

Review of

Vital memory and affect: Living with a difficult past By Steven Brown & Paula Reavey New York, NY: Routledge, 2015. \$49.95. ISBN 9780415684019

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Steven D. Brown and Paula Reavey have established an original view on the kind of memories that persons cannot live without. We all have vital memories, we all live with some aspect of the past that is difficult, however, some more than others find that difficult aspects of their past come to define their capacities to act in the present. These are persons who find the social viscosity of their distressing experiences means their memories more readily get collected up into the dynamic currents of social relations. Brown and Reavey show that having experiences subject to social remembering does not eradicate a person's agency; the vitality of memory lies in how people learn to live well with a distressing past and turn the ambiguities of that past over into a practices and techniques of recollection that qualitatively extend relations and the social worlds they compose.

In chapter one we are introduced to the book's central organising metaphor, that of a river. Rivers have the quality of appearing constant over time and space but, in following a broad tradition of process philosophy, the same river is never identical on two occasions. The same, Brown and Reavey suggest, is true of our experience of the past: 'the most important aspect of recollecting vital memories is setting specificity' [p210]. The authors follow observations from studies of river geography to caution against linear understandings of environmental causality on experience and memory. Rivers are constituted with tributaries and deltas (convergences and divergences), nonetheless over time the multiplicity of a river appears held together through persistence in a singularity of form, expressed through the riverbed (or chreod). Similarly, overtime, a rememberer may discover or invent ways to perform a memorial relation to a difficult past that, in appearance, has the persistency of a chreod, but depends on the situational resources and constraints made available in the present. The authors introduce the thematic coordinates of their empirical work, noting seven themes: autobiography, agency, forgetting, ethics, affect, space and institutional practices. Chapter two is epistemological in focus and deals with issues of method; specifically situating the authors' approach to empiricism in contrast to a "restricted view" of psychological experimentalism (citing for example the work of Elizabeth Loftus). The authors trace a careful genealogy that surveys their

intellectual heritage through the psychological empiricism of Hermann Ebbinghaus, Endel Tulving, Martin Conway, Katherine Nelson and Robyn Fivush, Lev Vygotsky, developments in Discursive Psychology and more recently distributed cognition. In chapter three the authors clarify the ontological commitments that arise from their river metaphor and epistemological stance. Brown and Reavey recall and combine ideas drawn from the work of James J Gibson and Kurt Lewin to argue that experience is best understood in terms of situated life-worlds, that life-worlds have relational and material elements that offer up invariant affordances that enhance or constrain a person's capacity to act, or rather, their freedom to move upstream or downstream in the flow of experience. The authors elaborate their view on life-worlds with reference to recent developments in affect theory. Life-worlds are attended by atmospheres, emotions, bodily capacities and material affordances that pose themselves as "propositions" that have a lure to transform, or "affect", how a person stands in the flow of experience. It is this framework that Brown and Reavey engage in chapters four to eight through discussion of empirical materials.

The empirical contexts explored are compelling; these are drawn from the life-worlds of people negotiating difficult settings including child sexual abuse (chapter four), adoptive parents (chapter five), the 2005 London bombings (chapter six), forensic psychiatric unit (chapter seven) and a reminiscence museum in a residential care home (chapter eight). There is insufficient space here to fully engage with the rich insights of each empirical domain, so I will address the empirical chapters thematically. The author's seven themes are apparent in each empirical study though some become more prominent. For instance, in chapters five and seven the theme of institutions is important for understanding how others participate in the management of a person's vital memories (the authors refer to a "managed accessibility" to the past). Chapter five explores how adoptive parents carefully manage access to objects that recall difficult pasts. Studying vital memories in this context demands an "expanded" view on the social relations that shape vital memories in domestic life-worlds, including social service workers, birth, foster and adoptive parents, siblings and schools. In chapter seven, emotions and affects travel between boundaries in a medium security forensic mental health unit. The authors observe an 'institutional regime of forgetting focussed on maintaining wellness' [p169]. For example, the innovation of administering medication through depot injections means that relations of compliance are vested at a biomolecular level with the effect of institutionally forgetting the autobiographical memorial qualities of life. Such innovations impact the kinds of affordances and propositions that patients experience as boundaries, though porous, for forming social relations within the mental health unit. Chapter six discusses interview data featuring survivor and bereaved accounts of the 2005 London bombings. The authors' focus is on how

vital memories are recruited into the collective fold of public discourse about the attacks. The authors note coping strategies, for example interviewees described how the bombings formed a kind of biographical watershed, even formalising the break as “life 1” and “life 2”. What Brown and Reavey are sensitive to is how the logic of media intrudes, hacks or highjacks, the deeply personal life-space of recovering from trauma. The authors refer to the “torque of media” when a survivor is called to speak to and on behalf of others, meanwhile journalists looking to get a juicy story probe for “life 1” details that they can make relevant to the mnemonic work of shaping collective memories of the bombings.

What travels across Brown and Reavey’s empirical sites is the figure of the person, a person that is framed by various institutions as “being with” the memory of an irrevocable experience, as the authors put it “[o]ne becomes the sort of person who is made over in the image of the institution” [p165]. If institutions participate in carving out a chreod-like version of the person with their difficult past, it is through appeals to personhood that a life accesses the resources to transverse or, in keeping with the authors metaphor, wade more freely against the upstream and downstream currents in collective flows of experience. It follows that the author’s ethical commitment lies at the level of becoming persons, since personhood is evidently a valuable social resource for putting vital memories in motion against the current of institutional memory management. Is this an adequately “expanded view” on memory? Clearly it is for the empirical purposes of investigating how ordinary people experience their pasts shaping their presents and futures. However, what would a psychological view on vital memory and affect consist if it were to be expanded beyond a (predominantly Western) conception of personhood? The supreme appeal of Brown and Reavey’s conceptual and empirical work lies in how they afford ways for psychology to study memory beyond the life-space of the person, to ask how person and environment, body and ecology, life and cosmos, topologically fold and extend to shape and actualise possible worlds. And so the authors serve a compelling account of why vital memories challenge received methodological and ontological certainties in psychology, and therefore matter for academic and clinical psychologists alike. Vital memories disrupt and redistribute accessibilities to the past, and the legitimacies for so doing, and so invariably carry consequences for advocates and activists. These memories confer and contort power relations that mean service users and their psychiatrists, policymakers and strategy developers must question the efficacy and violence of their boundary objects, such as deficit and extremity models of non-normative memory practices. The book provides a toolkit for enhancing sensibilities to the contingency and ethics of vital memories in institutional settings that will benefit actors from a variety of backgrounds to better face the challenges of making lives affected by difficult pasts more liveable and futures more desirable. For those of

us less directly touched by this project, Brown and Reavey deal a forceful reminder that not just memory but actively remembering is integral to 'what kind of person we have been, are now and can be in the future' (p.46).