

Collective future thought: Concept, function, and implications for collective memory studies

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Piotr M Szpunar

University of Pennsylvania, USA

Karl K Szpunar

University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

Abstract

This article introduces and develops the concept of “collective future thought” and its implications for the interdisciplinary field of (collective) memory studies. The study of collective memory has much to gain from the complexity that interjecting future thought introduces into the various processes that are the foci of the field. This article defines the concept: the act of imagining an event that has yet to transpire on behalf of, or by, a group. Second, it proposes a more complex relation between the past, present, and future than is regularly invoked in the study of collective memory. Namely, we posit that collective future thought is simultaneously dependent on the past and itself acts as a catalyst for the (re)construction of the past. Finally, we consider the implications of the function of collective future thought for the study of collective memory and identify avenues for future interdisciplinary research.

Keywords

Collective future thought, collective memory, group identity, imagining, temporality

People devote considerable time to thinking about the future. On a daily basis, we contemplate and anticipate a multitude of future scenarios: what we will have for dinner; what errands we will need to complete before, during, or after our workday; our plans for the weekend or an upcoming trip; and we weigh the priority of various tasks and goals for the upcoming months, years, and beyond. Indeed, one study showed that young adults think about the future an average of 59 times a day (D’Argembeau et al., 2011). Given the frequency with which we think about the future, academics from various fields of inquiry have made a concerted effort toward understanding, among other things, the cognitive and neural mechanisms that give rise to the ability to think about the future

Corresponding author:

Piotr M Szpunar, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, 3620 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA.

Email: pszpunar@asc.upenn.edu

(for recent reviews, see Schacter et al., 2012; Szpunar, 2010a), the limitations of our ability to predict our reactions to the outcomes of future events (Gilbert and Wilson, 2007), and the consequences of impaired patterns of future thinking that often arise in clinical disorders characterized by anxiety and depression (Watkins, 2008).

Notably, efforts to understand how we think about the future have focused almost exclusively on the future of the individual. Much less is known about two distinct yet interrelated phenomena that comprise collective future thought, namely, how individuals think about the future of groups and how groups imagine and conceptualize the(ir) future. First, just as we devote a significant amount of time to thinking about events that will shape our individual lives, so too do we spend considerable time pondering events and outcomes that are pertinent to groups of individuals such as families, work and religious organizations, communities, nations, and even the world. One might intuitively surmise that the act of thinking about an individual's or group's future represents the working of a single cognitive capacity. The future is the future and the only difference between individual and group futures is the content that makes up relevant scenarios. However, dissociations between the two have been demonstrated in the neuropsychological literature.

Human memory is not a singular capacity but rather a set of closely interacting capacities that give rise to dissociable forms of memory performance (Eichenbaum and Cohen, 2001; Schacter and Tulving, 1994; Squire, 1987). For instance, patients with amnesia commonly lose the ability to remember details from their personal past (i.e. episodic memory) but retain general knowledge about the world (i.e. semantic memory) (e.g. Tulving, 1985). Conversely, patients with semantic dementia lose access to general knowledge about the world but may retain access to details about specific memories (e.g. Hodges and Graham, 2001). Recent work in cognitive neuroscience has suggested that these dissociable memory systems may support dissociable forms of future thinking (Suddendorf and Corballis, 2007; for relevant discussion regarding the role of memory in giving rise to future thinking, see Schacter and Addis, 2007). For instance, patients with damage to a part of the brain called the hippocampus, a key region of the episodic memory system, have been shown to suffer impairments in the ability to imagine specific events that characterize their personal future (e.g. What specific events will you experience in the coming weeks?; Hassabis et al., 2007; Tulving, 1985; but see Squire et al., 2010). Yet, spared in such cases is the ability to imagine general events that characterize group or *collective* futures (e.g. What environmental concerns will the world face over the coming decade?; Klein et al., 2002; for further elaboration on this distinction, see Abraham et al., 2008; Irish et al., 2012; Manning et al., 2013; Race et al., 2013; Szpunar et al., 2014). Although the evidence is certainly sparse and more work is needed to identify what specific features of individual and collective future thought are dissociable, the capacity to engage in collective future thought appears to rely on cognitive processes distinct from those involved in individual or personal future thinking.

At the same time, the ability to imagine collective futures should not be over-identified as a purely psychological phenomenon. Groups also collectively engage in future imagining and project themselves into that which has yet to transpire: a couple ponders married life with a new child; a board of directors projects the value of their brand after expansion; social movements imagine a future world in which the change they seek is either realized or fails to materialize; a nation considers its future under a new occupying force; Christians await the rapture. In this sense, people not only collaborate with one another to formulate collective futures but also interact with various other mediating devices (e.g. objects, texts, images, and other media).

The purpose of this article is to introduce and consider the implications of the concept of collective future thought, as individuals and groups engage with it, for the interdisciplinary field of (collective) memory studies. The study of collective memory has much to gain from the complexity that interjecting future thought introduces into the various processes that are the foci of the field.

This article proceeds in three parts. First, we define the concept of collective future thought. Our definition is offered with recourse to insights from the field of collective memory. Second, we identify how the concept of the future is formulated in contemporary collective memory studies and, by utilizing recent scholarship on future thinking from outside of the field, propose a more complex relation between future thought and memory in the context of the collective. Namely, we propose that rather than simply being dependent on—or the effect of—a collective’s memory, we posit that collective future thought is itself the driving force behind the (re)construction of a collective’s past.¹ Third, we consider the implications of collective future thought for the study of collective memory and identify avenues for future research that emphasize contact between seemingly disparate disciplines. In terms of relevant research presented in this article and our accompanying suggestions for future research, we draw upon both qualitative and quantitative sources of evidence from various fields of inquiry pertinent to collective memory studies. The methods employed across fields provide unique, yet deeply interrelated, contributions. For example, quantitative studies provide insight into the cognitive mechanisms that have bearing on collective future thought as well as the individual iterations that make up a “collected” future, while qualitative approaches supply rich detail concerning the complex group processes that underwrite, overlap, and even “exist” outside of individual iterations of an imagined future. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches are indispensable in formulating a cross-disciplinary and nuanced concept of collective future thought, to which we now turn.

What is collective future thought?

Collective future thought is *the act of imagining an event that has yet to transpire on behalf of, or by, a group*. Despite a relatively straightforward definition, the phenomena that this concept is intended to capture are rather complex, comprising both psychological and social/group processes and dynamics. It is thus important to unpack exactly what we mean by the various terms utilized, namely, “imagining,” “event,” and “group.”

Imagining

The concept of imagination is often discussed in terms of a constructive process that involves generating novel ideas on the basis of pre-existing knowledge (White, 1990). Here, we focus specifically on the role of imagination in the construction of possible future scenarios as they pertain to groups, whether undertaken by individuals or by the group itself. Two interrelated points concerning collective memory—whose relation to collective future thought is detailed below—can clarify the conceptualization of collective future thought as a form of imagination.

First, collective memory is “conceptualized in the literature as lying on the continuum running from a collection of individual expressions of memory at one end ... [to the] property of a group, culture or nation, beyond the individual level” (Wessel and Moulds, 2008: 289–290). On the first end of the spectrum lies “collected memory” (Olick, 1999; Young, 1993). Just as an individual member of a group can remember in the context of a collective—its past, heritage, legacy, and so on—so too can an individual engage with a collective future. In this context, an individual imagines on behalf of and for the group. Carolyn Marvin’s (1988) study examining public reaction to the introduction and dissemination of new technologies, such as the electric light, the telegraph and the telephone, provides a well-researched example with which to illustrate this dimension of collective future thought. The advent of these communication technologies—“sources of endless fascination and fear” (p. 4)—sparked speculation regarding what future society “might be like” (p. 6). However, just because an individual might imagine how such technologies would develop and affect their

ability to communicate with others does not necessarily mean that one is thinking about the future in a collective manner. If, on the other hand, one's thoughts focus on how these technologies (and their further development) might affect their community moving forward, then that person would be said to be engaging in collective future thought. For instance, in 1904, Nikola Tesla imagined that wireless technologies would enlighten and civilize, fostering a world of "peaceful relations" between countries (quoted in Marvin, 1988: 192). Conversely, others such as Reverend A.C. Johnson made more terrifying prophecies at the turn of the century: "In just 32 years from now ... the electricity stored in the earth [the result of technological development] will come in contact with the heated matter inside and blow the whole world up" (quoted in Marvin, 1988: 120). Any person—as well known as Tesla or as obscure as the Reverend—attending to such issues could produce an individual vision of their group's future; in other words, one version or iteration of a "collected future."

Second, like collective memory, collective future thought is also the property of a group "beyond the individual level" and, in a sense, "exists" in a communicative and mediated process (Wertsch, 2002; Zelizer, 1995) that involves makers, users, "and the visual and discursive objects and traditions of representation" (Kansteiner, 2002: 197; also Halbwachs, 1992; Olick and Robbins, 1998). Consider again the example of "new technologies" (Marvin, 1988). Of particular concern at the turn of the century was how future society might be fundamentally altered due to the contact facilitated by new technologies and their effects on "family, class, community, and gender relations" (p. 7). This future promised "nothing less than a new organization of society," as *Scientific American* put it in 1880 (quoted in Marvin, 1988: 65), but one that some feared might imperil society due to the increased "mixing of heterogeneous social worlds" (p. 107). These predictions or anticipations of what the future might look like are not simply individual musings, but the result of complex communicative interactions between individuals, organizations, and mediating objects: new technologies and their creators, professional texts, instruction manuals, improvised uses, public experiments and spectacles, popular media stories and reports regarding social transgressions, and even religious prophecies. Ultimately, whether hopeful or dire (i.e. a peaceful world or the end of days), these imagined futures "exist" beyond the individual and in social/group processes that draw on—and reinforce or challenge—various social narratives and anxieties.

The examples utilized to illustrate the spectrum of phenomena that fall within the purview of collective future thought, embedded in psychological and social/group processes, highlight that future thinking often revolves around events, whether those events are specific (e.g. the advent of the telegraph or the end of the world in 32 years) or schematic (e.g. an increasingly technologized and peaceful society). Next, we provide a more formal distinction between specific and schematic events.

Events

The events of collective future thought involve the interplay of the specific and the schematic—a distinction made by Wertsch (2002, 2004) concerning collective memory or historical consciousness. The specific refers to particular dates, times, names, and details that make up events. The schematic refers to the underlying and generalizable patterns that structure the feel of imagined futures (Wertsch, 2004). In discussing collective memory, Kansteiner (2002) argues that an individual "might subscribe wholeheartedly to certain historical interpretations, but [they] would not be able to identify their origins even if one undertakes the cumbersome task of asking [them] directly" (p. 194). Similarly, an individual may not be able to identify the particulars of a future vision but can impart the feel or urgency of that imagined future. For example, at the turn of the century a person might have been unable to recite any concrete evidence concerning the increasing

ubiquity of particular technologies, their social-cultural effects, or precisely how these would materialize in the future, but could nonetheless convey a sense or feeling of the impending change wrought by such technologies that future society would face. While the specific and schematic are conceptually distinct, in almost any future vision, they overlap. Specific imagined future events—be they impending or distant, open or delineated, grounded or fantastical—are placed into schematics that aid in their communication. The feel that the schematics of collective future thought convey can be apocalyptic or hopeful, dystopian or utopian, and inducing or alleviating of anxiety. For instance, the anticipated significance of a particular technology might be situated in a schematic concerning the potential future disintegration of certain social mores and appropriate social behavior (see Marvin, 1988). We further elaborate on this point in our discussion of groups.

Groups

The size of the group that can share a collective future can vary considerably and includes, but is not limited to, a pair or set of friends, a couple or family unit, a religious or business organization, a social or political movement, a state, or a nation. The levels at which groups engage in collective future thought are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, their interactions are often exemplified in terms of the interplay between specific and schematic representations of a collective future across various levels. Marvin (1988) highlights that the manner in which families, classes, nations, and professional groups historically imagined their technologized futures was often closely intertwined. For instance, the technologists and engineers who, at the turn of the century, most forcefully asserted their authority as the arbiters and designers of the world's technologized future (p. 52) were complex social actors whose roles in imagining a collective future could not “be fully understood without attention to their efforts and aspirations as members of families, citizens of countries, and possessors of gender and race” (p. 232). That is, any specifics or schematics of a future vision of technological advancement were inflected with the specifics or schematics of the collective futures of other groups to which these experts also belonged, such as the family (e.g. the potential breakdown of traditional gendered familial structures due to technological advances in communication) (pp. 74–75). More recently, it is the seeming ubiquity of digital media that has led to discussions concerning the interaction of specific and schematic visions of a technological future between various groupings (see Natale, 2014).

Indeed, interactions between specific and schematic visions of the future permeate daily life. Consider a couple that imagines the birth of their future child and the associated implications. This future is likely to be imagined within familiar schematics of heteronormative reproduction, monogamy, and the nuclear family that are communicated, expressed, and contested through a variety of conduits (e.g. legislation, political rhetoric, media texts, popular film, television, and music). The schematics employed in the family's collective future thinking are likely to be tied to broader levels of collective future thought. For instance, this schematic of heteronormative familial development and growth is central to broader (often politically conservative) imagined futures concerning the health, prosperity, and continuity of the nation. To secure or avoid a particular future, a national group or a political segment thereof works to enshrine their particular schematics into law as well as cultural and social norms. Perceived deviance from or adherence to these schematics affects how groups predict or anticipate the future. These schematics can also delimit the ways in which other groupings might imagine their collective future. At the same time, alternatively imagined collective futures, such as those based in non-monogamous and/or non-heterosexual relationships, can alter the schematics of contexts beyond those of the family: beyond a collective future of the nation dependent on the continuation of the nuclear family, the nation's future is imagined as one premised on the continuity of other principles.

The interplay of collective future thought at various levels of abstraction underscores a key similarity and difference between the processes of imagining a collective future and remembering a collective past. Like collective memory, the collective future is a partial, multiple, and contested process in which the specifics and schematics of a variety of collective futures overlap, imbricate, and affect one another. A pivotal distinction lies in the fact that, whereas both collective future thought and collective memory often revolve around interactions with cultural artifacts and sites (e.g. archives, records), the practices that constitute collective future thought explicitly orient any such interaction toward that which has yet to transpire, attempting to either procure or preempt an imagined scenario or event. This may involve efforts to either secure or counteract the continuity of a past beyond the present.

Collectively imagining the future

In sum, the imagining of a future event that has bearing on a group is a communicative, social, interpretive, political, and contested process that involves a variety of groupings, actions, and objects. Collective future thought is a concept that includes psychological notions of imagining as well as those beyond the individual, those that are fundamentally collective and “exist” within group processes. At either end of the spectrum, collected or collective future thought is a communal act. Regardless of whether performed by an individual or by the collective, it is a phenomenon always for the group.

The utilization of scholarly work on collective memory to formulate and refine the notion of collective future thought is purposefully suggestive. The relation between the two notions is not satisfactorily articulated in theories and work on collective memory. We now turn to examining this relation in order to better link the two concepts and understand how bringing collective future thought to the foreground might come to bear on the study of collective memory.

Collective memory and collective future thought

In this section, we briefly outline the manner in which the concept of the future has been conceptualized in (collective) memory studies. Largely articulated as dependent and posterior to memory, we refer to this conceptualization as “future as after-thought.” Subsequently, we offer an alternative (or inverse) conceptualization that forefronts the future—“future as forethought.” The two are not mutually exclusive and together suggest a complex interplay between these temporalities in the context of the collective.

Future as after-thought

The study of collective memory has long adopted a “presentist” focus that is predominantly interested in how memory and the past are constructed in and for the present (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick and Robbins, 1998; Zelizer, 1995): “collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present” (Coser, 1992: 34). For example, the ways in which past conflict is remembered in the contemporary moment are more an indication of current needs, intentions, schisms, and aesthetics than those that defined the original milieu in which the past conflict unfolded (Szpunar, 2012b).

The future, however, has not been completely ignored. Maurice Halbwachs (1992) in his foundational text on collective memory asserts that the “new family turns from the start toward the future” (p. 77). Halbwachs argues that the new couple must form their own memories in order to “avoid [the] inevitable conflict” that would be created if each over-identified with their previous

families. For Halbwachs, the Christian is also “turned toward the future” (p. 96) and prefers his imminent existence after the end of time to his “terrestrial life” (p. 51). More recently, Zelizer (1998) has asserted that the study of collective memory “represents a graphing of the past as it is woven into the present and future” (p. 5). Nonetheless, the future has rarely been made an object of study in the extensive literature on collective memory in sociology, history, journalism studies, and communication and media studies.

The graphing of memory onto the future effectively relegates the future to an after-thought or effect of collective memory. This conceptualization of the future as after-thought—literally thought after memories—is one that has been articulated long before memory studies coalesced into a field of study. Berkeley (1907 [1710]) and Hume (1958 [1739]) both made distinctions between memory and imagination, positing, in essence, that imagination is dependent on memory, an idea that has received renewed interest in contemporary psychological and neuropsychological studies (Schacter et al., 2012; Schacter and Addis, 2007; Szpunar, 2010a). This view undoubtedly informs contemporary collective memory studies. In an uncanny resemblance to the claims made by Berkeley and Hume, historian Patrick Hutton (1993) defined collective memory as an “elaborate network of social mores, values, and ideals that *marks out the dimension of our imaginations* according to the attitudes of the social group to which we relate” (p. 78, *emphasis added*). This dependence and need to borrow, the inability to generate something truly novel, a future without the ghosts of the past, has long been lamented:

And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language. (Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, quoted in Derrida, 1994: 135)

As articulated by Hume, imagination is considered nothing more than the act of compounding, transposing, augmenting, and diminishing the past. In subscribing to this view, collective memory studies remain focused exclusively on the past in the present.

Future as forethought

We propose an alternative, albeit complementary conceptualization of the future vis-à-vis the past in the context of the collective: that the notion of collective future serves as a driving force of collective memory and can affect the ways in which a past is reconstructed. That is not to say that collective memory does not serve a forward-looking purpose. Even in presentist accounts, the invocation of collective memories is often goal-oriented (see Coser, 1992; Zelizer, 1995), supporting future visions (even if this latter point is only implicit in the literature). Nor is this intended to negate assertions that we use memory to imagine the future. Rather, positing the future as the impetus for remembrance is intended to stress that projections, predictions, and anticipations regarding the future can fundamentally alter the ways in which a collective remembers (and forgets). Here, the relationship between future and past is not unidirectional, nor is it linear.

The difference between future as after-thought and future as forethought further illustrates the distinctiveness of the concept of collective future thought in relation to collective memory. The orientation of collective future thought toward that which has yet to transpire emphasizes the role of projections, speculations, and predictions in the process by which collective identities, for instance, persist, change, and adapt. For example, perceptions of shared futures, or lack thereof, come to bear on how groups may expand, conjoin, or fracture (see Sani, 2008; Van Knippenberg

et al., 2002). In what follows, we highlight the directive function that a collective future can have in shaping the collective past in the context of collective identity and the bonds that form groups.

Studying the future: collective continuity

Collective memory is a communicative process characterized by an intricate set of relations between individuals, objects, and actions (Halbwachs, 1992; Hutton, 1993; Irwin-Zarecka, 1994; Kansteiner, 2002; Olick and Robbins, 1998; Szpunar, 2010b; Wertsch, 2002; Wertsch and Roediger, 2008; Zelizer, 1995). The process of collective memory is often tied to the formation of group identity (Olick and Robbins, 1998; Zelizer, 1995) and groups are conceptualized as products of collective memories (Olick, 1999; Mannheim, 1952). Herein lies the dominant function of collective remembrance: to solidify or assert collective identity, to construct a historical continuity from which to give a present grouping meaning—whether couple, family, organization, social movement, or nation. This process is partial and contested requiring us to ask “which memory?” and “who remembers?” (Zelizer, 1998); the assertion of one collective identity is done against other potential iterations of that group’s identity as well as against those that fall outside of the “in-group” (e.g. enemies or Others). Nevertheless, it is inherently tied to the formation and maintenance of groupings.

If a primary “function” of collective memory is to solidify and express group bonds, what remains simply implied or obscured is the catalyst for remembrance. Is remembrance undertaken for remembrance’s sake or does the notion of the future intervene in meaningful ways in this process? While there has been very little work done on collective future thought, a useful, if imperfect, starting point for clarifying the function of collective future thought in this context is recent research on the concept of “collective continuity” (e.g. Sani et al., 2007). This work has focused on the individual situated in relation to the collective in the context of national identity, as well as the schisms and mergers of social groups. While steeped in the psychological dimension of collective (or collected) future thought, it nonetheless provides useful conceptual tools from which to further examine collective future thought and collective identity beyond the individual.

In recent years, researchers have become interested in understanding how the concept of a collective future might be perceived by or benefit the individual (e.g. Bain et al., 2013). A notable impetus for this movement has been the observation that people tend to hold the belief that their social groups are temporally extended (Brewer and Gardner, 1996; Sani et al., 2007)—that they have existed not only in the past but that they will also continue to prosper *into the future*. For terror management theorists, this belief is a form of death transference, a strategy by which aspects of the individual live on long after her own demise (Pyszczynski et al., 2000). Recent studies have demonstrated that people who hold a strong sense of collective continuity about their social groups experience benefits in terms of social well-being, such as feeling less alienated (Sani et al., 2008; see also Sani et al., 2009). Halbwachs (1992) pointed out long ago that if the new couple’s “future were not painted in their eyes in alluring colors, we would not understand how they were capable of this sacrifice [i.e., detaching themselves from their previous familial groups]” (p. 78). Building on such ideas, there is a line of research that deals with marital satisfaction and its tie to a sense of “we-ness.” That is, a couple’s tendency to describe their experiences in terms of the plural pronoun “we” rather than individual pronouns is a remarkably good predictor of divorce rates (i.e. that couple’s collective future) (see: Buehlman et al., 1992; Carrere et al., 2000; Cartwright and Zander, 1960).

Tied to an individual’s sense of well-being through collective continuity is the notion that individuals will defend that collective in order to maintain their own sense of wellness (and perhaps death transference). When individuals perceive a threat to the continued existence of their

in-group, they react with behaviors that serve to protect it and to reject the out-group (Wohl et al., 2010). For instance, it has been demonstrated that people adopt an in-group bias when they feel threatened by social mergers (Smeeke and Verkuyten, 2013). This perception of threat is not intended to connote a rejection of change in general. Studies of schisms within and mergers between social groups have indicated that people tend to welcome schisms between factions of a group that is perceived to lack temporal continuity into the future (e.g. Sani, 2008) and encourage mergers wherein the conjoining groups are perceived to have a similar future-oriented trajectory (Van Knippenberg et al., 2002). In essence, collective future thought is essential to the persistence of collective identity and also highlights how group identity is malleable and changing—how its continuity depends on its ability to adapt and change rather than simply persevere—in relation to its projections of the future.

The concept of continuity immanent to collective future thought provides a basis from which to better understand the relation between identity and memory in the collective context. Namely, the catalyst to remember and form bonds through collective memory depends, in part, on how a collective envisions its future. The projection of the future that acts as a catalyst for remembrance is often one that invokes scenarios or images that threaten a collective's sense of continuity. One common theme in threatening visions of the future is the loss of a group's language, its distinctive form of communication. The notion that the death of a language brings with it the demise of communal identity, knowledge, and culture is the impetus for collective memory projects, such as the one led by the Endangered Language Alliance,² which aims to preserve a variety of languages whose futures are uncertain. Importantly, the apocalyptic catalyst for remembrance here is also accompanied by a vision of a potentially positive future in which the planet's linguistic diversity is maintained.

The recent work on collective continuity highlights that the future—particularly an apocalyptic one—can be a catalyst to remember, but collective future thought can also alter *how* the past is remembered. For instance, technological progress is often seen as a movement toward a future that promises a life of luxury based on the ease granted by developing technology. In this collective vision, it is likely that the automobile is remembered as a great innovation, a notable step toward achieving a brighter future. In contrast, a collective future dominated by the threat of climate change and its potentially apocalyptic repercussions may initiate a remembrance of fossil fuel-burning vehicles as one of the world's gravest errors. In each case, the future vision compels us to make sense of the past, and depending on the quality of the future vision, our reconstructions may sharply differ. Here, it is the “future operating in the present, that creates the past, and makes history” (Randall, 1939: 462).

Future directions

The reconceptualized position of future thought in collective memory studies offered here has implications for the study of the psychological, anthropological, sociological, communication, or media phenomena that fall within its purview and raises many new questions. To conclude, we reiterate the complexity of the process of studying collective future thought and offer some suggestions on what the various disciplines that make up the field of (collective) memory studies have to offer one another in this regard.

Bringing to the forefront a conceptualization of collective future thought that does not necessarily place the future as coming after the past suggests a different temporality through which to examine collective memory. The presentist inclination of contemporary collective memory studies, while examining the interaction of multiple and contested pasts, leaves implied a future that follows, and one often based on the compounding and transposition of the past. Without rejecting this

process, placing within it another relation between the future and the past, one in which an imagined, predicted, or anticipated future drives remembrance, the focus of collective memory studies is elevated to one of a complex interplay of past, present, and future without linear trajectory. This is a process that spans a variety of collectives that interact and affect one another.

Ultimately, this article is intended to be a general introduction to the concept of collective future thought in the context of collective memory. It is hardly exhaustive and many questions remain that would benefit from interdisciplinary efforts, contact, and exchange. For instance, in asking “Does the future exist?” Tulving and Szpunar (2012) answer affirmatively only in the realm of mental constructs. The work on collective memory in the fields of geography, communication, media studies, and sociology provides a complementary vantage point in affirming that the future does indeed exist in the physical world, beyond the psyche of the individual (albeit as a product of mental life; Popper and Eccles, 1977): in media texts (films, TV, music, books), peace accords, monuments, and in our interaction with these. Heretofore, these sites have been largely studied as *lieux de mémoire* (places of remembrance; Nora, 1989), but questions remain regarding whether such sites are too *lieux de futur* or whether there exist—or have ever existed—*milieux de futur*. Along these lines, much more work on historical and contemporary (and even future) futures is needed. Groups have not and do not imagine the future in the same ways across contexts (couples, families, social movements, organizations, and nations) and across historical time periods and spaces (ancient Greece as compared to ancient Persia or the Renaissance, for example; see Polak, 1973). Moreover, some future imaginings persist over time and inform the lives of multiple generations while other visions are altered, lost, or discarded.

Notably, scholars in various fields have begun to embrace the notion of collective future. Eshel’s (2013) study of contemporary literature formulates a notion of “futurity,” that is, how literary works, in addressing the past, provide an opening for thinking about the future with “new vocabularies” that go beyond the restraints of the past. Journalism studies have also turned to examining how the news media engage with the future (Neiger, 2007) and how they utilize the past in such efforts (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013). Various media historians also provide examples of how the widespread implementation and use of new media have sparked and/or affected the manner in which the future is envisioned (Boddy, 2004; Marvin, 1988; Natale, 2014). Still others have begun to consider the relation between collective future and identity (e.g. Sani et al., 2009).

These lines of work are encouraging, but more is needed to demonstrate the directive functions of collective future. For instance, studies of collective continuity measure the construct in a way that requires participants to consider the past and future in the context of thinking about the temporal nature of their social groups. This work, particularly that focused on schisms, mergers, and existentiality (Sani et al., 2009), implies that a sense of collective future plays a key role in upholding the integrity of the group and the well-being experienced by the individual who perceives themselves to be a part of that group. It will nonetheless be crucial to pinpoint both the extent to which a sense of collective past and future contribute to such evaluations as well as how a variety of constructs tied to group identity—based on race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, for example—come to bear on them. Also, the existing research on collective continuity is largely limited to national identity, and it would be fruitful to examine how this concept extends to other groups that might hold a sense of collective future (for a recent application to family units, see Herrera et al., 2011).

Finally, it will be important to develop a more in-depth understanding of the possible cognitive mechanisms that influence the construction and sharing of collected future events. Recent work on collaborative remembering has shown that a group of people remember fewer details about a specific event (e.g. a list of recently presented words) when they remember together as compared to when they remember separately and pool their individual memories (Rajaram and Pereira-Pasarin,

2010; Roediger and McDermott, 2011). It will be interesting to examine whether such instances of collaborative inhibition extend to group efforts in imagining shared futures. Perhaps even more exciting will be the development of research programs that address the extent to which cognitive and group processes pertinent to collected and collective future thinking may interact with or inform one another (e.g. Does the manner in which collected visions of the future are generated—alone or in the context of a group—influence the extent to which members of a group may be likely to identify with the schematics of that future?).

In their outline and suggestions for the burgeoning field of memory studies, Roediger and Wertsch (2008) call for a variety of activities necessary to truly make the field interdisciplinary. Perhaps one of the most important is a call to develop ideas that are amenable to interdisciplinary study. In developing the notion of collective future thought—the act of imagining an event that has yet to transpire on behalf of, or by, a group—we have attempted to bring the work of various fields into meaningful dialogue. Collective future thought is characterized by a multidirectional interplay of temporalities and involves the overlaying of the specific and the schematic across a variety of imbricated levels; the facts and feel (or affects) of collective future thought are communicated through a multitude of conduits (e.g. the media, literature, film, among others) and in a variety of contexts (e.g. the family, an organization). In order for this concept to fulfill its potential and adequately address the phenomena we have placed under its purview—and those we have not yet conceived—in all their detail and nuance, work across disciplines is crucial. In other words, interdisciplinary work is necessary for addressing both the key dimensions of, and what is at stake in, collective future thought.

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Notes

1. While we focus on the influence of the future on the past, we note that the collective future may also affect the manner in which current events or the present is interpreted. Of course, where the present ends and the past begins can be difficult to define (James, 1890; McTaggart, 1908).
2. See: <http://elalliance.org>

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Author biographies

Piotr M Szpunar is the George Gerbner postdoctoral fellow at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. He holds undergraduate degrees in Music Composition (Humber College, Canada) and Political Science (University of Waterloo, Canada) and earned a Dual-PhD in Communication and Political Science from the University of Pennsylvania in 2014. His research interests span identity and (new) media technologies, political violence and terrorism, communication/critical theory, and collective memory. He is currently working on a book-length manuscript on homegrown terrorism, identity, and citizenship in contemporary America.

Karl K Szpunar is an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago (szpunar@uic.edu). He earned his Bachelor of Science from the University of Toronto, Canada, in 2003, his PhD in Cognitive Psychology from Washington University in St. Louis in 2009, and completed his postdoctoral training at Harvard University in 2015. His research interests focus primarily on the cognitive and neural relations between human memory and future thinking. Address: Department of Psychology, 1007 West Harrison Street, Chicago IL, 60607.