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First Steps Towards a Sociocultural Psychological Approach to Museum Evolution

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Abstract

This paper proposes the first steps towards a sociocultural psychological approach to museum evolution. First, a short review of museological and related literature is offered to further contextualize the need for an alternative approach. Then, the article offers an exploration of the theoretical musings of imagination and collective memory within the traditions of sociocultural psychology as a developmental science. Here, it is argued that changes and developments of a museal nature are driven by psychological processes across transactions at the micro-, onto-, and sociogenetic levels. These processes are facilitated by the interactions between of a person navigating their sociocultural context, hinging upon intersubjectivity and sociomateriality as core axioms. This approach will be applied to recent writings by museologists regarding museum planning. This paper concludes by suggesting that further research regarding the everyday acts of collective memory as well as the processes of imagination across time is crucial to deepening our understanding of museum development.

Keywords: collective memory, imagination, museum evolution, sociocultural psychology

Introduction

Throughout history and developing society, people have produced countless objects that over time become cultural artefacts that demarcate snapshots into their lived experience. While the cultural artefacts and heritage we as humans leave behind stand as products of their time; the institutions we have built to preserve them change and evolve as we do. The presentation of such cultural heritage contributes innumerably to our present society as a consolidation of cultural memory and as a physical means to connect us to past and present cultures (Latham & Simmons, 2014). Modern research within museums is increasingly engaging with social science to ameliorate their methodological and theoretical praxis, however, approaches to illuminate the processes of museum evolution are far and few between. The key aim of the current article is to sow the seeds of an approach to museum change that is steeped in Sociocultural Psychology. This will be done by exploring previous theories/approaches of museum and institutional change, and by proposing the alternative and applying it to previous work within museum studies/museology.

Contextualization: Museum history

First, in order to engage with theory concerning the museum, we must engage with the history of the museum as an institution, and museology, as a field. It is widely taught that the origins of the museum lie within Alexandria, Egypt and the modern word comes from the Greek 'mouseion', meaning 'seat of the muses' (Hopkins, 2021). One of the first examples of the 'museum', as we can see today, belonged to the Medici merchant family of Florence, Italy in the fifteenth century, a private collection within the Medici Palace (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). Since then, there have been numerous shifts in the avenues in which cultural heritage institutions (CHIs), such as the modern museum, operate. One shift is from an 'old' "positivist-behaviourism-based paradigm"[1] to a 'new' constructivist paradigm which has fostered a more reflexive museum practice (Recupero et al., 2019, p. 2). With this paradigm shift, popularised in the 1990s (following Vergo, 1989) the modern museum is seen to be an evolving cultural environment that is sensitive to social, political, and economics pressures (Recupero et al., 2019). Most recently, we also see another shift toward a 'socially responsible' museum, one that aims to tackle, for example, social inequalities, sustainability and past colonialist practices, following later pressures of the same variety (Harrison & Sterling, 2021; Merriman, 2020).

[1] Recupero et al. (2019), elaborate that the 'old' paradigm was based on an expert-to-novice mode of communication and presentation of museal objects. Further, the objects, as material, were the focus of attention, as opposed to the meaning of those object to museum audiences.

Figure 1: The British Museum (Licensed via Wikimedia Commons)

Consequently, museums have already experienced many regenerations of face, mission, and identity. The mouseion can be thought to be the origin of the popular imaginary of the museum, where the British Museum (figure 1), founded in 1753, acts almost as visual facsimile to the Greek temples which still stand today. Later, in 1759 by act of parliament, the British Museum was decreed to be a free, national, and public institution, the first of its kind globally. This decree followed a rise in popular thought of public display which critiqued the open yet exclusive nature of 'Cabinets of Curiosity' (also known as Wunderkammer or in early periods, Studioli), often rooms or literal cabinets, which, in short, held collections of natural history, as well as exotic fakes such as 'unicorn horns', often only displayed to reflect one's rank in society (Hopkins, 2021). These cabinets acted as a precursor and transitionary entity between the private collections of aristocrats and the free public institutions we see emerging from the eighteenth century. The focus on the object of display was a lasting paradigm of the cabinet practice, those objects were designated for education or vaunt.

The modern museum

It has been well documented that there is no universal definition of a museum (see Maranda, 2020), and that there are many differing perspectives on what a definition should include. Keene (2002, p. 90) writes that museums exist as "a system to build and permanently maintain an irreplaceable and meaningful physical resource and use it to transmit ideas and concepts to the public". Here, it is seen that within this definition, a museum may encompass a complex symbolic system that navigates both past traditions and the multilevel aspects of meaning that come from them- but this definition is nowhere near current. In fact, definitions of the museum have often changed, so much so that the International Council of Museums

(ICOM) have commented on this in their document titled “224 years of defining the museum” (Lehmannová, 2020).

Table 1: Various definitions of ‘museum’. Adapted from Lehmannová (2020), ICOM (2022)

Definition	Year
The word 'museum' includes all collections, open to the public, of artistic, technical, scientific, historical or archaeological material, including zoos and botanical gardens, but excluding libraries, except in so far as they maintain permanent exhibition rooms.	1946
A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of the society and its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment.	1974
A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.	2007
A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets, and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.	2022

Following Table 1, we can see that there have been minor and major revisions to the definition of the museum. This reflects certain shifts in the role and expectations museum professions hold over their field. These definitions were debated on, and voted for via committee, the latest, in 2022, being agreed upon during the ICOM general conference in Prague. One major shift is from a collection-focused definition, to one that is person-focused, and currently, one that is both aimed at reflecting social responsibility and the connection between person and object. One interesting thing to note is that the 2022 definition has multiple additions, including ethics, inclusivity, and sustainability. Additionally, the subtle change from ‘non-profit’ to ‘not-for-profit’ is intriguing. These changes exemplify multiple changes in the societal attitudes and realities that behold museums. For example, we have a change in the economic landscape that the museum exists within, new funding models, fluctuations in visitor numbers, as well as crises on the global scale, such as the 2008 financial crash, or the COVID-19 pandemic that also led to major periods of financial instability for museums (Ballantyne & Uzzell, 2011; Lindqvist, 2012). For these reasons, profit-oriented practices can increasingly be seen across museums, or as Aroles, Hassard, and Hyde (2022) deem it, a ‘corporate colonization’.

This is an important first point to make, because in one instance we can see a grand evolution in the role, function, and mission of the museum, as decided by the international committee. Within those major and minor shifts, this author regards the museum as a 'living organism' (Bernard, 2023; Bernard & Catoni, 2022). In short, a museum's mission, presentation, narratives, etc. are subject to change and evolution as a response to endogenous as well as exogenous pressures of which we observe myriad pivotal turning points (Bernard, 2023, p.220). However, Bernard (2023) also denotes that those turning points do not fully explain how and why museums experience change. For this reason, it appears apt and appropriate to understand the evolution of the museum via an approach of sociocultural psychology, one that concentrates upon 'processes' including psychological processes, as explanative of museum change dynamics.

Previous contributions from museum- and related studies

Museology

In the task of understanding museum evolution, or the evolution of a museum, it is necessary to understand the established field of museology also. As with the definition of the museum, there has been some debate over the term 'museology', first used by Phillip Leopold Martin, an ornithologist and taxidermist, in the nineteenth century. It can be divided into general museology (a scientific discipline whose subject is to learn about museality, its division and specific roles in society, rather than the study of the museum), as well as museography (largely the praxis and operations of a CHI). In the 1980s, ICOFOM (International Committee for Museology) identified three basic concepts of museological praxis that can be identified in the world, (1) the study of the mission and organisation of museums, (2) as the study of the implementation and integration of certain basic functions related to natural and cultural heritage, and (3) as the study of the specific relation of man to reality, the expression of which is the conservation and documentation activity focused on this reality and communication of this knowledge to the public (Sofka, 1986, in Dolàk, 2022). More recently, the field was defined as a meta-discipline, one field "of academic scholarship that critically examines the histories, functions, and roles of museums in society using theory and analysis of professional practice" (Latham & Simmons, 2019, p. 103).

Many recent developments in the field follow the 'New Museology' of Vergo (1989), which was proposed as a challenge to the then traditional museum practices, focusing on the critique that these practices failed to value the social role of the museum (Hauenschild, 1998). New Museology, which is now seen merely as a developmental step in the field of museology, shifted the focus away from collections to people, where community-focused practices and the collaboration between the museum and said communities via social engagement, especially when concerning how certain histories are presented (Krouse, 2006; Kuklinova, 2020). Its implementation has been seen to shape the museum's role and function in many cases but has been limited due to factors of the organisational and managerial variety (McCall & Gray, 2014). This also facilitated thinking within the 'participatory museum' approach, opting to treat museum audiences as 'participants' when finding solutions to challenges to museum operations and exhibition creation (Simon, 2010).

New museology shares a constructivist epistemology, with the emergent Critical Museology, and now post-critical museology, critiquing the previous concentration of the field upon empiricism (Shelton, 2013). Critical museology is observed to advocate for a more reflexive practice, especially towards post-colonial practices (Lorente, 2022; Shelton,

2013). This approach offers a modern reassessment of museum-oriented research as well as existing pedagogical strategies and facilitates a reflective culture within the museum space (Lorente, 2022).

Another emerging approach is experimental museology, which bridges the gap between academic discourses and professional-led practice to address modern challenges within museum work (Knell, 2022) Often design-based approaches are used to develop, test and evaluate cutting-edge technology enhanced exhibits and displays, one example being the Laboratory for Experimental Museology at EPFL in Lausanne, Switzerland (Knell, 2022). Via the enactive approach headed by Schmitt (2016), some research has called for research regarding the agency and of visitors embodied experiences within cultural heritage institutions which could be supported using technologically enabled installations (Aguilar Rojas, 2020).

Moving again more towards the psychological realm, we also see literature on 'museological thinking', which shares similarities with the assumptions of sociomateriality, where research via a museological lens would hinge upon the dynamic transactional relationship between people and objects (Latham & Simmons, 2019). In this type of thinking, as well as the now long tradition of constructivist museology, we see the facilitation of diverse multidisciplinary approaches to be utilised within museum studies, namely the social sciences. One, Sociocultural Psychology has been utilised within visitor studies. Steier, Pierroux, and Krange (2015), for example, investigated sociocultural approaches to meaning-making within the art museum context concentrating upon the embodied interpretation of museum visitors via a research design based on observation and interaction analyses. Here it was suggested that indeed gestural behaviours within social interaction, such as bodily positioning facilitate the meaning-making and interpretation of museal objects such as sculpture and interactive technologies (Steier et al., 2015). With the advent of increasing ubiquity of advanced technologies, the focus of research has also turned to effectiveness of said technology. Recupero et al., (2019), applied 'Socio-Cultural Activity Theory' to an extended reality[2] tour within Rome's Ara Pacis Museum. Here, the museum visit was conceptualised as a technology mediated activity, with interactions between visitor characteristics, the material environment, and the technologies features being mediating factors between the museum's mission and the experience of visitors (Recupero et al., 2019).

What we can observe here is that the wealth of available literature is within visitor studies but literature seldom ventures to the realm of museum operations. The majority of literature concentrates on audiences, the creation and study of experiences, as well as development of the individual, but not on the museum and its operations. This may be a symptom of literature that involves short-term case studies rather than concentrating upon more longitundally-based investigations that may hold conclusions on how operations unfold overtime[3]. Therefore, it seems apparent that if one is to study museum development, longer term inquiry regarding institutional dynamics is required by academics. In fact, Zittoun and Gillespie (2018), citing the 'end of communism' in then Czechoslovakia, denote that inquiry into collective imagination requires longer time spans to be considered, due to the nature of

[2] Includes immersive technologies on the 'XR spectrum' (see Le Noury, Polman, Maloney, & Gorman, 2022), most commonly, virtual reality and augmented reality technology.

[3] Somewhat ironically, there is a wealth of literature concentrating upon how audiences understand museum exhibitions *of* evolution (e.g. MacFadden et al., 2007; Spiegel et al., 2006).

change at this level, using the examples of media of resistance as expressing certain imaginings.

Recent literature on institutional change

Here, some theories and accompanying literature will be explored to illuminate how museum evolution specifically has been tackled previously. A sociomaterial approach, evolutionary perspective, as well as a cognitive framework are presented in order to understand current gaps and areas of reproach required from an explicitly psychological alternative.

Sociomaterial

Actor-Network Theory (ANT; Latour, 1987, 2007; Law, 1991, 1992), a sociomaterial approach, has been used often in museum literature (see Portin & Grinell, 2021). Within this context, this theory is often proposed as a framework to account for networks as interactive relationships between people, technologies, and non-human objects, as actants. In terms of the museum, this would include (but is not limited to), professionals, visitors, digital technology, as well as museal/non-museal objects as actants which all contribute towards the institution's operations; and are viewed as hierarchically symmetrical within a network. This is often used as a theoretical or methodological tool to understand how certain networks form and move towards stability and further development or instability and ruin. This is explored via agency, as each member of a network is an actant, each member of a network is viewed as equally having a role in said network where their relationality is prioritised. Here, agency is referred to as the capacity of an actant to act upon the environment and produce outcomes (Latour, 2007). This constructivist approach adheres to the interrelationship between social and technical forces, arguing that no resulting phenomena can be purely social or technical, where constructions are natural, social, and semiotic concurrently (Cresswell, Worth, & Sheikh, 2010: Latour, 2007). One example of research is offered by Waller (2017), who in an ethnographic study applied the framework in London's Science Museum to curatorial practices and the agency of non-human objects of which museums are responsible. Here, following observed critique that the Science Museum does not 'show science', it was concluded that ANT can be used to revalue curatorial practices as mediational material between science and audiences (society) through the presentation and exhibition of museal objects.

Additionally, this framework has been used to evaluate the integration of advanced technology in terms of museum collections and data management practices, and the agency of said technologies in use (Park, 2021). Here, investigating the documentation practices in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, it was argued that contemporary participatory models of documentation have developed into allowing digital technologies more agency upon, deeming them the 'driving force' for change in collections management, citing the expansion of catalogues and collections online. Interestingly, it was also concluded that artificial intelligence technologies may be able to extend the agency of these actants, and therefore more change is upon the horizon (Park, 2021).

Despite its utility in museum studies, ANT as an approach has a history of critique. Mol (2010) argued that this framework is not entirely a coherent theory despite decades of development but is mostly characterised by internal tensions and its ambiguities that leave it purely descriptive as it does not adequately provide explanations for social processes.

Following this critique, Modell (2020) calls for a more nuanced framework which does not overemphasise the role of agency.

Evolutionary

There is an extensive body of literature, across research domains, which focuses on institutional change via an evolutionary approach (Blyth et al., 2011). Lewis and Steinmo (2012) offers such an approach, focusing upon Darwinian evolution. These approaches see gradual institutional change as a mechanism of interactions between one organism (here, the institution), and its surrounding environment. Effective responses to certain environmental and historical forces, i.e., adaptation, allow for survival and subsequent interactions. These authors explain that human cognitive capabilities contribute greatly to our understanding of these phenomena, but not as facsimile to biological evolution. This approach adheres to a variation-selection-replication process. It is explained that institutional change is contingent upon human actors who are continually creating variations of ideas, cognitive schemas, and preferences which guide selection of those very ideas, especially how they are framed and internalised, e.g. how policy decisions are catalysed. Positive feedback to decision making then facilitates the replication of certain ideas and schemas.

Elisa Bernard's work (e.g. Bernard, 2023) offers one example that uses such an approach. Bernard and Catoni (2022, p. 113), list "new data, new scientific hypotheses and results, new objects, new instruments of inclusion and public engagement, new research, new juridical and administrative rules, organizational forms or arrangements as well as the new needs, ways of accessing the museum, and contextual knowledge generated by different types of publics" as examples of stimuli that museums respond. As already cited, her work takes this evolutionary view of change within the museum context to explore adaptation to exogenic and endogenic forces within an Italian context. As mentioned in the introduction of this article, Bernard (2023) considers change to be evident from pivotal turning points. Within these points, it is said that many stimuli 'coalesce' to produce noticeable change. One interesting stimulus illuminated by Bernard (2023) is that of *traumas,* noting specifically how WWII directly impacted the National Museum of Palermo. Wartime bombing damage caused a need for reconstruction and reinstallation of a considerable number of collections. Recovery was overseen by then director Professor Bovio Marconi, appointed in 1939, the war with the expertise of a new director appeared to have coalesced to see a reevaluation of the museum's mission and role, moving towards. Adaptation to such emergencies requires quite abrupt and even reactionary changes if a museum is to have an effective response to trauma.

Cognitive Lifecycle

Adjacent to the Evolutionary approach discussed above, another relevant approach is Neuman's (2012) Cognitive Lifecycle Theory of Institutional Change which applies spatial imaginaries to institutions of infrastructure planning. Investigating the evolution of Madrid's city planning across the 20th century, Neuman's framework adheres to two main dynamics for institutional change, the first, denoted as 'cognitive' factors of the institution, being 1) its contents, and 2) the image of the content. The second is the 'institutional lifecycle'. When considering the imaginary, this theory stipulates that the 'constitutional image', i.e. an institution's thematic content and meaning within society, is socially constructed.

'Lifecycle' in this framework refers to certain stages of an institution's evolution, which follow five phases: creation (of an institution), development (incremental evolution), reform (major change), decline, and finally, demise. Each phase, which can occur non-linearly, adhere to certain stimuli for change connected to various outcomes. For example, incremental changes are said to follow no or little stimuli which maintain stability in the constitutional image whereas major changes follow a recognised need for reform which results in a new image that causes either instability within an institution if that image no longer reflects a favourable meaning for the public. Thusly, "the interrelationship of the image and the lifecycle reveals their dual nature: images sustain institutions and project them into larger society; at the same time, institutions maintain and project their constituting image. The same dual nature can just as easily change or topple an institution and change or erase the constituting image" (Neuman, 2012, p. 144). This interrelationship can be seen within Neuman's (2012) exploration of multiple 'planning episodes' across different twentieth century epochs of Madrid's history. One example from this research details that certain images, such as of metropolitan area maps, were used by politicians as stimuli to enact change toward specific political objectives.

Overall, this approach is seen to provide a utile framework for understanding dynamics of institutional change across myriad domains, to use Neuman's (2012, p. 140) words, "a complete theory of institutional dynamics needs to consider the entire lifecycle of the institution and the mode of institutional development and change throughout the lifecycle" – however, it can be argued that this is not complete *enough*, where, the individuals who constitute a team also need to be accounted for. Looking toward their activities, discourses, personal trajectories over time, etc., would allow for a multi-layered theory that can explore, museum change, in this case, on multiple levels. It makes sense to this author that an institution that has become person-centered in its practice requires an approach which is equally person-centered- especially, if we consider it a 'living organism' as proposed by Bernard (2023).

Sociocultural Psychology

The sociocultural turn in psychology stresses an inseparability of the psychological and sociocultural realms, psychological processes are thusly viewed as socioculturally constituted as opposed to as simply supported by acting within culture and society (Kirschner & Martin, 2010). This approach, sociocultural psychology, also referred to commonly as the sociocultural approach to psychology is closely related to the disciplines of cultural-historical psychology, social and cultural psychology, and cultural psychology. These fields all have a common goal, "to understand the mutual making of societies and subjectivity or the evolution of cultural, social and historical worlds and the life of persons" (Valsiner, 2020; Zittoun, 2019, p. 12). This quotation is used by Zittoun (2019) to aid in the definition of an epistemology of sociocultural psychology and differentiate it from the previous mentioned disciplines. In its differentiation, there are myriad axioms that are core to contemporary sociocultural approaches to psychology which are relevant to the proposed approach within this article: 1) it is a developmental science, 2) sense-making as central, 3) the interdependence between a person and culture, 4) self-other intersubjectivity, and 5) materiality. These axioms thus point to a sociocultural approach here to be one that is both constructivist and dialogical, being mediated by social and cultural experiences through interaction in complex contexts.

The first element explored here may be the most crucial, where we regard sociocultural psychology within the realms of a developmental science. Piagetian thinking stipulated that human development occurs across multiple concurrent, and co-constitutive genetic processes, being, socio-, onto-, and micro-genesis. These genetic elements are ongoing processes of change. As alluded to, this core assumption holds that people, their groups, and wider society(/ies), develop, grow, and change across irreversible time. Microgenesis refers to human activity, such as thoughts, interpretations, acts, etc. as an 'unfolding process', across shorter or longer periods of time, often moment-by-moment (Psaltis, 2015a). Microgenesis is thus referred to as the most immediate point of change and is seen as the motor of onto- and sociogenesis (Psaltis, 2015b). As such, ontogenesis concerns how an entity develops across its life-course, from conception to demise, cradle to grave. Sociogenesis, when compared with the former two levels of genetic development is the slower but more stable element of change. What needs to be stressed here is that microgenesis, as the 'motor', within the museal context then refers to museum change, from the 'bottom-up' that is driven by human activity, individually and collectively (Psaltis, 2015b).

When refering to the centrality of sense-making, we can borrow from Grossen, Zittoun, and Baucal (2022, p.3), we can point towards its role in the development of a cultural heritage institution: "sociocultural psychology insists on capturing the activity of sense-making by which people interpret and negotiate their environment and experiences, whether through narratives or more generally thanks to the use of semiotic systems available in their cultural environment (Cole, 1996; Valsiner, 2014)".

Next, there is interdependence between a person and culture, which is another central and important axiom as well. Here, the assumption holds that the relationship between a person and their (social, cultural) environment is mutually constitutive (Valsiner, 1997; Zittoun et al., 2013). Cultural psychologies see such interactions as dynamic transactions which produce a symbolic world and symbolic resources where by this logic "examines the relationship between collective culture and personal culture; it traces how individual, intentional persons, render their life meaningful; it focuses therefore on semiotic processes (signs exchanged in the world, and signs translated in mind); and it assumes the always changing nature of the world and consciousness" (Zittoun, 2007, p. 197).

It is through the assumption of intersubjectivity that sociocultural psychology is differentiated from similar fields. Specifically, intersubjectivity is seen to be constitutive of higher mental processes, and it is from self-other interactions and transactions that we can observe the emergence of: cognition, emotion, memory, identity, personality, and other such constructs (Kirschner & Martin, 2010).

Lastly, (socio)materiality, an area of research that has, within psychological research (e.g. Iannaccone, Cattaruzza, & Schwab, 2024), increased somewhat recently, is considered. This perspective sees technologies as transformational within human practices and within organisations (Myllymäki, 2021). Later in this paper, the rise of technology within museums will be discussed, and as such, materiality needs to take a certain precedence within a museum theory. Within this context, the importance of materiality as it relates to human activity and the perspective undertaken here is relational. This is the view that there is an inseparable quality to the social and material worlds, which are thus transactional, catalysed by unfolding performative actions, the result of which are known as 'assemblages' of sociomaterial practices (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008).

When considering these axions, we can admit that a sociocultural psychological approach to museum evolution adheres to constructivist and dialogical thinking, regarding processes, such as learning and development, which are claimed to be proliferated through transactions between and individual and (multiple kinds of) others of the symbolic, relational and material world (Marková, 2016, in Zittoun, 2022). Consequently, a sociocultural psychology of museum evolution then proposes to study the development of a museum, as an entity which is driven by multiple levels of genetic change; changes in society, culture, as well as changes facilitated by performative actions in context – this approach then aims to investigate and illuminate the psychological processes that drive said changes.

Thus far we have explored more abstract examples of museum change, and the assumptions this author holds to underline them. Now, some attention will be given to the underlying psychological processes which drive museum change, the processes of imagination and memory.

Imagination

The sociocultural psychological theory of imagination (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016, 2018) conceptualises the imagination as a looping psychological process, where via the uses of previous experience, symbolic resources, and other semiotic means, one can temporarily leave the here-and-now to explore one's mental constructions of the past, future, or otherwise alternative, present distal spheres of experiences. This process is seen as a force of 'expansion' which has the ability to fill in gaps of one's experiences or sense-making within the world (Zittoun & Cerchià, 2013). Imagination thus shapes personal decision-making as well as societal change, where "the sociogenetic level entails innumerable erable microgenetic instances of imagination (…) which draw on the same resources and stepwise contribute to the development of the given imaginary sphere of experience" (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016, p.12). Those instances of imagination are triggered by certain events such as an experienced rupture (disruption of the everyday motions or what is expected). For example, within the museum, a newly proposed problem with an artefact, display, or current practice may require a creative solution to find an adequate solution. The journey towards a solution would require imaginings of mutliple options (if they were plausible options). Such a solution can then be enacted with support by one's own knowledge base or by an expert's experience, tools within the immediate environment, and other people around them. Following figure 2, the three dimensions crucial to understanding the variability of imaginings are: temporality (past-present-future, both real and imagined), generality (on a continuum from concreteness to the abstracted), and implausibility (what is im/possible). Across experienced time, these dimensions form a looping mechanism, where the mind leaves the 'real' and returns upon the conclusion of the imaginative journey. The result of such a journey can be shared or rendered moot depending on the requirements of the situation.

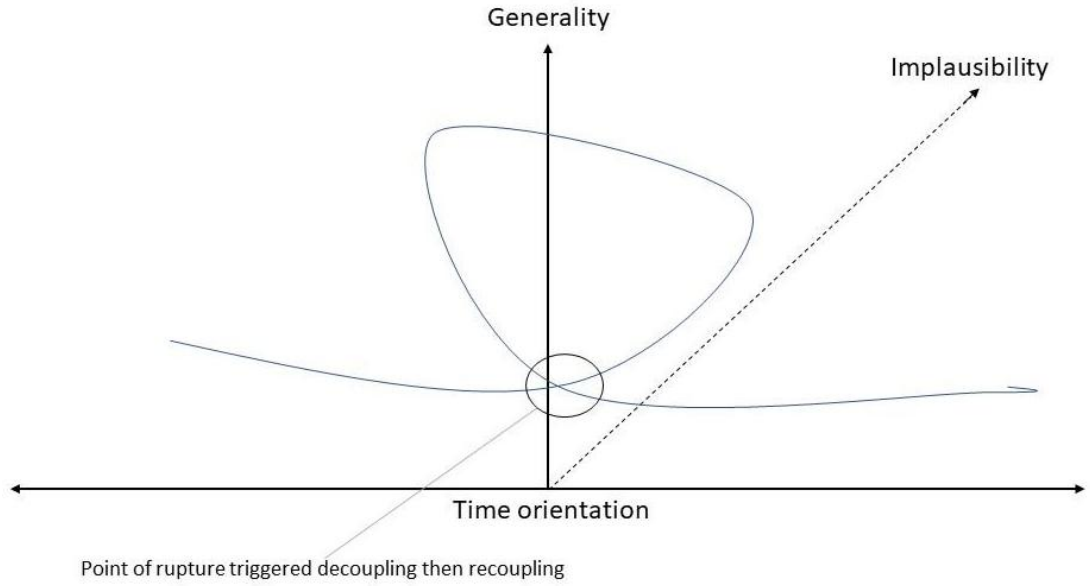

Figure 2: The imagination loop (adapted from Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016; Zittoun & Gfeller, 2021)

As insinuated, imagination is not only an individual phenomenon, but a social and cultural activity. Zittoun, Glăveanu, and Hawlina (2020) offer the example of pretend play within children as a way of exploring social roles and customs - such as the game 'Cops and Robbers'. Furthermore, imagination can account for developmental trajectories where it is specified that particular imaginings can be guided by certain social and political forces. Notably, in the context of a national museum, the contents and how items are described will guide the collective imagination of a country's past, e.g., how certain events are depicted within fine art or how some artefacts are archived while others are cast aside. This is described by Bernard (2023), as the museum's role in 'nation-building', the museum acts as political agent and has the ability to distribute approved messaging of how a nation wants to be represented towards, an often, international museum audience. This echoes Zittoun and Gillespie's (2016) understanding of the cultural nature of the (sociogenetic) imagination. This form of imagination can be culturally distributed by circulating approved narratives throughout a populace to guide a prescribed image of how a 'Nation' wishes to be perceived (Bernard, 2023; Zittoun & Gillespie, 2016).

We can also speculate upon barriers to imagination and their consequences. In some cases, such as with the Barbican Art Gallery, London, the removal of certain pieces (and sometimes the choice of a curator to not offer a description of a piece), such as in the case of artists and donors protesting the institute due to multiple cases of controversy related to the Israel-Palestine conflict (see Sherwood, 2023). Later, we also see censorship and cancellation of events from pro-Palestinian interviewees (e.g. Bakare, 2024). Censorship as well as removal practices will both hold the consequence of telegraphing or reflecting an institution's values. Protest may hold the power to enact change, and censorship assumes the position of being a barrier to change upon the microgenetic level. This is because these practices can potentially close the loop of imagination within an ongoing museum experience or negate the possibility of audiences experiencing a trigger to their imagination if certain voices are silenced or if important works are missing or left uncontexualised. If we recognise microgenetic change as a motor for ontogenetic and sociogenetic change, as

described by Psaltis (2015), then we can understand how museum-related practices guide imagination and thus have the potential to act as a barrier to human or cultural developments.

In terms of the museum, and historical change within museums, the approach of this paper concentrates on imagination as integrating of individual and collective imaginings, or as Zittoun and Gillespie (2018) describe, dialogical imagination, rooted in intersubjectivity. It is through intersubjective thinking that imaginings can be shared and distributed or even diffused among singular or multiple others that can be 'crystallised' as new physical resources, for example. This renders imagination both social and often collaborative (Zittoun & Gillespie, 2018). This approach also focusses on the role of the imagination as a catalyst and supporting psychological process of genetic change across three transactional levels of development: microgenesis, ontogenesis, and sociogenesis.

Memory

Collective memory as a concept was first introduced by Halbwachs (1925/1992), which comprises shared memories within social groups, and is crucial to group identity (for example, national identity) as well as perceived agency (Fischer & O'Mara, 2022). Two major approaches to collective memory will be discussed; these grew from the appeal toward a psychology of collective memory as proposed by Hirst and Manier (2008). Firstly, within sociocultural psychology it is stipulated that this process is mediated by cultural artefacts, social resources, and shared tools, particularly historical narratives (Garagozov, 2002). As such, primarily, this has been an object of research within the social sciences, however, cognitive empirical investigation has also faced a sharp uptick in publications as an alternative approach using the term 'collaborative-memory' or '-recall' of historical events which are supported by the reciprocal interaction of individual's 'memory schemas' within a systems-approach (Legrand et al., 2015; Rajaram & Pereira-Pasarin, 2010). Largely, both approaches highlight the importance of collective memory in understanding the process behind how groups (macro- and micro-) remember and construct shared narratives. Harris, Paterson, and Kemp (2008) illustrated how group remembering can lead to collective memories and then social cohesion, as a main outcome. Exemplifying this some research has tackled social movements, for example, Kubal and Becerra (2014) tackled the 'meso' level, i.e. broad cultural patterns and representations, as a level of analysis, adding to the already existing macro (group) and micro (individual) levels. This meso level added the concept of a 'repertoire' as a component/tool used by social movements to enact change. The authors argue these tactical and cultural repertoires reveal how remembering operates on various levels. These findings have implications for museum development, which will be explored later.

The work of Constance de Saint-Laurent exemplifies a corpus of research within sociocultural psychology, concentrating upon areas such as microgenetic processes of memory in everyday life as well as theorising the link between collective remembering and imagination (de Saint-Laurent, 2017; 2018b; 2021). It is de Saint-Laurent's theorising that appears most apt for museum development. In her 2017 paper on her theory of memory acts, this theory was proposed as a critique and alternative approach to the previous collective memory literature, elaborating that the memory act is "the act of presenting one's discourses as narrating, describing or interpreting something that happened in the past, or as referring to something that is commonly believed to have happened. Acts of collective memory are thus the subcategory of memory acts that refer specifically to the collective past" (de Saint-Laurent, 2017b, emphasis in original). Here, the theory concentrates on the performative

aspects of memory, denoting that collective memory is a construct, socially negotiated via discourse as well as via the use of material or symbolic tools. This approach to memory calls for a concentration of research upon how what is shared is shaped by material and intersubjective levels (Grossen, 2001 in de Saint Laurent, 2018). When understanding how processes of imagination and memory are linked, for example, imagination is required for the reconstruction and sense-making of past experiences (de Saint-Laurent, 2018). Collective memory acts as a frame of reference of how one can imagine the past, or multiple possible futures. For example, Beckstead (2017, p. 124) in his writings on ruins and memorials regards that the "past, or at least its echoes, reverberates into the present. It is apparent and almost quotidian that only certain aspects of a past event or deceased person are retained and maintained for current purposes while other aspects of the past are forgotten in part or in total. Thus, the past is dynamically alive, revisited by every generation, and the act of selective preservation and restoration go together with forgetting and destruction". Within this logic we can see that museum work is the collective effort of memory acts throughout an institution's workforce as well as of the audiences they serve. From this, we can point towards museum development, as catalysed by these acts related to how the past and the future are communicated between people and the world. That communicative power is transactional between those parties, where new imaginings and new retellings are built piece by piece, in the temple of time that is the museum.

Applications

With aspects of memory and imagination defined, as well as some previous attempts to illuminate museum change, attention will shift to instances of museum work that will exemplify how a sociocultural psychological model of museum evolution may be applied within the real-world context working in conjunction with museological work. This application is by no means an attempt to fully analyze data, however, this section aims to draw lines between theory discussed in this article and apply it cursorily so we can understand where only the first steps of an approach could lead us. The example within this article is taken from a chapter in the book International Perspectives on Museum Management (Babić, 2025), which explores an 'introduction' to the task of museum inception/redevelopment. The chapter is called:

The alchemy of museum planning

In this chapter, Barker & Langham (2025) give a two-part explication of how they define the task of museum planning (anew or redeveloping). First, they discuss museum planning as a systematic three-phase process of 1) Situation analysis, 2) Options appraisal, and 3) Masterplan. The second part denotes three principles: museums are relational, inescapably' future-oriented, and must consider their sustainability (and of people, planet, and profit). This sub-section will apply the previously discussed psychological concepts on a non-exhaustive list of excerpts from the text.

Firstly, this text describes museum planning as an inherently highly collaborative process, for example, within the 'situation analysis' section we are exposed to many of activities that constitute this first phase. Effective communication between key people as well as understanding of the current challenges that need to be addressed to tackle said challenges:

Excerpt 1:

> The planning team should enter into honest discussions with key project stakeholders regarding their respective aims for the museum and their understanding of the museum's particular purpose, its strengths and its weaknesses (…) this process is about bringing differences out into the open as the basis for respectful and empathetic dialogue

This example is one activity of situation analysis described within the text. Here, it is suggested that a certain level of intersubjectivity is required from the planning team as well as stakeholders to evaluate the necessary next steps effectively. The sharing of expertise and past experience allows abstract ideas to become more generalizable and plausible concrete ideas that can be shared and discussed between professionals of different capacities. These microgenetic developments within a meeting or series of meetings allow for intentions, values, and collective imaginings of those with capital power, to be diffused from stakeholder to museum worker. Those imagined and distributed ideas with the most plausibility, according to the museum's role and purpose as well as certain political forces a museum might be held to, may be offered as possible solutions for phase two: options appraisal:

Excerpt 2:

> a process that blends creative, imaginative thinking with rigorous modelling and pragmatic research into relevant precedents – is to create a number of options for how the museum might look, feel and operate when it opens and then, by comparing and contrasting those options, to understand each more comprehensively and more critically

An interesting loop of imagination can be identified here as it is clear that in museum practice, imaginative thinking is likened to gap-filling in that "imagination fills in the space between what is, what could be, and what will be (Vaihinger, 1924; Valsiner, 2014)" (Gillespie & Zittoun, 2016). As ideas and possibilities for intervention are evaluated, here we can see individual imaginings of the future would be diffused in a team's discourse, and the agreed plausibility and generality allow for these ideas to develop into collective imaginings of those possible futures and drive decision making. These decisions are thusly informed, majorly by a negotiation between ideals and sociomaterial practicalities as well as a more embodied nature of planning. hypothetically. Imaginative thinking here is bound by a professional's knowledge of what is expected from a museum, and what is possible. Furthermore, as can be seen in the next excerpt, in which the authors explain how museums are future-oriented institutions:

Excerpt 3:

> while they may concern themselves significantly with the care, remembrance and display of material remnants of the past, every facet of a museum's activity has to do with the shaping of particular futures

Arguably then, it is via acts of collective memory that those particular futures are shaped and one day will become memory themselves. Ruptures in this context, this author argues, drive memory acts as an agreed need for redevelopment, or the need for a new museum ultimately guides an institution's actions towards the aim of conserve heritage in a certain

way, for a certain purpose, for example, the anti-colonial sentiments of critical museologists. This leads to thinking upon the third principle, by planning for sustainability, one understands the success or failings of previous museum actions. It is this 'planning for evolution' that exemplifies de Saint-Laurent's thinking regarding the connection of collective memory and imagination of the future, as a catalyst for action- especially within the museum context where each minute action, of display, conservation, even, as Barker and Langham point to the 'instagrammability' of gallery design, build to a legacy that is distributed not only between people, but also on the internet. On the human level, even within these short excerpts we can point towards ordinary everyday acts (microgenesis) as drivers of change within a museum. The change can be incremental or sudden as museum professionals respond to demands within a context that is subject to any number of social, political, technological changes (sociogenesis) across their lived experience allowing them to, hopefully, become more adaptive and competent overtime (ontogenesis). It is then the possibility that imagination and memory catalyze evolution on the 'museum level' which requires much closer investigation.

From this very loose textual analysis, we can see not only reflections of imagination, memory, intersubjectivity etc., but museum professionals pointing towards these concepts as both constitutive and supportive of museum development. These are presented simply to illustrate the processes discussed already in context, but this author believes further inquiry can deepen our understanding of museum development as a process guided and catalysed by psychological processes.

To move from first steps to a more stable approach, real-world data-driven research is required. For example, a fuller dialogical analysis situated within a case study would offer a much more nuanced attempt at illuminating the transactional nature and co-construction of museum evolution and human development. Investigating this interactive nature between the two still appears novel when considering a sociocultural psychological perspective. As such, to hinge upon sociocultural psychological processes would require high triangulation between a range of data sources with evidence of micro-, onto-, and sociogenetic changes guiding and informing one another. To achieve a satisfactory analysis, research-design would most definitely need to be longitudinal and ethnographic in nature, focusing upon the 'life-course' of a museum to adequately reflect the complexity and particularity of such an organism.

Concluding Remarks

The proposition in which this paper sits has been a way to further develop the thinking of sociocultural psychology towards cultural heritage as well as find an approach which can help illuminate museum evolution from the perspective of psychology. It is aimed that future research can develop these initial thoughts more thoroughly using the concepts and engaging with the modes of thinking already described.

First, we concentrated upon the museum as an evolving sociocultural unit, one that has faced millennia of evolution already. In exploring scientific inquiry and psychological theory only we explored how social, cultural, and often political forces shape institutions in terms of their role, mission, and their transactional relationship with people- while only scratching the surface at this point. Sociocultural psychology was offered as an analytical approach to dynamics of museum development as described, attention then turned to the slight examination of hypothetical instances of change, more specifically, how imagination and

memory may support said instances. Further research will beget a far more nuanced understanding and explanation of the dynamics discussed here. As such, this paper will finish with select methodological musings for research in this area, as true engagement with theory requires engagement with research.

Via the general framework offered, investigating museum evolution through a sociocultural psychological approach requires an in-depth look at many transitions overtime, where research would be reconstructive, potentially relying heavily on ethnographic methods (see Zittoun, 2022). Additionally, as this framework as well as most contemporary museology relying highly upon constructivism within its epistemology even while being visitor-focused, one example being the imagination of the future as a symbolic construction on the individual and collective levels, a broader approach of methodology would be required, as described by Power et al., (2023). This could be via reconstructive or narrative interviews of museum professionals, as well as, observational methodologies of practice, discourses between professionals, and lastly, interpretation of public documents published by a museum. These examples offer a methodological plurality which would also allow for the investigation between levels of genetic development. If we take the analysis of museum newsletters or planning documents as memory acts, for example, we may highlight how actions taken by a museum were performed to move through and past specific ruptures, or traumas, such as financial crises, and how imaginative processes guided decision making through such a crisis.

As a final remark, the sociocultural approach to psychology offers a rich resource to which we can study the museum in myriad facets, from microgenetic visitor experiences to the sociogenetic evolution of cultural heritage, or also, the career development of a museum professional ontogenetically, as well as, most importantly, how these genetic developments inform one another. Overall, what excites this author most is the range possibilities that this approach appears to offer.

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