continuously adds new collective practical experiences to the group’s reservoir of memories, further enriching the content dimensions of shared memory. In turn, this updated memory provides a more solid narrative foundation for the next ritual, ultimately creating a two-way cycle where “memory shapes identity, and identity reshapes memory,” forming a stable, self-iterating system. Even across the span of several generations, this ensures the continuity of group identity and provides an unending source of endogenous cohesion for the group’s long-term survival.

4. Conclusion

Memory and identity form a dynamic, dialectical unity of mutual constitution. On the one hand, memory, as a neutral carrier of information, becomes—through the infusion of acquired social experiences—the psychological foundation upon which individuals define themselves, distinguish the “Other,” and reinforce their sense of group belonging; on the other hand, the group’s need for survival drives the active construction of collective memory. “It is only through symbolic interaction among different individuals and groups that the goal of fostering a shared sense of identity regarding the community’s past, present, and future can ultimately be achieved.”^[8] To transcend the temporal, spatial, and physiological limitations of individual memory, groups continuously reawaken their members’ shared memories through historical narratives, cultural symbols, and ritual practices, thereby sustaining a consensus on identity that transcends generations and geographical boundaries. This mutual formative process is not one-way causation; instead, it creates a recursive cycle: memory forges identity, and identity reshapes memory. As cultural tools, symbols and rituals both permeate collective consciousness in daily life and reinforce emotional resonance through periodic practices, transforming memory into a resource for the reproduction of collective identity. In turn, the consolidation of identity feeds back into the memory system, driving its continuous adaptation to the needs of the group’s development. Ultimately, the symbiotic relationship between memory and identity reveals the intrinsic logic of social cohesion in human society. Through cultural mechanisms, groups integrate fragmented individual experiences into a stable collective identity, sustaining the spiritual bonds

of the community in the face of oblivion, and thereby providing a fundamental guarantee for their long-term survival.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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