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Forward an Anthropological Perspective of Alzheimer's Disease: The Symbolic Meanings of Memory Loss in a Commemoration Society

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Abstract

This intervention is based to some reflections from an ethnographical research about the cultural meanings of aging, dementia and memory loss in Alzheimer's disease in contemporary society. In the common sense and in the classification of diagnosis, aging and dementia are considered as one of the dramatic and disturbing experiences of human condition. This work aims to explain the cultural reasons of this apocalyptic scenario considering the cultural meaning of memory loss in a society which defines its collective identity in historical et memorial terms, mostly by the political performances of commemoration. By the description and analysis of a particular commemoration ceremony of the very recent event of terrorism attack in Paris on January 2015, I would like to demonstrate that the commemoration practice is not really based on the historical objectivity of the past event but rather on a political performance promoting the mythisation of it, in order to reinforce the social cohesion around a dominant system of values at the bottom of collective identity. This argument allows to conclude that in the contemporary commemoration society which defines the collective identity on the memory and memorial practices, the person suffering Alzheimer's disease and memory dysfunction is not fully considered like a legitimate member of the social group.

KEY WORDS: Commemoration, Identity, Memory, Alzheimer, Aging.

Introduction

In my current ethnographical research, I'm working on the concept of aging, the image of old age, the symbolic meaning, and the social impact of dementia. I adopt a strictly qualitative method based on biographical data of Alzheimer's patients in gerontology and neurology services of different hospitals around Paris. The participant observation of memory evaluation setting and interviews to patients, their families and the clinical staff serves to define the main terms of the questions. Moreover, I use the same methodological tools to draw an additional ethnography about commemoration rituals in order to analyse the relation between the memory loss in aging and the importance of collective memory in our society. Finally, an historical perspective about the representations' changing about the notions of aging, identity and memory, is also considered in order to analyze the consolidation of contemporary systeme of values and thoughts.

According to my hypothesis, Alzheimer's disease is charged by a symbolic and socially shared meanings becoming a very representative metaphor of the devalued elderly. In the collective imagination the aging is only characterized by

physical relentless and cognitive decline. In particular, in a rational society that has always given a predominant role in autobiographical memories to define the identity, the loss of memory evokes the threat of the loss of self. For this reason, the memory disorders, although Alzheimer's disease is characterized by a large variability of symptoms, are metonymically perceived as the very sign of this pathology.

Moreover, with my research I propose an additional analysis of the relationship between identity and memory, in order to understand the cultural meaning of the Alzheimer's disease. The intent is to make a new look and to realize a new reflection including the political construction of collective identity. According to our cultural point of view, the memory has a central role in defining both individual and collective identity. So, memory disorders are necessarily lived by the Alzheimer's ill, his entourage and society as a whole, like an identity loss and a crisis about belongingness into a social group.

The contemporary commemoration society.

Contemporary society builds the social cohesion on memorial practices and commemoration rituals about recent or remote events that are perceived as myths founding the collective identity (Peschanski 2013). On one hand, the subject uses social values and semiotic codes to build its own identity. On the other hand, the society uses the historical reconstruction of past and particularly meaningful events to define the order of shared values and to mature a strong sense of belonging within the group. It is in this sense that I propose to read the symbolic and socially constructed meaning of commemoration ceremonies.

From this point of view, commemoration and the autobiography are strictly linked, revealing their common origin in narrative performance. Indeed, in a constructivist perspective that sees identity as the result of a process rather than as a specific entity, commemoration and autobiography are both a fictionalized representation producing the identity at the moment of its performance. Finally, the central role of the memory practices is easily tracked in the construction of individual and collective identity. In other words, following the constructivist point of view, identity is not an entity but a process. So, if the individual identity is constructed by a narrative performance, the identity of group is forged on a politically meaningful commemoration.

I adopte the same theoretical approach of those anthropological researches that link together identity, memory and performance theories. The performance is defined by Schechner (2002), which refers to the sociological perspective of Goffman's dramaturgy (1956), as the representation of a past behavior which aims rebuild it, complete it and to relive it in the present. Thus, the identity becomes the result of multiple processes of self that the individual acts in front of a public audience. Briefly, the poietic process of identity construction necessarily pass through a mimetic representation.

If the performance of the self is both a mimesis and poiesis process, the best candidate to understand the construction of identity is the narrative performance in both biographical and historiographical versions. If the first strengthens the subject identity, the second results from the political interpretation of an historical event reinforcing the current state of power. When the imagination – like the psychological human need to tell stories, transmit knowledge, and explore

possible worlds - meets the realistic instance – like the need to build the collective memory of a human group by representing its salient past facts – the historiographical narrative can be born. It is an exceptional story that organizes the events of the past in a logical and chronological order according to the current system of values and intelligible for the spirit of the present.

The history is a privileged subject to examine the nature of narrative. Included by the common perceptions into the sphere of factual occurrences, the historiographical narratives are instead shaped by the political power. In fact, law is supposed to define all past events that will be considered salient by the group. Indeed, Hegel (1840) already noted that a genuine historical account shows not only a certain narrative structure but also a certain political order. In addition, according to Hegel, the state is the only legal authority able to submit his testimony as if it were a very real story, uttered by reality itself. Foucault (1975), in turn, will explain this state function in terms of an order of power. The story answers to the urge of moralization of reality: every story, including historiography, charges the factual dimension by moral values (White 1980: 18).

If an historical event can only be presented in the form of the narrative, it must contain a potentially infinite number of alternative versions. But the only expressible version from the authority's point of view is objective interpretation of the event (White 1980: 23). Well, the memorial function is precisely to neutralize every independent and alternative version of the same event. The commemoration is a ritual performance of the identity group which is built and represented at the same time in agreement with any conditions of validity (Austin 1962). These conditions draw the ritual space in a sacred dimension which has to be strictly separated from the everyday sphere (Turner 1982).

Despite the memorial practices promote the instance of objectification about the represented event, its moral and political content will be the real focus in the performance of the collective self. In other words, the construction of identity of group is reduced to the ritualized way of its representation. Similarly, the memorial – as a ritual object of commemoration – aims to gather people around a commemorative souvenir in order to strengthen the relation with a shared horizon of meaning and values. This representation coincides with a politically significant selection of historical events evoking any values at the bottom of the collective identity.

The commemorated event is represented in such a way as to consolidate a positive point of view about the shared self. In this regard, the commemoration can not celebrate the vanquished and the executioner. In short, it is only possible to commemorate victims or winners. This means that a single event can change its sign depending on the role of the group during the past and currently represented event. This is exactly the political meaning of the event.

In fact, the commemorative performance allows to build and assert a morally appreciable image of the group. Thus, the ritual reestablishes the status of power by the neutralization of every alternative version of the event potentially in contrast with the status quo. The political redefinition of a past event in the present builds a positive image of the group and reinforces the dominant position defending the fundamental values of the collective identity. This is exactly what De Certeau (1987) calls "narrativization of historical facts". Each narrative tells "what happens" (or happened) establishing the real during its representation. Behind the represented past the organizing present is always hidden.

The political performance of a recent past event

Commemoration ceremonies celebrate those values that are reactivated by the memorial practice. From this point of view, it seems interesting to note that some recent past events can rise to the rank of the commemorative souvenirs. Even if they do not defined as strictly historical events, they can evoke the shared values and be historicized and celebrated because of their mythical qualities.

In particular, I think about the commemoration ceremonies that took place in Paris in memory of the victims of the terroris attack on 7th of January against Charlie Hebdo and on 9th on January, 2015 in the Hyper Cascher supermarket. This event strongly evoked the founding principles of the collective French consciousness. For this reason, political authorities in France have already prepared a lot of commemoration practices from 4th to 10th of January, 2016 after only one year from the tragic event. This political purposes was spectacularly accomplished in the squares and streets of the capital as well as in other French cities. The President François Hollande discovered the commemorative plaques in different locations throughout the city to pay tribute to the victims of Islamic terrorism.

On 10th of January French people honored the 149 victims in "Place de la Republique" and I personally witnessed this commemoration ceremony. The secular ritual took the form of a religious ceremony, with a lot of references to the ideal of social life marked by the values of the Republic and the Nation: "Liberté, Egalité, Fraernité", the principals values at the bottom of French national and secular identity had almost the same function of the Christian trinity in strengthening the sacred union among the group members.

These ceremonies, two months after the tragedy of 13 November which touched again the city of Paris, spread the Islamophobia ideology and rejected any analytical criticism about the European political responsibilities in this dramatic geopolitical situation, especially in the Middle East region. The commemorations were punctually filmed by local and international medias and represented on the public scene in order to conform the ideological distinction between the "civilized world" and the "barbarism of terrorism."

The very absence of an historical distance from the event reveals to what extent it was mythologized by the commemoration practices and memorial ceremonies. In other words, the historicization of this recent event aims to claim the democratic and republican values. The objective of the remembering is not the commemoration in itself but rather a political performance of the identity construction in order to promote a positive image of the self in contrast with the other and to reaffirm the dominant point of view about recorded myths in collective memory.

Conclusion

The society agrees to commemorate an historically objectified fact by removing the performative process of mystifying and mythologizing representation. In particular, our society traces the definition guidelines of their own group by commemorative practices and establish the symbolic, anthropological, and social foundations of their collective identity on the value of historical objectivity.

This enhancement of the past and his deep connection with the identity can be noticed from the individual and social perspective. The mechanism is really similar. In fact, the individual identity construction is supported by the autobiographical memory. At the same time, commemorative performance are crucial in the consolidation of collective identity. As a result, a legitimate member of the commemoration society must have full cognitive and mostly memory functions.

In the light of the above, I can close my intervention with a last reflection. In the common thought of contemporary society, the aging drama does not really coincide, or at least not only, with the weakening of the body but rather with a relentless cognitive decline strongly radicalized in memory loss. In fact, if memory disorders in Alzheimer's disease and other dementia experiences represent, on the one hand, a denial of identity and a kind of early death, on the other hand, they contradict the basic criteria to define the human person, fully legitimate and worthy of belonging to the group, to share memory and to transmit practices and knowledge. According to this social definition of aging and dementia, Alzheimer drags the individual into a subhuman dimension drawing for the sufferer the contours of a non-person.

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Gloria Frisone is a Phd Student in anthropology at École Des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales of Paris. She is working about the contemporary definition of aging and dementia, mostly Alzheimer's disease, in diagnostic and common sense. Her ethnographical research concerns the interaction between the loss of memory and the commemoration practices aimed at the construction of the collective identity in contemporary society. After the first cycle university degree in anthropology at the University of Siena, Italy, she obtained two postgraduate degrees, the former in anthropology at the University of Siena and the latter in social sciences at EHESS in Paris. In order to achieve her academic qualifications, she carried out three ethnographical researches in medical and psychological anthropology about migrants' illness. The first one was conducted at the Frantz Fanon Centre in Turin, Italy and it analyzed the cultural definition of psychological disorders of Nigerian women, victims of human trafficking and exploitation of prostitution. The second is an ethnography of the therapeutic ritual in a cross-cultural service for foreign refugees in Avicenne Hospital, near to Paris. Finally, in the last research, she analyzed the experience of aging and dementia into the migrant community in a popular periphery of Paris.

