Memories of Everyday Life in Communist Bulgaria: Negotiating Identity in Immigrant Narratives

Nadia Kaneva

University of Colorado at Boulder

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 marked the end of the communist era and the political and economic structures that supported it. Yet, for many Eastern Europeans communism was not a monolithic "Evil Empire" but their "normal" way of life. This paper focuses on the narratives of Bulgarian immigrants to the US about experiences that formed the fabric of everyday life in communist Bulgaria. The informants in this study are not political immigrants. They came to the US after 1989 in pursuit of educational and career goals and claim to have had "average" lives in Bulgaria. However, they belong to a generation that came of age in the last years of communist rule in Bulgaria and have a unique perspective on that period. The analysis approaches memory and identity as narrative constructions that are constantly renewed, struggled over, and adapted to the present context. In exploring this instability, the paper seeks to identify common patterns among the stories told by immigrants, which represent pieces of the collective memory of ordinary life under communism in Bulgaria.

1. Introduction: What Was Communism?

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, "actually existing communism" in Central and Eastern Europe was pronounced dead although the reasons for its collapse are still the object of debate and research (e.g., Verdery 1996, Burawoy & Verdery 1999). While ideological accounts of the Soviet bloc often portrayed it as a monolith of oppression, communism as a social practice and lived experience did not have a single face in the different countries of Central and Eastern Europe, nor did it have a fixed form during its existence over the course of half a century.

The task of writing the history of communism is complicated by the emergence within public discourse of various personal accounts that had been previously suppressed by totalitarian regimes, the declassification of state archives, and the opening up of spaces for collective remembering and questioning of the past. Perhaps the most controversial and painful memories to emerge in the process of reassessing the communist past are those of survivors of political oppression, among whom are survivors of various internment camps (e.g., Ratushinskaya 1988, Sherbakova 1992, Todorov 1999). These personal "survivor narratives" have come, at least in Western eyes, to represent everything that was horrible about communism and are often used to reaffirm preexisting stereotypes about the corrupt nature of the communist system.

However, for many people in Central and Eastern Europe life under communism was simply their "normal" way of life. Indeed, it was no less filled

Colorado Research in Linguistics. June 2006. Vol. 19. Boulder: University of Colorado.
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with human emotions and struggles than life under any other system, although the nature of these struggles was inevitably influenced by different socio-political, economic, and ideological conditions. In this paper, I focus on a set of narratives about experiences that were seen as mundane and formed the fabric of everyday life in communist Bulgaria. I analyze the personal narratives of Bulgarian immigrants to the US who emigrated after 1989.

The informants in this study belong to a generation that came of age in the last years of communist rule in Bulgaria and have a unique perspective on that period. They are not political émigrés or dissidents and do not see themselves as "communism survivors." On the contrary, they claim to have had "average" lives in Bulgaria and came to the US legally in pursuit of educational and career goals. Examining their stories may contribute to the reconstruction of a fuller memory of "life under communism" – one that is not fixated on political oppression but allows for mundane and peaceful moments to be remembered and told.

2. Theoretical Focus: The Intersection of Memory and Identity

This analysis of the personal narratives of immigrants explores the intersection of memory and identity and is situated within a constructivist theoretical framework. From this vantage point, reality is viewed as socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann 1967) and may be understood as "a scarce resource" that is produced and contested through communication (Carey 1989: 87). In this view, control over communication processes is central to the struggle over the nature of the real, and personal narratives are one arena where this struggle can be evidenced and explored. Consistent with this framework is the work of scholars influenced by symbolic interactionism who see personal and collective identities as products of social interaction, which become present and known through narratives (Goffman 1959, Bruner 1991, Gagnon 1992, Holstein & Gubrium 2000). Within this view of identity, memory narratives become important acts of identity production and sites for the negotiation of meaning.

In my analysis of memory, I rely on the theoretical work of Maurice Halbwachs (1980) who coined the term *collective memory* in his book *La Memoire Collective*, originally published in France in 1950. Halbwachs establishes several central principles of collective remembering. First, collective memory is constructed through communication, and depends on the existence of an "affective community" which can sustain it through its communication practices (31). Second, memory is always embedded in a spatial and temporal dimension (187). That is, we remember events by remembering specific places and moments that are linked together into a narrative. Finally, memory narratives are always reconstructions, which serve purposes rooted in the present. Thus, memory is unstable and often incorporates events in the present into the telling of the past (69).

The three dimensions of collective memory identified by Halbwachs – affective community, space, and time – are central to my analysis of immigrant

https://scholar.colorado.edu/cril/vol19/iss1/2
DOI: https://doi.org/10.25810/tjqa-yy74

narratives. I attempt to understand how each of these dimensions is embedded in narrative form by bringing to bear the theoretical notions of frameworks (Goffman 1974, Tannen and Wallat 1987) and narrative time (Ricoeur 1980). In sum, I approach memory and identity as narrative constructions that are constantly renewed, struggled over, and adapted to the present context. In exploring this instability, I seek to identify common patterns among the stories told by immigrants, which represent pieces of the collective memory of ordinary life under communism.

3. Methodology: Meet the Immigrants

This study adopts an ethnographic approach and is based on a set of narratives by eight Bulgarian immigrants to the US, which were collected over the course of four months between December and April 2004. All of the participants were living in the Denver, Colorado metro area at the time of the study. All of them knew each other and formed a loose network of friends and acquaintances. I met them at different times in the fall of 2003 and maintained casual contact with them for over a year before conducting the interviews for this study. My initial introduction to the group was not as a researcher but simply as another Bulgarian living in the area. While I did not have the idea for this study at that time, I shared that my area of research was communication and that I was interested in studying Bulgaria and communism.

My interactions with the people in this study over the course of the year were usually associated with celebrations of birthdays, Bulgarian holidays, or simply social visits. One of the joys of these contacts came, as stated by many in the group, from the opportunity to speak our native language and talk about topics that would be unfamiliar or strange to Americans. A personal interest in cross-cultural communication motivated me to observe which topics were deemed particularly "foreign" to Americans. On several occasions I would hear the phrase, "How can you explain this to an American?" and noticed that often it referred to the inability to communicate a way of thinking or acting that was embedded in Bulgarian culture, defined as "a whole way of life" (Williams 1977). This last realization prompted me to conduct more focused conversations with several of the people in the group during which I asked them to recollect in more detail their life in Bulgaria and talk specifically about how they recall "life under communism."

The excerpts presented in this paper come from two individual interviews and two group interviews with five and three participants respectively. A total of eight people were interviewed, including three women and five men. All interviews were conducted in Bulgarian and later translated, although certain expressions in the original conversations were spoken in English. Wherever that is the case, I have indicated so in the transcription. The group of interviewees includes people who were born in Bulgaria between 1964 and 1974. All of them immigrated to the US after 1989 and all but one came as students pursuing

advanced degrees. Three had completed doctoral degrees in the US and three others were enrolled in doctoral programs at the time of the study.

The high level of education and the enterprising spirit of the people in the group no doubt had an influence on the life experiences they have had and the way they talked about them. In this sense, this group is not representative of all Bulgarians and not even of all Bulgarian immigrants in the US. However, all participants in the study spent their childhood, adolescence, and in some cases part of their early adulthood in Bulgaria during the last years of the communist regime. This was a period of stability, characterized by a relatively egalitarian social organization for the majority of Bulgarians. For example, education was free and widely accessible. High school education was mandatory. Centralized structures permeated all aspects of social life and thus all young people had to go through certain collective experiences, such as participation in agricultural brigades, membership in communist youth organizations, or mandatory military service for all healthy men over the age of 18. It is not surprising that some of these common experiences emerged repeatedly in the narratives and served to bring the group closer together, while distinguishing it from “Americans.” In this sense, the narratives of such experiences represent what can be considered “typical” experiences in the lives of many Bulgarians growing up in the 1970’s.

It is important to stress my positionality as a researcher in the process of collecting and analyzing the data. I am a member of the same generation of Bulgarians as my informants and share some similar experiences to the ones they recalled. Thus, my personal memories were a basis of comparison in analyzing their narratives and served as a measure for the authenticity of their stories. This type of insight may not have been available to an analyst of a different national and experiential background. At the same time, my identification with this generation and my own immigrant status in the US implicate my perspective as partial and one that carries an insider’s bias. However, my theoretical grounding is derived from a largely Western tradition that I have come to know through my life and education in the US for the last eight years. Thus, I attempt to maintain an analytical distance in the discussion of the data in order to give my conclusions significance that goes beyond an insider’s view. In this sense, I see this project as a bridging effort where I, as the analyst, adopt the role of a cultural interpreter seeking to make everyday life in communist Bulgaria knowable outside of its local context. This project is only the beginning of a larger exploration into the nature of collective memories of communism and makes no conclusive claims. Rather, it seeks to document and demystify to a broader audience the profoundly human experience of everyday life in a communist country.

4. Discussion: Demystifying Life Under Communism

In the next part of the paper I examine in turn the establishment of relevant affective communities and the construction of space and time in the memory

https://scholar.colorado.edu/cril/vol19/iss1/2
DOI: https://doi.org/10.25810/tjqa-yy74

narratives of informants in relation to the identity work they accomplish through the acts of telling.

4.1. Identifying Affective Communities

The notion of community is often invoked in discussions of culture, memory, and collective identity, but pinning the concept down is a difficult task. In his theory of collective memory, Halbwachs (1980) conceptualizes affective communities as groups of shared experience – for example, men who have fought together in a war, people engaged in a creative project together, people bound by familial relations, etc. He distinguishes between abstract communities, such as nations, which he terms "distant frameworks," and groups of a more immediate nature, which he calls "nearby milieus" (76). The notion of distant frameworks is similar to Anderson's argument that national communities are, in fact, "imagined communities" which do not rely on direct interaction among their members (Anderson 1983). By contrast, the idea of nearby milieus can be related to the theory of discourse through the concept of participation frameworks (Goffman 1974, Tannen & Wallat 1987). Halbwachs acknowledges that, "between individual and nation lie many other, more restricted groups. Each of these has its own memory" (1980: 77). The fact that individuals participate in multiple groups and may occupy various roles within them speaks to the multifaceted and unstable nature of collective memories, which are shaped in each telling by the particular participation framework within which narrators are situated (cf. Goffman 1954).

Communities of both "imagined" and "actual" types were referenced in the narratives of my informants. The first type referred to national identity (being Bulgarian), a common culture, and a common language. In examining the narratives, I observed that belonging to a national community or a national culture was referenced most often in relation to symbolic artifacts, such as films, books, music albums, or other cultural texts associated with Bulgaria. For example, the group often talked about and exchanged DVDs, CDs, and tapes of Bulgarian films and music. Several satirical comedies, produced during the communist period and starring Bulgarian actor Todor Kolev, were among everyone's favorites. The commonality among those films is that they depict everyday life in communist Bulgaria without direct references to the political and ideological regime, yet poke fun at its absurdities. On more than one occasion, several informants remarked how difficult it would be to translate the particular humor that defines these films to foreign audiences. An often-repeated remark was, "How do you explain this to an American?" This comment suggests a tacit recognition among informants of a community of memory and identity at the broad level of nation and culture.

The second type of communities referenced in the narratives included smaller groups of friends, colleagues, and relatives who share direct experiences. Such references emerged when informants reflected on the meaning of direct personal experiences. Consider for example the following excerpt from an

interview with Val in which I asked him to talk about his memories of life in Bulgaria before 1989.

(1) Example: Communities of memory

Interviewer:

1 When you see your parents do you talk about how it used to be and things like that at all?

Val:

2 Well in the interest of truth I talk about how it used to be with my friends more often
3 Who are all my age
4 For example suddenly we would remember something which…
5 We weren't appreciating at the time
6 And now suddenly when you go back it looks so typical

Although my question (line 1) asks whether Val talks to his parents about the past, his answer identifies a different community of memory that is relevant to him, defined as "my friends… who are all my age" (lines 2-3). This disclaimer sets the stage for the narrative to follow and suggests that Val constructs his memory of how Bulgarian life "used to be" in reference to his generation and in particular to his group of friends.

Halbwachs recognizes the importance of generation for the maintenance of memory. He also notes that as communities change, so do their collective memories. When we lose our connection with a community of memory, we lose the memories associated with it. Thus, for immigrants who find themselves separated from many groups they have left in the home country, it is important to create new affective communities with fellow expatriates within which stories about home and the past can be told and preserved. However, the types of stories that can be shared are limited to what is assumed to be "typical" or "common" among the members of the group, rather than deeply personal and private experiences. In this sense, the tellers rely on knowledge schemas (Tannen and Wallat 1987) to make judgments about the boundaries of the affective communities they form as immigrants.

4.2. Narrative Space: Narrative Constructions of "Home"

Next, I examine the construction of space in the immigrant narratives. In his theorization of collective memory, Halbwachs distinguishes between several types of space, among which are physical space, economic space, legal space, and religious space. For the purposes of this analysis, I define space simply as narrative references to a physical and/or symbolic location or *place* that situates the telling of the story. Labov and Waletzky (1967) have suggested that establishing place is one of the essential elements of any narrative. They propose that most narratives make use of five components, which they term *orientation*,

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.25810/tjqa-yy74

complication, *evaluation*, *resolution*, and *coda*. The orientation is typically found in the beginning of narratives and serves to "orient the listener in respect to *person*, *place*, *time*, and *behavioral situation*" (Labov and Waletzky 1967: 32, emphasis in original). My analysis of the memory narratives of immigrants confirms the importance of Labov and Waletzky's orientation, although the examples discussed below illustrate that the construction of place is not always restricted to the beginning of narratives but can be interspersed throughout the story.

In the immigrant narratives described here, the memory of life under communism is intertwined with the memory of home. "Home" is a broad category that signifies both a physical location and a symbolic grounding, both of which are important to the teller's identity. "Home" is sometimes identified simply as Bulgaria, the immigrants' country of origin. At other times it is linked to particular locales, such as a teller's hometown or place of residence. An interesting paradox arises, however, in the establishment of "home" as different from the narrator's current location – "home" is designated as a distant "there," different from the proximate "here."

"Home" is an essential component in grounding the identity narratives because it provides a point of origin for the life stories of the narrators. In this sense, forgetting "where one came from" is a threat to the integrity of one's identity and is valued negatively. An example of this can be seen in the excerpt below, where Tina relates a story about a trip to Chicago. Tina took the trip with a Bulgarian friend at a time when both of them lived in Nashville, TN and neither had traveled to a larger city in the US. In the example below, Tina recalls an exchange with her friend towards the end of their trip:

(2) Example: Constructing notions of "home"

Tina:

1 So she said, "How I wish I didn't have to go back to that village Nashville."
2 And I said, "Village? You are from Vakarel,* girl!" (laughs)
3 I mean, compared to Vakarel, Nashville is a much bigger town.

Steve:

4 Where the <u>fuck</u> is Vakarel? (everyone laughs) ((this sentence spoken in English))

*((Vakarel is a small town in Bulgaria, not distinct in any particular way.))

Tina's story, told in a group setting, provoked laughter and sarcastic comments from the people present. The brief interchange with Steve has a strong evaluative component both in relation to Tina's friend, but also in relation to the meaning of "home," especially as suggested by Steve's comment in line 4. Both Tina and Steve implicitly position "home" as an obscure, rural place (lines 2 and

4) and at the same time poke fun at Tina's friend who seems to have "forgotten where she came from." Thus, the interchange establishes Tina's identity as someone who is better connected to home than her fellow traveler. At the same time, the story positions "home" as a place that is less sophisticated than "here" and reinforces Tina's present identity by implicitly justifying her choice to leave Bulgaria.

An excerpt from an individual interview with Val also demonstrates how the narrative space of "home" is established in reference to a present location "away from home." The excerpt contains a short narrative with the theme of remembering things that seemed "typical of Bulgarian life as it used to be." In this narrative, what was "typical" is represented in memory by everyday, consumer products. Generally, the notion of "typicalness" was often indexed in the narratives through references to concrete everyday objects and products. On the other hand, the meaning of "the way life used to be" is clearly situated in spatial terms within the opposition of "there" (in Bulgaria) and "here" (in the US).

(3) Example: Spatial and material dimensions of "home"

Val:

1 I have explained this here
2 We have always laughed a lot
3 For example if they told you for example to buy *Vero*[*] in Bulgaria
4 I mean here if you tell someone
5 "Go and buy *Palmolive* or some other detergent"
6 You know, they know exactly
7 I mean in Bulgaria *Vero* was understood
8 As the only kind that is
9 Detergent for washing dishes, simply there wasn't another one
10 While here if you were simply told
11 "Go and buy detergent for washing dishes"…
12 You will be in great difficulty

[*]((Vero is a Bulgarian brand of dishwashing liquid. Because of the lack of alternative products, the word "Vero" was used by people instead of "dishwashing liquid."))

This narrative talks about a very mundane experience – buying dishwashing liquid – but establishes this most trivial activity in terms of differences between "here" and "there." The implied distinction is not simply geographical. The story describes a difference in the way of life in a consumer society "here" (in the US), and life in a society where consumer choices were much more limited (in Bulgaria). The same narrative is visually represented below in a different way to demonstrate two parallel sub-narratives that show more clearly the distinction between "here" and "there":

https://scholar.colorado.edu/cril/vol19/iss1/2
DOI: https://doi.org/10.25810/tjqa-yy74

(4) Example: Spatial dimensions of home: "here" vs. "there"

"There" (In Bulgaria)	*"Here" (In the US)*
3 For example if they told you to buy Vero in Bulgaria	
	4 I mean here if you tell someone,
	5 "Go and buy Palmolive or some other detergent"
	6 You know, they know exactly
7 I mean in Bulgaria Vero was understood	
8 As the only kind, that is	
9 Detergent for washing dishes, simply there wasn't another one	
	10 While here if you were simply told
	11 "Go and buy detergent for washing dishes"…
	12 You will be in great difficulty

These two sub-narratives illustrate the connection of memory to space, broadly defined. It is significant that the idea of memory space is often constructed in contrast to a physical space within which the narrator is located in the present. In that sense, Bulgaria in the memories of the immigrants is a different Bulgaria from the one that actually exists in the present moment. In the words of L. P. Hartley (1953), "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."

4.3. Narrative Time – "The Way It Was"

Space is closely related to the notion of narrative time. Halbwachs outlines several different conceptualizations of time related to the personal experience of temporality and the more abstract notion of time as historical flow. Time is particularly important to this study because "communism" can be thought of as a particular historical period. However, because the reconstructions of this period are accomplished through the means of narrative, Ricoeur's theory of narrative time is particularly useful.

Of specific interest is to this discussion is the distinction between what Ricoeur terms the *episodic* and *configurational* dimensions of time. The episodic dimension structures narratives as a linear progression and characterizes a story as made out of distinct, sequential events. By contrast, the configurational dimension

of time implies a whole within which the sequence of events is significant or meaningful (Ricoeur 1980: 178). The narrative acts of recollecting the "communist past," then, are set within a configurational boundary of meaning. In outlining this boundary, the configurational dimension of narrative time also has an evaluative function that allows the teller and listener to make judgments about the episodic elements of the narrative.

As an illustration of how a narrator may outline the configurational dimension, consider the following example from the interview with Val. At the very beginning of our conversation Val makes the following disclaimer without any prompt or question on my part:

(5) Example: Configurational Time and Meaning

Val:

1 When you asked me,
2 When you requested this interview
3 I sat down and thought of several things that made an impression,
4 Well, that I remember.
5 For example the way it was
6 At the time that we had to apply to the Komsomol.*

*((Komsomol is a Russian coinage that was appropriated in the Bulgarian language to refer to the political organization of high-school and university students, which was an affiliate of the Communist Party.))

In my request for an interview, which I had made approximately a week earlier, I had told Val I was interested in what people remembered about life under communism, and that I would like to talk to him about his own memories. I had hoped that by phrasing my interest in broad terms I would not lead my respondent in any specific direction. This strategy prompted Val to set a particular configurational boundary around the past that made his own recollections meaningful. This boundary is introduced in lines 5 and 6. The phrase "the way it was" in line 5 also works as a narrative abstract in Labovian terms (Labov, 1972), or a summary of what is to come later in the story, and implies that the narrative to follow is authentic. In other words, Val is making the claim that he is not recollecting a rare or unusual event but one that somehow typifies life under communism.

Several lines later in the narrative, Val provides additional information about the period he has introduced in lines 5 and 6 above. In lines 10 to 13 below Val makes assertions about the moral climate of the period and his statements exemplify the evaluative function of configurational narrative time:

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.25810/tjqa-yy74

(6) Example: Configurational time and moral judgments

Val:

10 I think absolutely nobody then already believed in anything
11 Especially from our generation.
12 I mean, even our parents
13 I think had already stopped believing.

This passage refers to people's belief in the communist ideology, as defined by the ruling Communist Party, which was presumed to underlie individuals' public, if not necessarily their private, behavior. By negating this presumption, Val attempts to establish the past as "non-ideological" and, perhaps, more "ordinary" than an outsider would expect. However, it is interesting to note the use of the word "already" in line 10, which seems to imply an earlier configurational boundary – a time when "everybody believed." While universal belief in communist ideology is not likely to have existed during any period in Bulgarian history, the significance here is that Val is working to construct through his narrative a period of "normality" within his memory of the communist past – a period that is free from ideological pressure by virtue of people losing their belief in ideological doctrines.

A different illustration of how configuruational and episodic time structure memory narratives is found in recollections of student life that are common to some degree among all informants. Tina and Leo, who are husband and wife and have known each other since high school, tell several such stories about high school life. Their stories show a parallelism that comes from shared memories. The following opening lines introduce two narratives told in a group setting:

(7) Example: Confugurational time and "typicalness"

Tina: I remember how we had to do group physical exercise every morning.

(8) Example: Confugurational time and "typicalness"

Leo: I've had my hair measured. They used to measure your hair.

These opening statements establish the theme, or the pattern of repetition that confers historical significance to the narrated experiences that follow. The telling of the stories themselves is accomplished through the episodic dimension of time. Tina tells about mandatory physical exercise at school as a nuisance. Leo tells a story about having to maintain a hair of a certain length in order not to be harassed by school officials. Leo's story reflects an aspect of life under communism according to which a teenager's behavior was subjected to invasive

discipline even in the most mundane of circumstances. The story is an example of such disciplinary rules, as represented by the practice of "measuring your hair" at the entrance of school to determine if it met government issued decency standards.

Both Tina and Leo tell their stories in a humorous way and tend to exaggerate the events for comical effect. One result of this is that the "normal" past in their narratives is recast as "absurd" from the point of view of the present. Consider for example another brief story told by Leo in the course of the same group conversation. In this narrative Leo recalls having to wear a high school uniform and the problems he had with the metal buttons on his suit:

(9) Example: Configurational and episodic dimensions of time

Leo:

1 We had to wear these suits with metal buttons
2 And they always used to fall off
3 Because the metal would just cut through the thread.
4 I mean it was idiotic that they made the suits with metal buttons
5 But you couldn't replace them with other buttons.
6 So one day I got sick of sewing them back on all the time
7 And I used safety pins on the inside of the jacket to pin all of my buttons on. (everyone laughs)
8 I thought I was <u>so</u> smart.

In this narrative Leo establishes the configurational temporal boundary in line 1 and proceeds to tell the story along the episodic dimension in lines 2 through 7. Line 8 provides a summative evaluation and establishes Leo's identity as someone who found a way of resisting the disciplinary rules. In this case, Leo's resistance can be interpreted as an attempt to reestablish "normality" within a context of absurd clothing rules. The laughter in response to Leo's story stems from the fact that everyone present at the telling can recall various problems with school discipline and uniforms. Indeed, Leo's narrative prompts other people in the group to tell similar stories, which remained embedded in the same configurational dimension of time.

In sum, the narratives I examined demonstrate that the configurational boundary of time is often established at the outset of the story. This technique implies that what follows is only one among a number of similar stories that are typical of life during that period and serves to evoke historicality.

5. Conclusions: Memory and Identity in Narrative

In this essay I have attempted to document how a group of immigrants in the US remember everyday life in communist Bulgaria. My study began with a

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specific interest in recovering the memory of mundane experiences of "life under communism." However, in the course of the study it became evident that memories of communism are difficult to isolate as distinct narratives. Because communism was not simply a set of ideological directives but permeated nearly all spheres of social life, the theme of "life under communism" was intertwined in the memories of informants with other themes, such as "home," "youth," and "high school life," to name a few. This layering of meaning is reflective of what Goffman (1974) terms "laminations" and speaks to the complex and unstable nature of collective memory.

In my analysis I have attempted to map the memory of communism emerging from the narratives onto the matrix of affective community, space, and time that was first identified by Halbwachs in relation to collective memory. This process of mapping reveals three general trends in the way the narratives were constructed. First, the informants' narratives of the past are acutely shaped by their present circumstances as immigrants. In this sense, the memory narratives contribute to a process of secondary socialization (Berger & Luckmann 1967) into the social universe of the US that each of my informants is undergoing. Because immigrants are faced with the task of negotiating their identities against this unfamiliar social universe, their recollections of the past are often constructed in response to what they perceive as the nature of their immediate environment. Thus, remembering life in communist Bulgaria is often narratively accomplished by way of comparison to their present life in the US. At the same time, memory narratives often provide a narrative space of escape from the challenges of immigrants' present lives and a way to reconnect with a distant homeland.

Second, the tellability (Ochs & Capps 2001) of immigrant memory narratives is linked to the narrators' identity projects and the affective communities that contextualize the telling. For example, when Leo recalls an act of small, personal resistance against the disciplinary rules of high school and presents the episode as humorous (Example 9), he seeks to establish his personal identity as a free-thinking, independent human being. By contrast, when Val describes the past as a period during which no one believed in communist ideology (Example 6), he precludes the need for personal resistance because he constructs the social system as previously purged of ideological content. These differences illustrate the intersection of memory and identity as it occurs in personal narratives. Thus, the meaning of "normal behavior" or "normal life" under communism is understood differently in the narratives of Leo and Val, and these differences are the result of the personal identity project of each narrator.

Finally, the meaning of "normality" in the past is also affected by the immigrants' need to adapt to present circumstances. In their efforts to normalize the present and make it easier to cope with, narrators sometimes delegitimize the past and make it appear absurd or incomprehensible (See examples 4 and 9). This delegitimation is accomplished through an implied conversation with an imagined Western audience, which is often simply referred to as "the Americans." Yet, because of this implied conversation, immigrant narratives may be particularly

poignant as a way of representing and interpreting the experience of "everyday life under communism" to Western audiences.

Because the construction of memory in narrative is a pragmatic process embedded in the context of the present and linked to various identity projects, the conclusions in this paper should not be taken as definitive or universal. The challenge for researchers interested in collective memory is to embrace the partial and unstable nature of their subject matter. Unlike the work of historians who study archival materials, the goal of memory researchers is not to arrive at a fixed record of the past but, rather, to open the past up to multiple interpretations and voices. In this task, narrative analysis is particularly useful because it allows for the "systematic study of personal experience and meaning: how events have been constructed by active subjects" (Riessman 1993: 70). By collecting the memory narratives of various groups, memory researchers can contribute to the recovery of a more democratic, multivocal version of the past. In relation to communism, a social system that is at once among the most maligned and most admired yet to exist, the project of recovering a fuller story of the past is all the more important.

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