

Bridging Psychological Science and the Humanities

September 29, 2017

Being a psychology professor at a small liberal arts college comes with certain perks. One is that I routinely have deep discussions with experts outside of my field. My office at Fontbonne University is just down the hall from colleagues who work in philosophy, sociology, history, English, and communications, and we discuss various ways that our disciplines intersect. For example, in what ways do themes from qualitative research in the humanities complement the empirical research of psychology? If we consider information stored in the physical environment as a form of external memory, as I do in my research, then what is the difference between that and history? How is memory represented in movies and literature? How has new technology changed the way people remember events in everyday life, the way psychologists study human memory, and the way libraries and museums manage archives as part of collective memory? How does the reconstructive nature of human memory play out in the narratives of immigrant communities such as the large Bosnian population here in St. Louis?

These conversations have led to a source of grant funding that was unexpected for me as a psychological scientist: the NEH. No, not the familiar NIH (National Institutes of Health); the NEH is the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#). I am part of an interdisciplinary team that applied for and has been awarded a [\\$100,000 grant](#) from NEH's new [Humanities Connections](#) program. With this grant, we will develop several interlocking courses in which students will explore memory as a unifying theme across the humanities and the sciences. Our team consists of me (psychology), my fellow professors Corinne Wohlford (history and culture), Ben Moore (English, [Bosnia Memory Project](#)), and Julie Portman (library and digital humanities), and our collaborators at the nearby Missouri History Museum, Jody Sowell and Angela Dietz.

I will create and teach a new psychology-based course — “Memory and the Human Experience” — that will include an experiential component in which students use grant-funded wearable cameras on a trip to the Missouri History Museum. Students will compare their unaided recall of the visit with the objective record shown by their pictures. The additional three courses will approach the study of memory from other disciplinary lenses: “Memory and Public History,” “Collective Memory, Migration, and Identity in American Culture,” and “Genocide, Migration, and Transgenerational Memory: The Case of Bosnia.” One of the ways my course will connect to the others is by examining how information is stored internally in the brains of individual humans versus stored externally in the social environment (collective memory) or in the physical environment (everything from cave paintings to libraries and smartphones). I also will challenge students to think of humanities-inspired ideas for new scientific research on memory.

As part of this grant we also will be holding an interdisciplinary conference on memory and identity. The conference will be in [St. Louis](#) from May 17 to 19, 2018, and our call for abstracts is open until January 5, 2018. I can't wait to see what new ideas emerge from this whole endeavor.

Our success story at Fontbonne came at a time of funding uncertainty at the federal level, as President Donald Trump had proposed completely eliminating the NEH and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Fortunately, in May Congress approved a spending bill that preserves funding for the NEH and NEA through the end of fiscal year 2017. I think it is worth letting our [congressmembers know](#) how valuable we feel these endowments are, especially given that the public good they do extends to science in collaboration with the humanities.

I encourage fellow psychological scientists at universities small and large to talk with colleagues in the arts and humanities. There is so much fruitful ground for synergy; human experience is vast and multifaceted. Psychological science is a powerful tool for understanding it, but it is by no means the only tool. You never know where cross-discipline conversations might lead.