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Conceptualizing the interconnected agents of collective memory: The transforming perception of a regional geohazard between mediated discourse and conversation

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Social memory is a constructive process rather than a fixed object, in which different actors constantly negotiate with each other in their respective socio-cultural context and within a dynamic-transactional process. This paper describes interdependent processes of mediated memory work, individual memory and memory talk which are involved in the creation and transformation of the social memory. The theoretical concept refers to the example of a regional geohazard.

1. Regional geohazard: Definition

In geo-scientific terminology, regional geohazards cover extreme natural phenomena such as storm surges, floods, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes or avalanches. They pose a permanent threat to the society of a certain region. A regional geohazard can be characterized by further features (Neverla 2009, Ratter 2009): The permanent threat to the region is, first and foremost, rooted in specific *physio-geographic events and circumstances*. For instance, Japan's specific location puts it under a permanent threat of being hit by earthquakes and Bangladesh is prone to frequent destructive tropical cyclones associated with tidal surge. Regional geohazards are also a particular form of *human-nature interaction*. One precondition is mankind's settlement in an endangered region despite their knowing of the potential threat. For one thing, the settlers put themselves deliberately at risk. At the same time, humans use their natural surrounding and turn it into a cultural environment. In doing so, *human interfere with the eco-system and changes the natural conditions that cause geohazards*. After having been struck by a natural disaster, society develops certain strategies to overcome the catastrophe and takes precautionary measures impacting the eco-system. Each of these individual events is extra-ordinary and surprising. The hazard, however, results from the fact that such an event can happen again any time. The collective experience makes its recurrence likely *but not predictable in exact terms*. Perceiving a threat is determined by a *key event*, a collective traumatic encounter. The traumatic impact is not rooted in the event itself but in its effects on our lives. Such an event only strikes people as a geohazard, if it has happened before or when people become aware of its potential for recurrence while coming to terms

with the event. The resulting understanding of the permanent threat then leads to precautions or strategies to solve the problem (Lüthje 2009).

2. Space, society and culture, and time: Three dimensions of a regional geohazard

The concept of a regional geohazard encompasses three dimensions: (1) space, (2) society and culture, and (3) time.

2.1 Spatial reference

Geohazards have, firstly, a particular *spatial reference* through (a) the local and current effects and (b) the specific geographical context. For example, the major geophysical risk along the coast of the North Sea is storm surges. A series of many historical disasters has deeply engraved the ever-present threat into the collective memory, habitus and practice of the coastal population (von Storch/Woth/Gönnert 2007). Not only coastal region is concerned by this danger but also the city of Hamburg. The estuary of the river Elbe extends from Cuxhaven (coast) to Hamburg a distance of about 130 km. Hamburg has often been subject to storm surges with significant damages. But after the storm flood in 1855 for more than 100 years no severe storm surge happened when the big storm tide flooded Hamburg in the night between the 16th and 17th of February 1962. The city was not at all prepared for the event. The dikes broke over 60 times along a stretch of 2.5 km. About one sixth of Hamburg was deluged, 315 people died and more than 20,000 people had to be evacuated (Eismann/Mierach 2002).

2.2 Social and cultural reference

Secondly, regional geohazards have a particular *social and cultural reference*. The treatment of regional geohazards is shared by agents (groups and/or individuals) who are originated in different social fields: media, economy, science, politics and society. Hazard treatment includes mitigation of catastrophe's damages as well as the adaptation of the reprise's likelihood, awareness, and prediction into everyday life and practices. According to the competences of the different fields, functions are distributed. The scientific field is commissioned by politics, economy, and society to research for disaster's reasons, to find solutions and to develop warning systems to predict extreme and dangerous events as soon and as true as possible. The economic field for example is responsible for financing measures but also makes demands toward the political field which on the other hand is accountable for catastrophe management (mitigation) and hazard management (adaptation) in equal measure.

Politics is asked to solve the problems, to make decisions and plans and to build community structures (which will be mainly financed by the economy and taxes). Society, in this case different social groups and individuals, is living with the hazard. The hazard is part of the collective habitus and thus influences everyday practices based on long-term considerations like building private houses as well as short-term practices like quick reaction on warning. Warning is a task of the public mass media. They are needed for informing on threats, reporting scientific and political solutions (and discussing their different positions too) as well as reporting level and kind of damages, reasons, and consequences. The origins of the agents in different fields account not only for different competences and functions but also for different field rules and different interests. Agents are imprinted by the collective habitus and the social practices in their respective social field. Individual actors certainly hold their own habitus which consists of an individual and unique accumulation and mix of different sorts and amounts of capital. This habitus is the result of the biographical journey through different social fields during lifetime and the sum of experiences. However, individual decisions are not only determined by structural conditions, as Bourdieu's theory of structural constructivism (1989: 14) contends that individual actors also influence the structure. Individual and structural concepts are interdependent. Individuals move freely between the different social fields in the social sphere and thus affect the structure and collective habitus by their own individual habitus. Interactive effects of structure and individuals lead to permanent social and cultural change: *panta rhei*. But social and cultural sphere is not only a matter of change but is also historically grown and based on tradition.

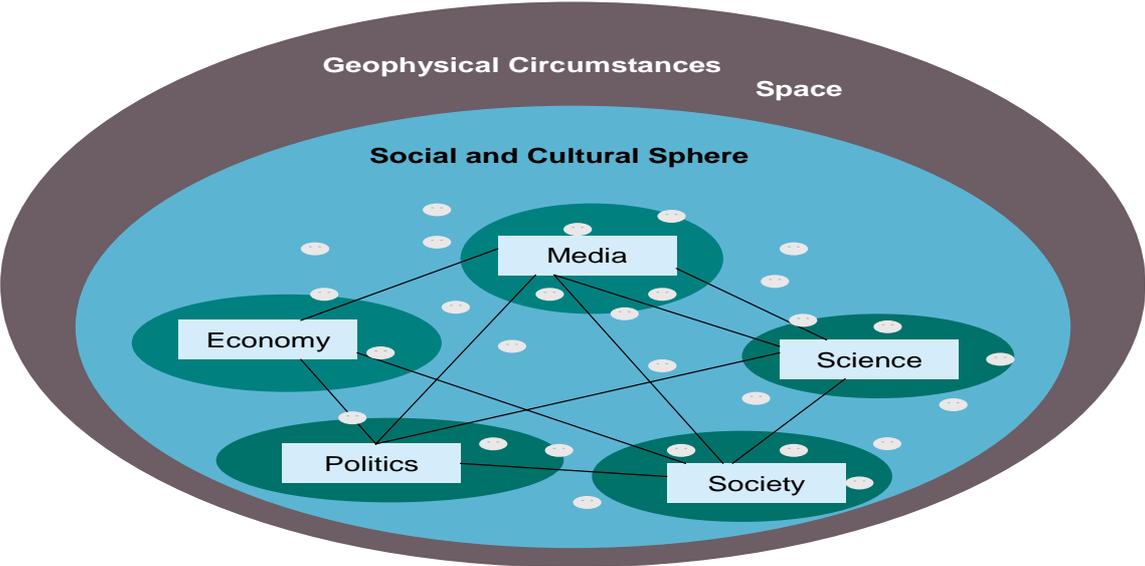


Figure 1: Regional Geohazard: Interplay of agents and circumstances

The first and the second reference (space and society) of geohazards cannot be seen separated. We also have to consider the interdependence between geophysical circumstances and the socio-cultural sphere. In other words, the concept of environment (and the amplitude of the regional geohazard) as a result of a circulating human-nature-interaction as mentioned above. Tradition and historically grown socio-cultural sphere as well as social fields and individual concepts have been developed in this dependence on natural circumstances and thus in influencing the nature.

2.3 Time reference

Thirdly Geohazards have a particular *time reference*, which (i) refers to the past via the recollection of the traumatic event; (ii) looks ahead by anticipating future events; and (iii) remains present in our conscience to ultimately change our practices. And this leads us to the discussion on construction of social memory in dealing with regional geohazard as well as to examine the role of the media in the process.

3. Mediated memory work

Mediated memory work not only sets the memory agenda but also transforms the collective memory.

3.1 Memory career and memory agents

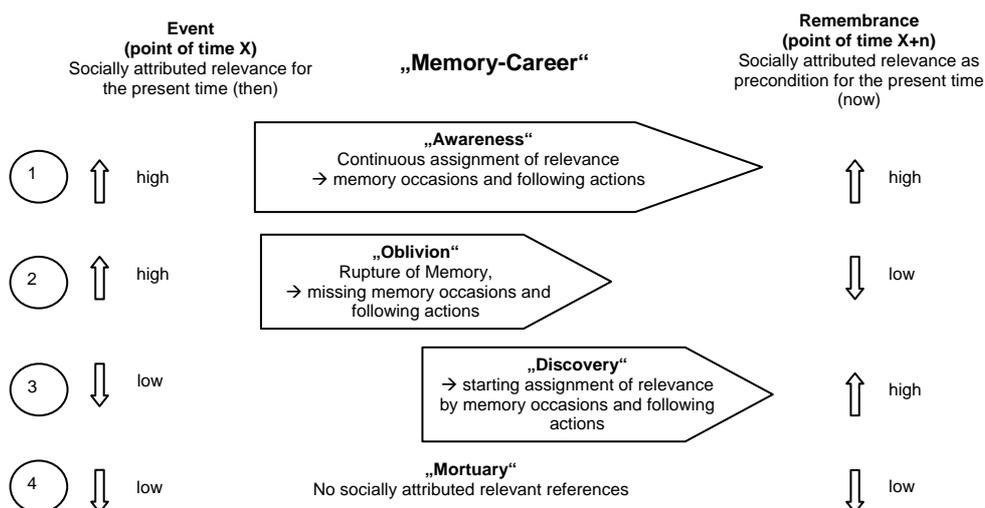


Figure 2: Types of memory careers (Source: Zierold 2006)

Media are responsible for *memory careers* (*Erinnerungskarrieren*, Zierold 2006: 152). The act of establishing the relevance of the past proceeds in two steps: first the media's creation of a memory occasion, which is then socially accepted in the shape and size of follow-up-actions. These are short-term communications and rationally actions as well as habitualized medium-term and long-term every day practices. Zierold (2006) differentiates four types of memory careers: *awareness*, *oblivion/rupture*, *discovery/archaeology* and *mortuary*. According to Zierold, past events are only presented in the media if they can be made relevant to the present. Awareness depends on continuous assignment of relevance by permanently created memory occasions and following actions. Precondition is high social relevance of the key event in the past. Consequence of awareness is a high relevance of the memory in the present. In contrast, oblivion means the rupture of memory of a highly relevant event in its time by missing memory occasions in the following. Discovery of an unimportant event at that time is similar to archaeology of memory by creating memory occasions and ascription of relevance in the aftermath. Finally, mortuary describes the never happening career of an anytime irrelevant event. Starting point of a memory career always is a key event: in the case of regional geohazards a natural catastrophe with a traumatic impact, like the Hamburg storm surge of 1962.

Daily media and journalism are "remembrance and memory generators" (Reinhardt/Jäckel 2005: 102), "*memory agents*" (Zelizer 2008). Journalists set the *memory agenda* to meet the demands of newsworthiness of a particular issue or event. They follow habitual practices which include the professional routines of selecting news, processing them and to present to the public.

3.2 Memory occasions

Donk (2003) differentiates between *three specific types of journalistic reporting on the past* to create a memory occasion: (a) anniversary journalism, (b) historical analogies, and (c) historical contextualization. Each type of media coverage retrieves the historical event from the social memory and makes it relevant (or newsworthy) for the temporary present in an act of recollection. Social memory can be seen as a pool where the different mementos are sleeping until being awakened. This awakening takes place within the memory occasions created by the media following their own field rules and practices. Anniversary journalism is dedicated to the key event plus a ritualized period of remembrance. This ritualized period in our cultural sphere consists of five-year-intervals and exceptionally accounts for the first

anniversary of the key event (Robinson 2009). Memorial days are virtual events in the present with reference to the real event in the past. Historical contextualization and historical analogy otherwise reminiscently link contemporary and real media events with the historical key event in order to frame the present with the past by sharing experiences. Historical contextualization takes place by mentioning the key event in conjunction with a regionally near subsequent event, for example subsequent severe storm floods in Hamburg after 1962. Historical analogies establish cultural proximity and empathy of the local public with a disastrous and sensational but distant event by referring to own experiences. Thus, Hamburger media while covering similar events which occurred in distant places (tropical cyclones of 1970 and 1991 in Bangladesh, and Hurricane Katrina of 2005, and the Asian tsunami of 2004) refer them to the Hamburg storm surges of 1962.

In the process of selecting and processing historical catastrophes media are influenced by different stakeholders. The public debate on regional geohazards is characterized by the circular and interactive connection between scientific knowledge, political and administrative knowledge and action, media construction and processing of scientific and political knowledge, and public awareness and interpretation (Neverla 2009). These discourses lead to follow-up actions concerning mitigation and adaptation of the geohazard, like rising the dikes and improve their construction continually in Hamburg since the 1962 event.

3.3 Memory transformation

A memory career does not only keep the awareness of the absolute and objective truth of a historical event in the collective conscience but also includes the transformation of the memory. Media and journalism are remembrance and memory transformers. When updating the historical event within each memory occasion, media adopt it to the contemporary frame and thus transform it. Responsible for transformation are upcoming new themes like the mediated discourse on climate change and its connection with the increasing number and intensity of storm surges in Hamburg in the recent past. But also stakeholder interests could determine the collective memory. For example, two recent urban development projects in Hamburg – building the Hafen City (new living and working quarters in Hamburg's port area) and enhancing Hamburg's hazardous river island Wilhelmsburg as necessity for the growing city – decrease the politicians as well as investors' motivation to keep the storm surge's remembrance alive. In 1997 Hamburg's Bürgerschaft decided to build the Hafen City and the

construction began in 2001. Since then, this big and prestigious project is underway and has already been partly completed and populated. However, the risk of flooding has not been ignored in this project in actual fact, the strategic method was not to “fight against the aquatic force of nature” but virtually “go with the tide”. Instead of erecting dikes and walls, the principle of constructing wharves or artificial hills is being applied. But despite this careful planning, investors argue that the awareness of the geohazard will induce a reduction of the estate’s worth. The long-run discourse analysis of the news reports on the storm surge in the *Hamburger Abendblatt* (a regional daily newspaper) shows the rupture of the mediated memory on 1962 after 2002 (Lüthje 2009). This finding suggests the possibility of a (more or less conscious) link between the journalist’s awareness of the storm surge hazard (influenced by a generation break and perception of total security caused by effectiveness of the coastal protection) and the newly emerged (financially induced but also part of local patriotism and pride) HafenCity frame.

Updating a historical event by the media and transforming the memory happens in a constructive act of decoding and re-encoding of memory, which is similar to the process of constructing one’s autobiographic memory described by Markowitsch and Welzer (2005). (Social) Remembrance is not primarily related to the past but a process belonging to the present (Zierold 2006: 150).

4. Social Memory and conversation: Memory talk

Now the discussion goes on introducing the model of social memory construction. When constructing social memory, media are using the whole range of types of media effects: knowledge transfer, agenda (or: memory) setting, framing, public opinion climate transfer, persuasion, and impetus for action (Eulmann/Stadelmaier 2009: 118). But the audience doesn’t adapt exactly the mass media contents as those are presented. Media and audience interact in the constructing process of social memory. Social memory, though in the words of Welzer (2001: 12), is the universe of constructing the past en passant, mostly as it were unconsciously and unintentionally. Memory occasions created by the media initiate follow-up actions, especially conversation in families or other social groups concerning the own history and personal experiences, regional history, and myths. The social media of the practice of constructing or re-constructing the past encompass recordings, texts (letters), and pictures (photos) which transport a subtext of the past, spaces (historical ensembles) in which we live but also dynamic interactions like “memory talk” (Welzer 2001). This conversational practice

connects and mixes traditions, own historical and recent experiences and mass media work on memory. The result is a remembrance which could differ from the historical event; a truth related to time, space, social circumstances and individual imprint but not doubtlessly equivalent to reality.

5. Conclusion and methodical annotation

Social memory can be seen as a constructive act in presence with reference to the past. It is embedded in a complex process of transformation in which different actors play their individual role in their respective cultural and social contexts within a dynamic-transactional process (Früh/Schönbach 1982). In this process each agent and each factor is permanently subject and object, instrument and player of change at the same time.

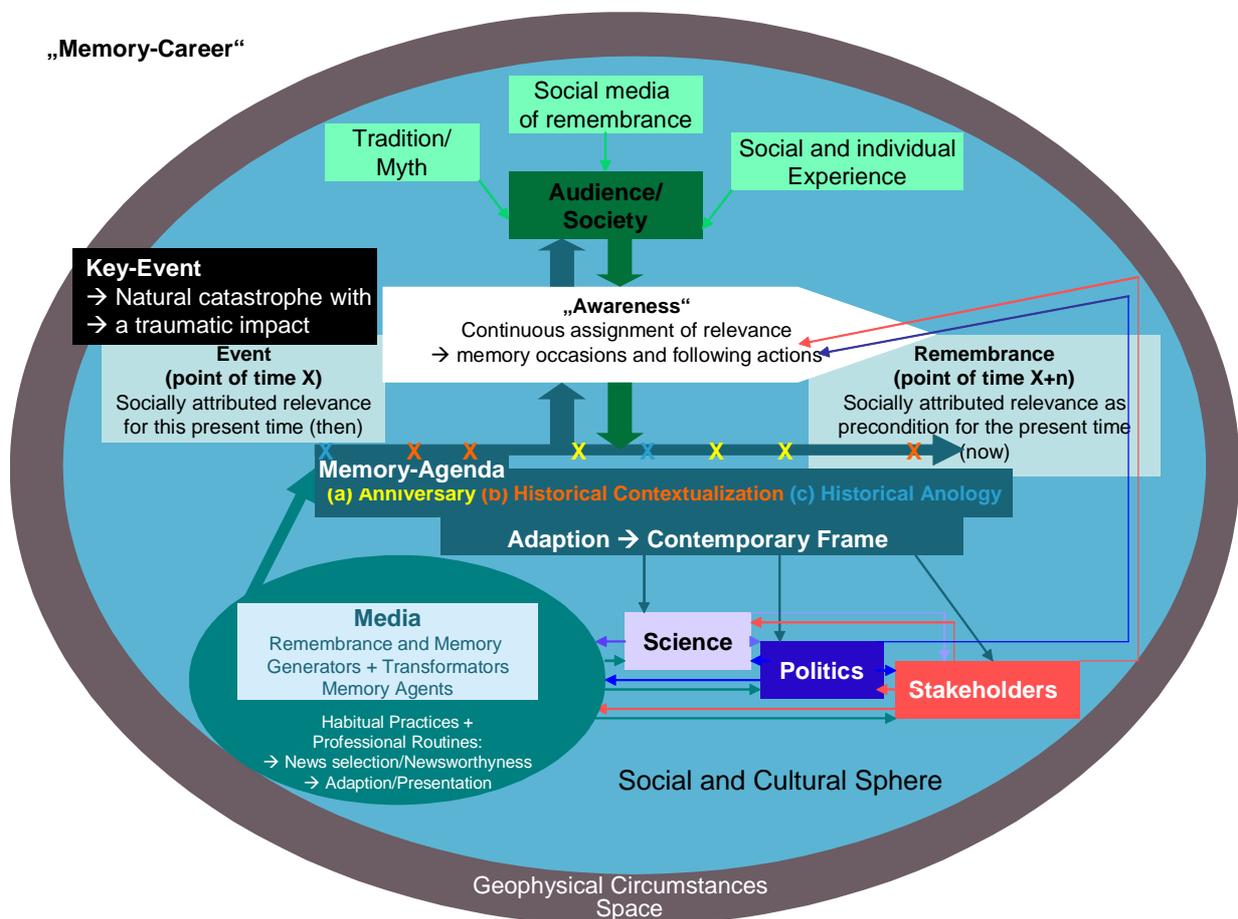


Figure 3: Regional geohazard, media, and social memory (model)

Social memory induces present social practices. It is linked with the concept of regional geohazards at least in two ways:

- a) Social memory is connected with risk perception, and
- b) Risk perception influences mitigation and adaptation strategies for the future.

The functions of the mass media in this process are to share and shape the social memory while social group's conversational practice helps linking the mass media's memory work with collective and individual experiences and memories.

Concerning empirical methods the following aspects must be considered when studying the social memory: (a) memory agents, (b) memory occasions (c) (communicative and everyday practical) memory follow-up actions, (d) the contingency of memory, (e) the procedural character of remembering, (f) the unconscious construction of past events, and (e) the spatial and temporal ties of memory. Due to oscillating complexity and multiple causality, social memory cannot be reconstructed by using a unidimensional methodological design. Drawing on the concept of a regional geohazard, we propose a research strategy which accounts for the different aspects mentioned above. The point of departure will be the reconstruction of the mediated memory career regarding the memory occasions as well as the general social and cultural conditions, transformative events and stakeholders. The first step should be a functional and reconstructive analysis of the mediated memories of the key event. Even though this approach seems to be impractical, confusing, and difficult, the findings will represent the complex processes and interdependencies as accurately as possible and are worth the trouble. Because of the high methodological requirements this research practice usually is part of interdisciplinary teamwork.

The second step focuses on the social practice of constructing the past which is stimulated by the media's memory occasions and mixes collective and individual experiences with the media's memory work. This part of conversational memory work can be reconstructed with the method of open group discussions in the documentary method (Bohnsack 2003). This method is yet proved of value in the archaeology of latent and buried memories in historical audiences research concerning processes and effects of media reception that are distant in time (Lüthje/Pater 2008). Open group discussions simulate the social practice of memory talk at its best when fitting normal conversational situations and avoiding laboratory conditions. Taking these conditions in consideration, open group discussions will offer the chance not only to reconstruct buried memories but also to observe the processes of constructing social memory simultaneously.

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