

## Representing, Re-presenting, or Producing the Past? Memory Work amongst Museum Employees

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**ABSTRACT** Though it is widely understood that the past can be an important resource for organizations, less is known about the micro-level skills and choices that help to materialize different representations of the past. We understand these micro-level skills and choices as a practice: ‘memory work’ – a banner term gathering various activities that provide the scaffolding for a shared past. Seeking to learn from a context where memory work is central, we share insights from a quasi-longitudinal study of UK museum employees. We theorize three ideal-typic regimes of memory work, namely representing, re-presenting and producing the past, and detail the micro-practices through which these regimes are enacted. Through explaining the key features of memory work in this context, our paper offers novel, broader insights into the relationship between occupations and memory work, showing how occupations differ in their understanding of memory and how this shapes their memory work.

**Keywords:** memory work, museums, occupations, past

### INTRODUCTION

The past, expressed through memory and its representations, can be leveraged by organizations to generate competitive advantage (Foster et al., 2017; Suddaby et al., 2020). Organizations can invoke and represent a memory of the past to shape their identity (Basque and Langley, 2018; Coraiola et al., 2021; Rowlinson et al., 2014), reach a specific goal (Wadhvani et al., 2018), redefine their global strategy (Maclean et al., 2014), bolster their brand image for marketing purposes (Urde et al., 2007), or preserve their memory

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(Lasewicz, 2015). The responsibility to interpret and materialize the past rests on the shoulders of various actors who mobilize artefacts and discursive resources. Empirical research has documented how this work is carried out by senior executives, hired professionals and corporate archivists (Foster et al., 2020; Stutz and Schrepf-Stirling, 2020), alongside regular employees (Foroughi and Al-Amoudi, 2020) – as well as external actors such as Non-Governmental Organizations (e.g., Mena et al., 2016), partner professional organizations (Coraiola and Derry, 2020), and the media (e.g., Caillaud et al., 2018).

As recognized in organizational memory, a clear sense of the past can constitute an asset (see Foster et al., 2011). Yet the past can also be selectively recalled, deliberately altered, or simply forgotten (see Anteby and Molnar, 2012; Coraiola et al., 2021; Foroughi and Al-Amoudi, 2020). This malleability can be valuable to organizations if the past is perceived as a hindrance or brake on progress. To understand the significance of practices that represent the past is to realize that rather than organizational memory being an anchor, it is surfaced through ebbs and flows: at times more or less partial, more or less accurate, and oscillating between asset and liability (Crawford et al., 2022; Decker et al., 2020). The past is continually open to re-interpretation (Bloch, 1977), meaning organizations can revisit and reshape, or perhaps even invent it to suit their current purposes (Rowlinson et al., 2010; Suddaby et al., 2010), albeit with some unpredictable consequences (Hatch and Schultz, 2017).

Such (re-)interpretations require work (Coraiola and Derry, 2020; Crawford et al., 2022; Foster et al., 2011). While we know that miscellaneous actors, and indeed occupations, view the plasticity of memory in different ways (Foroughi, 2020; Kameo, 2017), there is a lack of insight into the micro-level skills and choices that help to materialize different versions of the past. Here, we understand these micro-level skills and choices as a practice: ‘memory work’ (Foster et al., 2020). This encompasses various activities that provide the scaffolding for a shared sense of the past. By extension, we conceive of memory as an on-going set of practices rather than a fixed, static object. To examine these micro-practices that frame the relation between memory work and memory production, we here ask: *How does memory change when the practices of memory work change?*

To address this question, we share insights from a quasi-longitudinal (see Hassard and Morris, 2022; Miller et al., 2020) study of UK museum employees. While memory work features, under one form or another, in all organizations, it is central to the activities of museums. This makes museums an ideal empirical setting in which to explore and theorize memory work as well as to examine the relationship between memory work and memory production. Our paper draws on multiple data sources gathered through two waves of research, approximately four years apart. During the first wave (2017–18), we conducted 30 on-site, qualitative interviews, collected observational data in the form of museum tours as well as documentary evidence (relevant policy literature, organizational documents, promotional materials and so on). The second wave of research (2021) was footprinted on the same design (although in person interviews and observation were not possible during Covid) and involved conducting a further set of 21 online, qualitative interviews.

The findings reveal that interpreting the past translates, in the museum sector, into three ideal-typic regimes of memory work. The first regime of memory work, *representing the past*, is aligned with the normative ideal of preserving artefacts for the public good, which many museum employees subscribe to. Here, memory work enacts a

view of history as fact, with memory seen as unalterable. In the second, *re-presenting the past*, museum employees understand their role more pragmatically in terms of creating contemporary and context-sensitive versions of history, thus accommodating the past to a changing contemporary landscape. In this case, history is a story that can be narrated in different ways, as memory is altered or selectively forgotten. The third regime, *producing the past*, occurs when commercial logics channel museum employees towards creating visitor attractions and realizing value. Here, history is that which sells, where the past is commoditized into a monetizable resource. Enacting these three regimes calls on the skills and abilities of museum employees, who carry out memory work primarily by mobilizing collections and artefacts. This entails crafting stories and narratives that seek to highlight but also forget and adjust some parts of the past, with technology increasingly playing a role in such narrativization. Though we cannot attach one regime of memory work to specific occupations, we identify links between them.

Our paper makes two main contributions to the literature. First, it further advances our understanding of the concept of memory by theorizing three ideal-typic regimes of memory work, namely representing, re-presenting and producing the past. We detail the micro-practices through which these regimes are enacted, thus linking memory work and memory production in a way that accounts for how changes to memory work translate into different views of memory and of the past. Second, by fleshing out the features of memory work, our paper critically examines the relation between occupations and memory work. More specifically, we show how occupations differ in their understanding of memory and how this shapes their memory work. In so doing, we strive to build a bridge between a mature literature on occupations and growing work on memory studies in organizations, paving the way for further research aiming to explore the complex relation between occupations and memory.

The following section presents the theoretical framework of this paper, where we introduce the term ‘memory work’ drawing connections between history, memory and occupations. We then set this in the context of occupations charged with doing memory work in the cultural sector. After explaining the research design, analysis of our empirical data details three regimes of memory work and shows how this work is enacted through the skills and practices of various occupations in museums. We then discuss these findings and their implications, and a conclusion summarizes the main contributions.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Memory Work and History**

Memory work is an umbrella term that takes on different senses across various strands of literature (Fraser and Michell, 2015). Its earliest uses are as synonyms for memorizing thorough ‘rote learning’ or ‘learning by heart’ (Laurie, 1887; Martin, 1874). As such it features throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as a disparaging term in approaches to education (Shively, 1966). Over this same period, some scholars seek to rehabilitate

memory work, identifying it as integral to higher-order skills like comprehension (Duggan, 1952) and also as central to personhood (Detwiler, 1974). Similar connections are still being made in even the most recent literature on working memory in experimental and applied psychology (Kerns et al., 2017). Tracing memory work back to memorizing might seem a shallow and unpromising origin, but even this simplest usage conveys how personal, micro-practices relating to memory are situated in a macro-level context (Entwistle and Entwistle, 2003) and culturally ingrained (Tan, 2011).

Another sense is found in literature in psychoanalysis that considers the therapeutic merits of eliciting or co-creating memories, where both the therapist's and patient's role are occasionally called memory work (Stocks, 1998). 'Memory-work' (often hyphenated) can also refer specifically to an emancipatory research method in feminism, where descriptions of past events are collaboratively examined to identify taken-for-granted assumptions expressed through tropes such as cliché and metaphor (Onyx and Small, 2001). These can signpost 'common sense' understandings of the past which reproduce ideological hegemonies (Boucher, 1997). Rewriting memories offers a form of liberation from existing socialization processes, recovering and foregrounding the feminine self (Crawford et al., 1992). Though clearly there are very different senses of memory work in psychotherapy and in feminist methodology, both involve a move away from realism. They unsettle assumptions we might have that our relationship to the past is one of storage and retrieval and they also show how the past is shaped through institutionalized practices.

Contemporary uses also signal links between practices and organizations but see memory work as an activity essentially rooted in the present; 'interpretive labor' (Stoler and Strassler, 2000, p. 9). Instead of being real and accessible, the past is a contingent, perspective-laden and unfolding project – memory is therefore an on-going set of practices. This sense of memory work features in sociology (Merrill et al., 2020), history (Moran, 2004), geography (Till, 2012), urban studies (Inwood and Alderman, 2021), and the performing arts (Rhodes, 2021). Reflecting the central concerns of these different disciplines, scholars again bridge the micro- and macro-levels, placing respectively different degrees of emphasis on the roles of social processes, hermeneutics, place, the built environment and aesthetics. As an emerging concept in management studies, memory work has been defined as, 'the strategic construction of short- and long-term memory in organizations' (Foster et al., 2020, p. 254).

As Foster et al. (2020) explain, there are ties between memory work and the discipline of history. The traditionally dominant view of history in management and organization studies – history as fact – is premised on a normative goal, namely, to represent the past in a systematic way, 'objective reconstruction that is largely absent of human agency' (Suddaby and Foster, 2017, p. 21). From this perspective, memory work becomes seen as a largely technical activity associated with archiving, retrieving and displaying facts. In contrast, the notion that memory work is 'strategic construction' suggests it is at least partially fiction – a more artful and selective packaging of events to project an identity or appeal to an audience.

Any neat dichotomy between fact and fiction is not sustainable and contemporary organization scholars are used to blurring the lines between these in analysing accounts of the

past (for instance Rosile et al., 2013). Such shared, well-placed epistemological scepticism quickly takes us to different views of history: not just history-as-fact but history as power, as sense-making, and as rhetoric (Foroughi et al., 2020; Suddaby and Foster, 2017). These macro-level perspectives have implications for how we make sense of micro-practices associated with memory work. Activities such as archiving, retrieving, and displaying are never neutral portrayals of past events. Instead, they are freighted with positional interests and (continuing the theme memory-work has in feminist methodology) result from the conscious or unwitting exercise of privilege (see Coraiola et al., 2021; Foster et al., 2011, 2017). History is not only representation of the past (how things were) but re-presentation of the past (how they are seen to be). Accordingly, just as a neat dichotomy between memory work as fact and fiction is not sustainable, dividing accounts of the past into representations and re-presentations is naïve both in terms of ontology and socio-politics. To understand this in more depth, it is instructive to look more closely at how this split between history as representation and re-presentation originated and how it was eroded.

At its origins, the view of history-as-fact and representation is one reason the modern discipline of history is traced to Herodotus and Thucydides. Both broke with mythical stylisations of past events that were closer to epic poetry in favour of a more chronological style. The radical historian, Hayden White (1973), identified two interrelated questions that erode the distinction between Herodotus and Thucydides and their predecessors. These can be summarized as follows: What makes history more than an objective chronicling of events? How can history reproduce the past in all its complexity and detail?

To take the first question, the illusion of an objective chronicle is simple to illustrate. In the UK, before they were typically made of plastic, children's rulers often used to be wooden with a scale on one side (in inches and centimetres) and the other side showing a timeline of Kings and Queens with their dates of accession and death. This basic chronicle is perhaps as close as we can come to history-as-fact, but it is not objective because it is silent about all other details. Countless events both mundane and spectacular are not shown, all other biographies and voices are silenced, claims to legitimacy are never surfaced and so on.

In terms of the second question, White's work also shows the impossibility of representing the past in all its complexity (see Rösen, 2020). The ruler's most rudimentary chronicle is obviously inadequate and partial but then no matter how sophisticated or intricate accounts of historical events are, they would always be incomplete and mediated by social structures and texts: 'we can have no access to a full and authentic past ... histories necessarily but always incompletely constitute ... the 'history' to which they offer access' (Montrose, 1989, p. 781). There is an inescapable materiality and indexicality to history (Blagoev et al., 2018), which means it is impossible simply to represent the past. At the macro, disciplinary level then, history always blends representation and re-presentation. This has implications for understanding memory work at the micro-level (Coraiola and Derry, 2020), also inviting careful attention to the meso-level practices associated with groups who enact the past.

## Memory Work, Occupations and Museums

Occupations constitute a distinctive model of social formation that overlaps, but is not synonymous with, professions. Essentially, a profession is a more highly elaborated form of what we know as an occupation, coming with defining features such as requirements

for higher levels of formal education. This requirement for higher level tertiary (and beyond) education distinguishes professions from what we might call ‘trades’ such as printing and carpentry, which are also based on training, skills and qualifications, but do not typically require higher (as opposed to further or vocational) education. The process of professionalization (Abbott, 1988) formalizes occupations in that it establishes a more-or-less credentialized structure with restrictions placed upon membership. This is the model for the archetypal professions of medicine, law, architecture, the clergy, and to a lesser extent, the academy.

As well as codifying membership of a specific group according to rules on qualifications or standards of behaviour, the process of professionalization also involves the intra-professional socialization of individuals’ cultural values, norms, and worldviews. These elements are in turn shaped by historical dynamics of the external environment and further, the process of intra-organizational socialization is not unilinear, being instead subject to the tensions and struggles that characterize most work organizations (Anteby et al., 2016). These dynamic social contexts determine key factors such as the content, timing, and conditions under which professionalization occurs (Larson, 2017) and draw our attention onto the co-existence of competing framings in professions (Anteby et al., 2016; Hwang and Powell, 2009).

Museum workers such as curators and managers are professionals in the sense that they work in a sector typically populated by those with a tertiary education, and where the work requires an awareness of established norms and behaviours. Their work can be and often is highly complex and it takes place in a ‘heritage sector’ which is heavily influenced by governmental and quasi-governmental systems of funding and regulation. There exist professional associations for those working in the sector such as the Museums Association which, like other professional associations, has a code of ethics and offers continuing professional development (CPD). At the same time, curators and managers are not a profession in the classical sense in that entry to the museum sector can be facilitated through specialist qualifications (e.g., a degree in Heritage Studies or Curation) but does not require a specific form of qualification and registration with a formal professional association such as the Law Society, the British Medical Association or the College of Nursing. Thus, museum workers occupy a position where it is possible to use the terms ‘occupation’ and ‘profession’ somewhat interchangeably (and these terms are often interchangeable in everyday use across the sector).

Turning explicitly to the concept of ‘occupation’ we, in line with Anteby et al. (2016), adopt a broad understanding of occupations, using the term to refer to socially constructed entities that consist of the four following elements: (i) a type of work, (ii) practitioners of this work, (iii) a set of actions performed by those individuals, and (iv) a broader social system that sustains the occupation. Occupations are not synonymous with job titles because a variety of jobs can be found within the same occupation. This intentionally broad perspective brings to focus the issue of ‘how occupational members perform activities – like work tasks or practices – that have consequences for individual, occupational, and organizational outcomes’ (Anteby et al., 2016, p. 200). Occupational groups can engage in jurisdictional competition where they assert their expertise and authority relating to the completion of specific tasks (Abbott, 1988). These authority claims support forms of closure (O’Regan and Killian, 2021), although not in the sense

of the classical professions discussed earlier. Jostling for power and authority also takes place within occupations as individuals choose different ways to carry out their roles (see Hallett and Ventresca, 2006). Under changing societal or cultural contexts, the status and significance of an occupation and roles within that occupation can shift – for instance virology and epidemiology became far more prominent during the pandemic. The table below (Table I) provides operational definitions of the key concepts in this paper.

In the public or ‘not for profit’ sector, of which museums are a part, there have been a number of significant shifts owing to changes in the political, economic, and social spheres. These have taken shape in terms of a move away from traditional logics of public service, which emphasize social values (Haveman and Rao, 2006; Suddaby et al., 2009), to logics of efficiency and commerce that stress economic value (Aroles et al., 2022; Goodrick and Reay, 2010). New Public Management (NPM) – the introduction of a range of quantifying metrics in the UK public sector – and The Global Financial Crisis induced two waves of marketisation through which many public-sector organizations found themselves caught in tensions between their founding values embodied in occupational norms, and an encroaching market or commercial presence (see Aroles et al., 2023; Sanders, 2015). This affected not only organizations but also individuals.

Such changes are particularly worth exploring in the museum sector given its prime role in the shaping and representation of collective memory. They put curators and museum managers on the back foot, compelling them to justify intrinsic and local values and projects in terms of externally derived, competitively benchmarked performance metrics (Zorloni, 2010). In this context, the work of experts and organizations in curating the past has witnessed a wide array of changes (see notably Levine, 1986; McCall and Gray, 2014), with technological developments clearly contributing to altering practices within organizations of memory but also our relation to the past and its conservation (see Arvanitis, 2013; Garde-Hansen, 2011). Here, we are particularly interested in exploring the micro-level skills and choices that help to materialize different representations of the past. To examine these micro-practices that frame the relation between memory work and memory production, our paper aims to answer the following question: *How does memory change when the practices of memory work change?* To begin exploring these theoretical concepts in material and experiential terms, we now turn our attention to the methodological approach underlying our research.

Table I. Operational definitions of key terms

Organizational Memory	<i>A collective, ongoing set of practices that crystallize around the enactment, recollection and interpretation of the past</i>
Memory work	<i>A set of micro-level skills and choices that help to materialize different versions of the past</i>
History	<i>A discipline concerned with articulating shared, collective versions of the past. History is not solely about how things were but also how they are seen to be, bringing together both representations and interpretations</i>
Occupation	<i>A socially constructed entity that encompasses a specific type of work, the individuals who perform this work, the actions they undertake and the larger social system that supports and sustains this occupation (Anteby et al., 2016)</i>

## METHODS

Using a quasi-longitudinal qualitative design (see Hassard and Morris, 2022; Miller et al., 2020), our data sources comprise 51 semi-structured interviews with senior employees in museums in both England and Scotland, as well as observational data and a range of organizational and policy documents. More details on the context and design are below.

### Research Context and Approach

There are approximately 2500 museums in the UK, 1736 of which are accredited (Arts Council England, 2022). The Museums Association (2022) registers eight types: (i) national museums with ‘collections considered to be of national importance’; (ii) local authority museums housing ‘collections that reflect local history and heritage’; (iii) university museums with collections related to ‘specific areas of academic interest’; (iv) independent museums that ‘are owned by registered charities and other independent bodies and trusts’; (v) historic properties and heritage sites; (vi) National Trust properties; (vii) regimental museums and armouries; and (viii) unoccupied royal palaces. In recent years, museums in the UK have experienced a wide array of transformations (see Aroles et al., 2022; Loach et al., 2017).

We study the changes experienced by the UK museum sector, in terms of practices, processes and occupations in two waves of research. The Covid pandemic prompted us to engage in a second round of data collection. Despite all its challenges, the pandemic allowed museums to pause and reflect on their practices. Significantly, this made participants more acutely aware of some aspects of their work and, in particular, more reflective of the memory work they perform. Prior to Covid, many aspects of this were more taken-for-granted or institutionalized and thus less discussed. This elicited our interest in the micro-practices that frame the relation between memory work and memory production. Our two waves of research are approximately four years apart, which is within established norms for longitudinal research (see Blazejewski, 2011). Qualitative longitudinal research is particularly effective in enabling the exploration of processual phenomena while being attentive and receptive to the context (see Brattström and Faems, 2020; Snihur and Zott, 2020). This design enabled us to identify trends and patterns in real time rather than through retrospection, also affording significant flexibility to pursue emerging themes (Decker et al., 2020; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

### The First Research Wave

The first wave of research was conducted in 2017–18. We started our research by collecting various documentary evidence (notably official policy documents as well as reports from the Museums Association) in order to gain a broad understanding of the context in which museums in the UK were operating. We subsequently adopted a purposive approach to selection of which specific museums to study (Robinson, 2014), covering different types and sizes of facility, across a range of geographical areas. In total, we contacted 109 museums securing a final sample of 30 who agreed to participate in our



research. A purposive sample across different museum types included 15 independent, nine local authority, three university and two national museums, as well as one heritage site. Research involved interviewing museum employees as well as collecting observational data and documentary evidence.

Museums which agreed to partake in the study forwarded our research query to the person thought to be the most capable of answering our questions, who was then interviewed, resulting in one formal interview in each of the 30 museums visited, with these organizations being located in 20 cities across England and Scotland (see [Appendix 1](#)). Most interviews lasted around 60 to 90 minutes, during which time extensive and detailed notes were made to record the answers given to the questions forming the mainstay of the first phase of the investigation. The interview protocol was guided by both our engagement with external documentary evidence and our interest in exploring the changes experienced by the UK museum sector, in terms of practices, processes and occupations. Exemplary questions included: How did the financial context impact the work carried out in the museum? How have curators responded to growing financial imperatives? In what ways did that change their work practices? The interview process was stopped once we reached a stage of 'data saturation' (Guest et al., 2006), with the same points recurrently emerging through the interviews.

We decided to complement our interviews with both observations and internal documentary evidence to shape and sharpen our understanding of these organizations and to help us make sense of the narratives that emerged from the interviews. All interviews were thus either preceded, or followed, by a tour of the museum. All but five tours were docent-led (the five remaining being self-guided). The docent-led tours comprised a mix of what we may call museum-sanctioned narratives (e.g., highlighting the key exhibits or features of the museums) and more open-ended discussions, typically pointing at ongoing issues, problems or controversies. Altogether, this offered the opportunity for extra informal discussions, which brought additional context to the interviews. On average, each tour lasted approximately three hours, amounting to 90 hours of observation in total. This resulted in copious field notes. Finally, internal documentary evidence (statements of purpose, etc.) were gathered.

## **The Second Research Wave**

The second study, conducted in 2021, was essentially footprinted on the same research design. The 30 museums initially sampled were contacted to partake in this second phase of the research. Twenty-one responded positively, and interviews were thus conducted. Eight museums answered negatively mentioning time and financial constraints while one museum did not return any call/email. All interviews took place in the second half of 2021 and via Zoom (due to travel restrictions induced by the Covid-19 pandemic). The interview guide was informed by the previous research wave and still shaped by our interest in exploring the changes experienced by the UK museum sector, in terms of practices, processes and occupations. Exemplary questions included: Would you say Covid has meant you have to change things incrementally or does it require transformational change? What do you think are the main opportunities and challenges connected

to the on-going pandemic? How do you accommodate changing societal expectations? Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio recorded then transcribed by the first author.

Although in this second wave we attempted to interview the same individuals, quite a few had changed roles, or left the organization since 2017–18. As such, we encountered four cases: (i) interviewing the same individual in the same role (11 interviews), (ii) interviewing the same individual but in a different role (three interviews), (iii) interviewing a different individual but in a same role (three interviews) and (iv) interviewing a different individual in a different role (four interviews). These differences are why we describe our design as quasi-longitudinal (following Hassard and Morris, 2022). As the research took place online, the second study did not involve observational data. No further documentary evidence were collected. Table II below provides an overview of our study.

## Data Analysis

As mentioned in the previous section, our analysis draws on interview data because this provided the most clear and explicit source of insight into memory work. We analysed and coded our interviews using an inductive approach inspired by Gioia et al. (2013), but in a way that was also informed by our interest in memory work and memory production. Summarily, following a three-stage process we first induced a series of first-order codes, which captured the essence of our raw data. We then crafted second-order themes that sought to group together meaningfully and rigorously our first-order codes. Finally, we derived aggregate dimensions that frame the main findings of this paper. The external documentary evidence we assembled informed the early stages of our research while the internal documents as well as the observational data helped us to further our understanding of the interview data and sense check first-order codes. Our interest here lies in the narratives provided by museum employees.

While the interview guide for the second study was informed by the analysis of the data collected from the first study, we decided to analyse all the interview data together (thus

Table II. Data sources

	<i>Time frame</i>	<i>Data sources</i>	<i>Research focus</i>
First study	2017–18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 30 semi-structured, onsite interviews</li> <li>• Observational data (museum tours)</li> <li>• Informal discussions (in 25 museums)</li> <li>• Documentary evidence (internal museum reports, policy documents, reports from the Museum Association)</li> </ul>	Focus on the changes experienced by the UK museum sector in terms of practices, process and professions
Second study	2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 21 semi-structured, online interviews</li> </ul>	Emphasis on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The use of museum artefacts</li> <li>• The role of museum professionals</li> <li>• The purpose of museums</li> </ul>

disregarding prior analysis of the first study). The analysis was performed by the lead author with frequent team meetings to discuss the emergence of the data structure. The first-order codes developed are in vivo elements from our interviews, which we contextualized during discussions amongst the author team and checked through our observational and documentary data. These codes notably included the following: reinventing museums, being relevant, preserving memory, engaging (with) the public, working in digital spaces, narrating our stories, stating our message, being visible, prioritizing the audience, storytelling, staying in role, responding to the changing landscape, responding to financial pressure, evolving practices, taking more responsibility, mitigating institutional racism, coping with problems related to representation, accountability, education and so on.

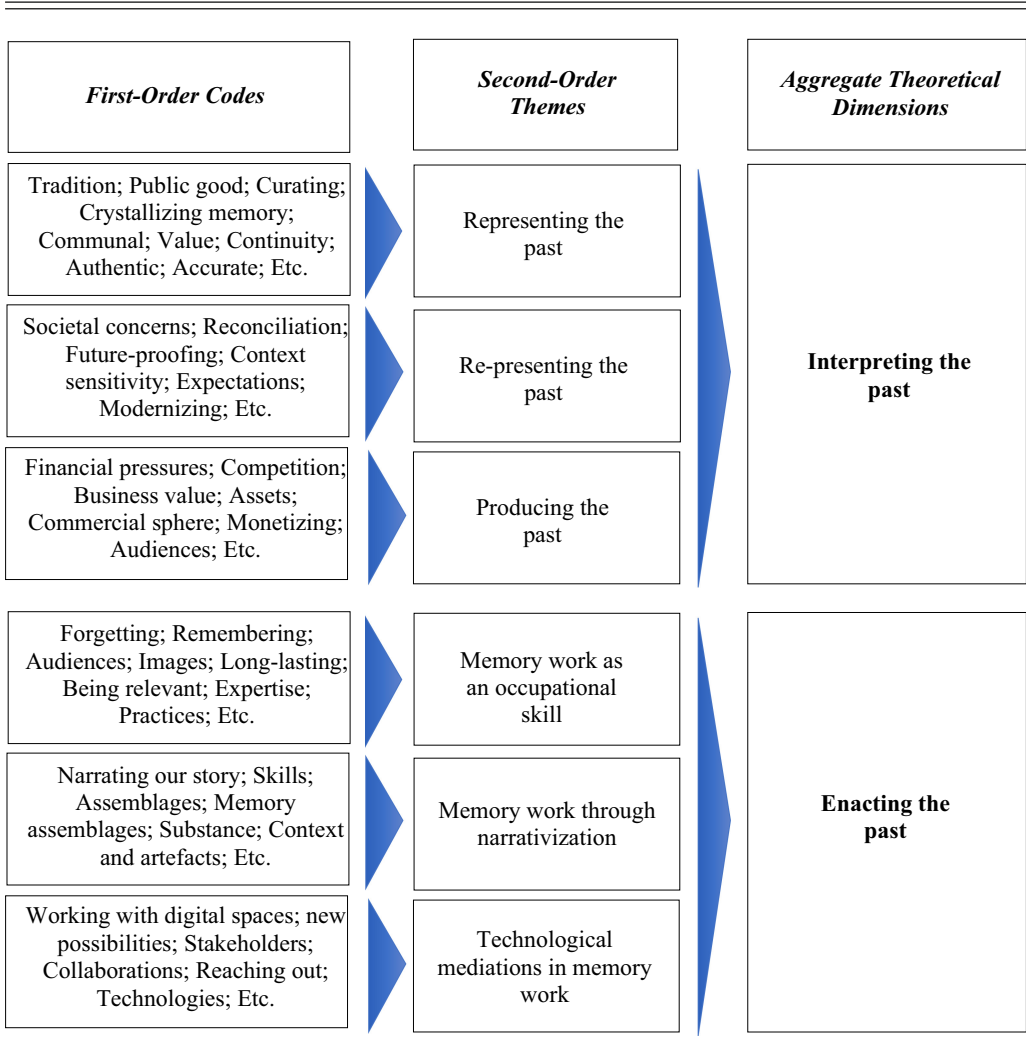
We then worked on crafting our second-order themes; this involved an iterative process of moving back and forth between our raw empirical data and our first-order codes, whilst also connecting to relevant debates and concepts within different streams of literature. Informed by our engagement with the concept of memory work, we explored three streams of literature: research on organizational memory (e.g., Foroughi et al., 2020; Foster et al., 2011, 2020; Rowlinson et al., 2014), on the evolution of occupations and professions (e.g., Anteby et al., 2016; Suddaby and Viale, 2011) and, for contextual understanding, on contemporary changes in the museum sector (for instance Alexander, 2018; Aroles et al., 2022; Ashton, 2023; Brenton and Bouckaert, 2021). At this stage, we revisited our first-order codes looking for ways to group them under the umbrella of wider, robust analytical themes. Some first-order codes that appeared more tangential to our emerging focus (e.g., supporting education or organizational culture) were dropped from the analysis.

We settled on six main second-order themes. Foreshadowing a more detailed discussion which follows, three of these consist of ideal-typic regimes of memory work. These are: *Representing the past* (which is consistent with the normative goal of museums and the history-as-fact perspective); *Re-presenting the past* (where museums purposefully re-present history in a way that is ‘future-proofing’ the past to conform to changing societal aspirations); *Producing the past* (which involves commoditizing the past in such a way that it can generate value). Our three other second-order themes detail different modalities through which museum employees enact memory work, that is to say management practices that support and inform memory work. These second-order themes are: *Memory work as an occupational skill*; *Memory work through narrativization*; *Technological mediations in memory work*. Differentiating between various types of memory work and management practices that support and inform memory work helped us to identify two aggregate dimensions. These are, respectively: *Interpreting the past* and *Enacting the past*. These aggregate dimensions are explored through the empirical accounts that follow. The table below (Table III) provides an overview of the coding structure. Further illustrations of the data structure are provided in appendix (See Appendix 2).

## FINDINGS

We organize our findings section following the themes that emerged through the analysis of the data. Initially, we discuss the three ideal-typic regimes of memory work that

Table III. Coding structure



transpired from our research and then the management practices of UK museum employees that support and inform memory work.

### Interpreting the Past

*Representing the past.* Many museum employees in the UK, in particular with a curatorial background, gave accounts highlighting the importance of occupational norms which have guided the practices and organizational cultures of museums for centuries. Specifically, the central role of museums in preserving memory as a shared, communal resource was regularly emphasized. When asked about the responsibilities of museums, Ben (Director of an independent museum) gave one such emblematic answer explicitly describing museum employees as custodians of memory: *‘Museums are about preserving*

*the past, curating the past, which involves looking after artefacts*'. The brief statement neatly connects potentially abstract organizational imperatives (preserving the past, curating the past) with specific occupational practices and skills (looking after artefacts, properly interpreting artefacts).

Occupational knowledge, whatever the sector, is often held in such a way that initiates suspect only they truly understand the 'value' of their work. Perhaps reflecting this, Jane (Head of learning in a national museum) observed that representing the past through the memory work of preserving and curating artefacts is undeniably central to the museum while being '*inevitably a costly process*'. Comments such as these also speak to a consciousness of having to account for their memory work against both financial criteria as well as strongly-held occupational norms. On-going challenges have made this dilemma an everyday preoccupation, occasionally creating tensions between UK museum employees with a managerial versus curatorial background. All the museum employees with a curatorial background and several with a managerial background we interviewed believed strongly that the increased financial demands on museums should not imply deviation from their core purpose as custodians of memory, of 'looking after' the past. This sentiment was expressed frequently in both rounds of fieldwork. Leo (Business manager of a local authority museum) also counselled that society should not forget or overlook the role of museums and their unique role in representing the past, warning of the risk to society of failing properly to preserve its own past and history. Frequently, the imperative for museums to be custodians of memory was shown to clash with market norms. For instance, Michael (Team leader of a local authority museum) explained:

'If you have money to invest, you wouldn't put it in a museum; because by nature they are not designed in a way that would generate financial benefits [...] we cannot change the fundamental nature of museums [...] museums will never be money-spinners'.

This view was echoed by other museum employees, notably Andy (Deputy chief executive of an independent museum) who explained that '*the primary function of museums is that of preserving and collecting [...] other activities should not change our priorities*', thus highlighting the gravity of preserving the past, and that such endeavour should constitute the mainstay of a museum's activities. For those understanding their role as custodians of memory, marketization, finance and commodification are woven into the contemporary cultural and political fabric, which increasingly is the backdrop for their memory work. The austerity climate meant that a clash of values arose even where occupational norms remained in sync with long-established traditions and expectations around the purpose of museums.

Across a number of interviews, it was regularly highlighted that museums are very slow to change. Sarah (Curator of an independent museum) notably explained how '*things change slowly here because people, and I include myself in this, are used to doing things in a certain way*'. This is not simply because of a passive kind of inertia or conservatism. Instead, many museums have founding charters and governing principles that involve explicit commitments, such as to serve the public good or a particular community (a point which is readily visible when looking at museums' statements of purpose). This means there can be an inbuilt source of active resistance to some kinds of change

perceived to be going against greater values and principles. Though these founding principles are often in keeping with the role of custodian of memory, they produce interesting tensions when museums have to respond to contemporary drivers of change such as cuts in funding or (following the pandemic) a move to digital spaces. These tensions are sometimes embodied in hybridity, where employees have both curatorial and managerial roles and thus have to balance out competing values embedded in overlapping roles and occupations. These tensions are navigated through memory work.

*Re-presenting the past.* During our second round of interviews in particular, it became clear that museums in the UK were increasingly affected by and sensitive to on-going societal events, which forced many organizations to rethink their practices around memory. The unanticipated ‘reset’ occasioned by Covid-19 restrictions prompted museums to think not just about survival, but also about how to re-present the past in ways that would portray museums in a more modern manner and thus secure a place for the organization in an uncertain and seemingly fast-changing future. Alongside the challenges of grappling with a deadly pandemic, other socially significant issues had been rising to prominence.

During the second study we saw even clearer evidence of museum employees navigating significant social changes through memory work. In part, this was to do with a desire to respond to social movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and anti-colonialist protests over the history of some museums, sometimes embodied in specific material form, such as statues. It also came about because the sense of each museum’s place shifted when the pandemic meant memory work had to be mediated through technology: *‘It’s not just the pandemic that changed our institution though but other things that happened this year with the Black Lives Matter and MeToo movements’* explained Rachel (Head of collections and engagement of an independent museum). Reflecting on the place of museums in an increasingly mediated world, she highlighted how issues such as these had come to the fore during the Pandemic, where *‘everyone’s watching it on a screen and following the news’*. Elaborating further, she underscored the impact of social movements:

‘...the museum sector was really shaken by it and [it] forced us to confront a lot of difficult questions around diversity and how our content and our collections are so narrow in their focus and we can’t continue with that going forward’.

At the same time as solving a series of practical difficulties to enable them to function during the pandemic, we also found museum employees thinking about ways to maintain the relevance and reach of their organizations in light of changing attitudes. We describe this in terms of a category of memory work that seeks to modernize memory. This involves re-presenting the past so that it reflects changing soci(et)al and cultural attitudes and connects with certain constituencies. Lucas (Director of cultural services of a local authority museum) explained they were grappling with: *‘how we should be reflecting them in our programming and how we go about doing our business’*. To do so they needed to facilitate a reframing and reinterpretation of their collections, raising awareness of them

by developing parallel online narratives and experiences. The desired end result was a re-presentation of the past, and of a communal memory of that past that would also position the museum as a more inclusive and ‘modern’ organization in the UK context. In the words of Paul (Director of an independent museum), there was a need for the organization to ‘*understand that we were not being very modern in the way we discussed certain topics and had to rethink what we want to say and how we want to say it*’.

The pandemic and social movements raised new and in fact existential challenges to do with the relevance and positioning of museums. In different ways, both called into question the status of a museum as a privileged site and therefore challenged the construction of museums as custodians of memory. Some employees experienced a more deep-seated Angst in relation to the pandemic and ascendant social movements than that brought about by cuts in funding. In this case, the split between employees with managerial or curatorial backgrounds was less clear in that they both shared reservations, although based on somewhat different dimensions. Re-presenting the past was sometimes perceived by curatorial employees as a kind of travesty and for managerial employees as additional, complex work without any clear direction or return on investment (to borrow the language of the market).

This Angst relating to the status of museums as sites, and of how they select and present their collections was sometimes in very concrete ways. Alexa (Director of an independent museum) explained that her museum had historically been connected to someone who made their money through the international slave trade. Such a connection is far from unusual in the UK, as is the fact that there was a statue of him in front of the museum buildings. But when the statue of Edward Colston (another figure connected to slavery) was toppled by protestors in Bristol, England, public attention turned to them. In her words, ‘*We went to public consultation, the public consultation came out overwhelmingly in favour of it being removed and staff were unanimous in wanting the statue removed*’. However, as events unfolded, she also highlighted how museum employees sometimes have to contend with organizational inertia:

‘I wrote a recommendation to the board for the statue to be moved, but the board decided not to take that recommendation and [decided instead to] adhere to government policy on “retain and explain”. Morale was extremely low, I mean people were extremely distressed by the decision’.

This is a good example of how changes in context can mean that – even if practices stay the same – the memory work done by museums can shift from representation to re-presentation. The brute fact was that the statue – itself part of an earlier, less enlightened chronicling of history – remained on display. This made the museum and museum employees witnesses to an historical injustice. The MeToo and BLM movements forced museums to face their own pasts as well as rethink their position in society. This point was echoed in many interviews, highlighting the need for collections to curate the past but also serve future generations:

‘The whole point of museum collections is using them to explain and to contextualize and have discussion and debate [...] We’re just saying that we want to make our collections future proof, we want to collect better and more diverse stories, so that

in 100 years time you won't have this awful, you know, void in our collection' (Paula, Head of collections and engagement of an independent museum).

As modernizers of memory, museum employees sought to chart a course between their duty to be custodians of memory and a desire to remain relevant. This involved not just 'looking after' the past but as Matt (Director of an independent museum) expressed it, '*bringing the past to life*', in other words re-presenting history. Their adherence to communal logic meant that preservation, but also reconciliation, were valued.

*Producing the past.* A significant drop in public funding for cultural activities in the UK reshaped the landscape in such a way that intense competition between organizations, and income diversifying strategies, have become normalized and are now taken for granted, affecting the memory work of museum employees. Joseph (Director of a university museum), reflecting on his experience running the same organization over an extended period of time, explained:

'15 years or so ago, the facility would simply organize an exhibition if deemed interesting from a curatorial perspective. Over the years, however, we have had to adopt a very different approach by looking initially at the costs associated with an exhibition, along with attendance predictions, before deciding whether or not to proceed'.

This was echoed by Leo (Business manager of a local authority museum) who, reflecting on changes across the wider museum sector, observed: '*We are now being looked at as a business, which goes against the ethos of museums really*'. Such a comment reflects the aforementioned tension, in terms of occupational values, between long-standing aspirations of museums and ascendant commercial imperatives. This tension, or conflict, is expressed here in an explicit appeal to a specific 'ethos' – a set of norms that many museum employees saw as underpinning their, and their organization's core values and purpose. It encourages a transposition of business values, ideologies and logics, to organizations previously firmly in the public realm, which inevitably impacted on the narrative through which collections are presented.

As George (Business manager in a heritage site) explained, memory work is often influenced by commercial logics as museum employees seek to produce something that will 'sell' to visitors. Museums have to '*present an offer that is relevant*' to the visitors they target, if they wish to remain open. This view resonates with Mickael (Team manager of a local authority museum) who argued that '*We wouldn't talk about visitor experience before, but now there are visitor experience managers in many museums [...] it's all part of the packaged experience we now have to offer*'. Producing the past then becomes integrated into specific managerial roles, which in turn affect broader museum occupations in a domino effect.

As museum employees become, effectively, merchants of memory, they invoke different norms which align more closely with the practices of the corporate, commercial sphere. The words of Chloe (Museum officer of a local authority museum) indicate the need to flex certain practices and priorities and like the most 'agile' of corporations, to adapt to changing circumstances; '*For museums, it is do or die [...] some saw the meteor coming and planned the need to be more business-savvy, others reacted too late*'. This



highly pragmatic approach goes beyond a commitment to representing the communal past in ways that are appropriate and inclusive in the present. Particularly under the shadow of austerity, the need to monetise collections to attract visitors and to ensure a stable income became paramount for museums in the UK. The monetisation of memory, or producing the past, took many different forms. As well as thinking about exhibitions and indeed entire programmes primarily in terms of how much income they could generate, museums instituted practices such as charging individuals or schools for curators' time, organizing private events and relying more on volunteers rather than paid employees.

### **Enacting the Past**

*Memory work as an occupational skill.* Across the museum sector in the UK, many organizations dealt with the consequences of various crises by attempting to appeal to new audiences who would not normally engage with them. At the same time, they needed to retain existing visitors and audiences. This challenged museum employees' skills in memory work. Faced with this potential dilemma, Leo (Business manager of a local authority museum) asked:

'How do you become a family friendly institution? That's a question we've had to ask ourselves and the answer is tricky [...] Everyone has a different view on how this can be done; I mean, it became essential for us to move away from the image of a classical, rather conservative museum that only caters to certain people [...] we wanted to appeal to more diverse audiences without alienating our existing audiences'.

That it was felt essential for this museum to become 'family friendly' is interesting. It indicates a need to move away from existing practices even though many museums have explicit mandates in their founding principles to serve the public, or a more local constituency such as a 'community'. Their equivocation of 'family friendly' and 'diverse audiences' indicates that enacting the past is not simply about moves from representing to re-presenting – which could reflect the need to discharge a public mandate by remaining relevant. Instead, there are associations here with producing the past: a concern with image and a reflection of market norms. More deliberate enacting of the past is needed to 'cater' (an implicitly consumerist metaphor) to existing and new audiences. For this, it is necessary to conceive of memory work which alters, or makes people forget, certain aspects of what was done previously and to perform activities that support these representations. What becomes dominant is a need to develop curatorial-driven, material practices that project a different vision for the museum, that will 'appeal'. This essentially rests on the ability of museum employees to craft interpretations, juxtapose artefacts or assemble exhibits that enact a different regime of memory. These are changes in the image of the organization that go beyond superficial marketing and image-making; in the words of Mary (Director of an independent museum): '*it's got to be more than cosmetic work*'. It entails '*fundamentally rethinking and altering how we tell our stories, what stories we narrate*'.

*and to what end. For instance, if we have a special exhibition on [...], then we know that this will lead the general public to see us as an institution that cares about this’.*

In the context of the pandemic, because of the necessity to create virtual spaces and the opportunities afforded by digitization, there was at times less friction involved in moving from representing to re-presenting the past. This offered some museums the chance to find virtue in adversity, so to speak. George (Business manager of a heritage site) explained that:

‘We have certainly been a very risk averse institution in the past and to some extent we may remain so. But if you’re a risk averse institution, you sort of ask what’s the worst that can happen when you’re trying to take a decision, and if the worst that can happen is certainly not going to be worse than Covid, then you might feel more empowered to go, given what we’ve gone through, we can probably take this risk, whereas three or four years ago maybe we couldn’t have done’.

Though it inevitably placed a greater *physical* distance between museums and their visitors, social distancing also empowered organizations to experiment with different practices for enacting memory. This put museum employees to the test and clearly demonstrated the extent to which memory work is a key occupational skill in the UK museum sector. As noted in a previous section, the Covid-19 pandemic presented an opportunity to rethink the image that museums wanted to convey of themselves and the way this was realized was through innovations in museum employees’ memory work practices.

*Memory work through narrativization.* Whilst discharging the responsibility that museums have towards society to preserve a communal past, individual organizations can also choose what part of history is valued and showcased, and how this is done. For instance, a museum could host a generic collection – i.e., a combination of natural, archaeological, Roman, industrial history – or focus exclusively on one aspect of the foregoing. Narratives provided by museum curators underpin these collections and they are crucial to shaping visitor perceptions – not just directly in terms of the particular exhibit or collection but also in conveying something of the organization’s values and standing. Deborah (Head of learning and participation at an independent museum) emphasized the role played by curators in enacting the past and how this specific skill was integral to the role of curators as experts:

‘There’s real opportunities for additional layers of interpretation in museums; you don’t want too many physical labels in an exhibition or a gallery because nobody reads them all [...] I either read the label or look at the object I can’t do both. But with different technologies, you could use, you know you can have a QR code or whatever, or something that is just enabled on your phone and you can hear somebody talk about that object. I have been looking at kind of anti-racism and decolonizing collections, the opportunity or just different, hidden, forgotten stories, unknown stories [...] I think the voice of the expert is really quite central to this’.

This detailed description of memory work highlights the ways in which museum employees developed the skill and ability to materialize memory, shaping and re-shaping the past through collection assemblages as well as specific interpretations of artefacts. These innovations were accelerated as a result of the pandemic. The role of museum employees in enacting memory work was frequently voiced in the interviews. This was not confined exclusively to curators themselves. Interviewees who had less of a direct impact on curation (typically because they had been promoted to more of a managerial role) would explain how central it was for employees with expert knowledge to be involved in developing distinctive ways to interpret the past for visitors and audiences; *'it's their unique knowledge and voice that give substance to our collections'* (Paul, Curator of an independent museum). On various occasions, interviewees did emphasize the key role of interpretative skills and specifically the ability to craft narratives that conjure up specific intentions of images. Many examples were given of curators managing to change the overall feel of an exhibit by narrating the story from a different angle. If certain occupation skills are overlooked in the UK museum sector, this is certainly not true for memory work.

*Technological mediations in memory work.* Innovations in memory work were often brought about by, or at least footprinted on, new technologies in UK museums: social media, hand-held devices with imaging capability, wireless connectivity, and so on. These were typically seen to offer great potential but implicitly they may also have reinforced market norms. For example, they were often identified with increasing reach to a particular audience, offering a different type of immersive, more engaging experience, or allowing the flexibility to speak more directly to ongoing social concerns. As explained by Emma (Programmes officer of a local authority museum),

'the pandemic has really exposed how little our digital offer was, how little we had in the way of web content and engagement online, that kind of stuff you know. [...] We've got a good social media presence, that kind of thing, but mainly was about pushing, encouraging people into the museum physically and it really wasn't about getting information out about our collections. So that was one thing that was radically exposed and obviously we've worked on this'.

The impact of digital technologies was seen as something that could be leveraged in engaging with already existing core stakeholder groups – schools, for example. However, at times organizational inertia or occupational recalcitrance meant that new practices had to be negotiated to prove their worth. Paula (Head of collections and engagement at an independent museum) highlighted how:

'for instance, our schools program and our schools team was vehemently opposed to doing anything digitally and we found that actually there was a huge demand for it and so that's really changed the way we view schools engagement so going forward we're going to keep offering digital as part of our offer, and do it in a blended way and we saw schools engaging with us and they've never come to the museum before [...] It's kind of proved that the appetite is there for digital engagement and so definitely in

relation to schools that was positive. I think it's also helped us understand which parts of our offer are particularly valued and we maybe didn't appreciate'.

In this case, modernizing voices won the day, facilitating memory work that enacted the past in new ways that were conveyed through digital spaces. Though authenticity and seeming 'real' was at a premium, these digital spaces inevitably re-presented the museum and the past. As well as developing new access points for a wider public, this entailed some 'boundary work' in terms of renegotiation of occupational practices and identity. For example, one employee (Judith, Executive manager of a university museum) explained how they were establishing collaborations with industry in order to mobilize Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies:

'we came up with this concept, if you could just release museum objects as big data, if you could just let it all out of the museum and if you looked at it as big data, you could then start to look at questions and stories around climate change. Rather than saying oh we've made a museum app, come and download our app, actually, you could take museum data to where conversations are already happening online on social media [...] and you train your AI bots to go out across social media and what it will start to do is start to draw in what we're calling snippets of stories and connects them to museum objects'.

In this example, memory work is supported not only by advances in technology, but by collaboration with workers from other sectors and a wider public. The most contemporary technology offers opportunities, but it also provides powerful platforms for factional interests and fabrication of the past. An example might be conspiracy theories spread through social media. At the same time, modern technologies can support the kind of memory work that is very traditional – representing the past in a way similar to the history-as-fact paradigm. An example might be records being publicly available for people to trace their family tree – a personal chronicle.

## DISCUSSION

### **Interpreting the Past: Three Ideal-Typic Regimes of Memory Work**

Through our empirical accounts, we identified three ideal-typic regimes of memory work in UK museums. Describing these as ideal types signals that each is a descriptor of a process and as such is inevitably only partially accurate. As a set of practices, memory work is continually becoming, or emergent, rather than static and fixed. Thus, 'representation', 're-presentation' and 'production' co-exist, overlap and 'jostle' for primacy. The table below (Table IV) provides an overview of the three ideal-typic regimes of memory work we identified.

In the context of the first, representing the past, there is a strong sense of what memory work involves – with marked isomorphic pressures to conform to established norms and practices that are consistent with occupational ideals (see Brock, 2006). Memory work instantiates and supports the traditional ethos of museums. Interpreting the past is representation

Table IV. Overview of three ideal-typic regimes of memory work

<i>Ideal-typic regimes of memory work</i>	<i>Practices</i>	<i>Stakes</i>	<i>Memory and history</i>
Representing the past	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alignment with established norms of curatorial practices</li> <li>• Crafting interpretations that are truthful to the artefact(s)</li> <li>• Continuity with long-standing objectives and values</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preserving cultural artefacts for the public good</li> <li>• Living up to the duty of museums to act as custodians of the past</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• History is understood as a series of objective facts, thus akin to a chronicle</li> <li>• Memory is crystallized and seen as unalterable</li> </ul>
Re-presenting the past	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing context-sensitive and contemporary narratives that present collections in a different light</li> <li>• Designing creative connections between collections and on-going events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accommodating the past to a changing societal landscape</li> <li>• Appreciating the responsibility of museums as organizations of collective memory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• History can be narrated in different ways (through processes of altering and forgetting)</li> <li>• Memory is malleable, open to (re-)interpretations and needs to be future-proofed</li> </ul>
Producing the past	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extracting value from artefacts by generating public interest</li> <li>• Re-assessing collections in terms of their market value</li> <li>• Making compromises to bring the past to market</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remaining open and having capacity to operate in an increasingly challenging environment</li> <li>• Developing ways to speak to and reaching new audiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• History is a story and not all stories sell equally</li> <li>• Memory is articulated as a resource that can be monetised</li> </ul>

and constitutes a form of long-term memory work (Foster et al., 2020). A commitment to communal norms, to preserving artefacts for future generations and to curating the past (see Aroles et al., 2022) act as guiding principles for museum employees. Through this regime of memory work, memory is understood as unalterable, embedded in a history-as-fact view of the world. This can, however, be challenged when there is a growing misalignment between the interpretation of history found in museums and audiences' expectations. A wedge can be driven between representation of the past and contemporary pressures.

In terms of the second type in our nomenclature, re-presenting the past, museum employees' memory work 'brings the past to life' in ways that support contemporary claims to legitimacy or that conforms to societal or stakeholders' aspirations. Societal changes, such as marketization (sharpened in the shadow of austerity) or existential challenges (such as the

pandemic and social movements), affect collective processes of memory making (Ocasio et al., 2016), and this is visible through the ways in which museums sought to re-present the past in a way that would be perceived as socially responsible (Ravasi et al., 2019). In such cases, the challenge is for museums, as modern organizations, to strike a delicate balance between preserving the past while also accounting for the plasticity of its interpretation. This highlights the role of external stakeholders, particularly the media (Cailluet et al., 2018), in shaping memory work in a context where this work transcends the boundary of the organization concerned. Akin to a practice of recollecting (see Foster et al., 2020), the process of re-presenting the past entails a more deliberate choosing of what aspect(s) to remember and to forget (see Coraiola et al., 2021; Foroughi and Al-Amoudi, 2020). Here, memory is seen as malleable and history can be narrated in different ways, forgetting or altering aspects that no longer align with the aspirations of museums.

Finally, the third, producing the past, involves the monetization of the past through specific practices. This type of memory work is pragmatic, positional and selective and goes beyond re-presenting a particular version of the past to suit the contemporary context. Instead, it involves producing the past in such a way that it can be consumed by an audience to generate income. While it bears similarity with the previous type (re-presenting the past) – because it involves responding to external, catalytic events – it differs in that this type of memory work entails bolstering the brand image of museums for marketing purposes (see Urde et al., 2007). Rather than ‘bringing the past to life’, this is bringing the past to market. In a bid by museums to remain financially stable (or in some cases open), producing the past entails finding ways of extracting value from artefacts by generating interest amongst particular audiences. Here, memory is clearly articulated as monetizable resource with the view of producing the version of history that sells best.

Importantly, our three regimes of memory work are constructs and therefore not static, neat boxes into which museums and occupations can readily be placed. There is undeniably overlap across the three ideal-typic regimes that we theorize in this paper. In practice, there are temporal dynamics at play in the sense that one organization might move from representing to producing the past if facing strong financial difficulties. Likewise, a museum could simultaneously produce and re-present the past, ensuring that the version of the past that they materialize through memory work is not only future-proofed but also attractive to various audiences, and hence profitable. In contrast to the history as fact paradigm, and the idea that curating the past concerns storage and retrieval, it is important to note that the same museum artefact could feature across all three ideal types depending on how it was mobilized.

### **Enacting the Past: Memory Work and Occupations**

The interpretation of the past unfolds through the practices of museum employees who, mobilizing their skills and expertise, enact it in specific ways. As we saw through our three ideal-typic regimes of memory work, museum work is not simply preserving the past, at times it involves re-presenting and producing particular versions of the past. Though many cling to the norms associated with representing the past, our interviewees understand their work as an activity that is inevitably politicized, as is the

case for memory work more broadly (Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003). They recognize that, in a context of cuts, marketization and growing social movements, they are at times compromised in carrying out their work, which plays into broader conversations about the labour process and alienation in cultural spheres (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013).

As highlighted through our empirical accounts, enacting the past is accomplished through a variety of skills and practices amongst museum employees who collectively accomplish memory work. These processes involve different ways of relating to the past – acts of forgetting (Foroughi and Al-Amoudi, 2020) and adjusting (Anteby and Molnar, 2012; Coraiola et al., 2021) that cement a new shared history. Museum employees, across occupations, craft new stories, altering the fabric not just of our collective past but also of the museums they work for. During this narrativization, specific accounts of history are crafted and recorded, giving substance and materiality to creative re-interpretation of the past (see Bloch, 1977). Increasingly, digital technologies are seen to play a key role in developing new forms of engagement with the past and its representations. This illustrates how even the most novel features of our present can intercede and alter our relationship towards the distant past and to its conservation (Garde-Hansen, 2011). Museum employees can weave new narratives using digital technologies, offering the possibility to project not just a different image of the past but a new image for *their museum*, whether as curator, narrator, or broker of history.

Furthermore, though none of our three ideal-typic regimes of memory work is attached to a specific occupation in a direct and causal manner, we could nonetheless identify certain trends linking the specificities of the memory work that had to be produced to occupational backgrounds. In the first regime we identified (representing the past), memory work was mainly the undisputed realm of curators inasmuch as it aligned with their traditional background and training. Employees with managerial backgrounds, even though they experienced commercial pressures more directly, would very rarely interfere with the memory work of curators. Here, different values serve to preserve the specialization of various occupations (Wright et al., 2017), exemplified in an opposition between curatorial and managerial roles. Significantly, as we move from representing towards re-presenting and producing the past, the binary opposition between curators and managers loses ground as new occupations come to play an active role. In re-presenting and producing the past, greater occupational diversity features in enacting memory work. Roles in domains such as marketing, digital technology and customer relations are becoming increasingly relevant, shaping the memory work of museums by providing directions as to what should be given priority and for which audience. The influence of these newer roles is likely to yield more complex tensions than witnessed in the familiar manager/curator binary. The contemporary production and enactment of memory work is more contested – where a constellation of differing values, aspirations and communities of practice compete (Gehman et al., 2013; Glynn, 2000).

Through our accounts, we showed how curators and museum managers create and impart meaning by arranging events into familiar conceptual inventories that make a kind of history. In doing so, they draw on narrative devices that support personal sensemaking projects, but that also ‘pre-package the world’ (Abbott, 2008, p. 40) for

others. The kinds of history that these curators and museum managers create are also sense-giving – because they furnish museum visitors and other stakeholders with frameworks that are both descriptive and constitutive, thus speaking to a form of collective memory.

## CONCLUSION

Through a quasi-longitudinal research design, our paper explored the micro-level skills and choices that help to materialize different representations of the past in the UK museum sector. In so doing, our paper identifies and theorizes three ideal-typic regimes of memory work (representing, re-presenting and producing the past) and illustrates the practices of museum employees through which memory work and memory production are enacted. While each regime of memory work is not invariably associated with a specific occupation, we found greater occupational diversity where museums move away from a paradigm of history as fact and a regime of representation towards re-representations and productions of the past. Abbott's (2008) landmark work shows how societal change brings about a continual jostling for jurisdictional legitimacy, status and power between groups of individuals attached to different occupations. Here we suggest memory work is another means by which to understand how different occupational roles also jostle for primacy and legitimacy. In doing so, we aim to build a bridge between a mature literature on occupations, and growing work on memory studies in organizations. This is done with the intention of paving the way for future research seeking to further elucidate the complex relations between occupations, practices and memory.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data supporting this study are not publicly available due to assurances of confidentiality given to interviewees and institutions.

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**APPENDIX 1**  
**Museums and interviewees' profiles**

Museum	Museum profiles				Interview information			Pseudonym
	Type of museum	Geographical area	Nature of collections	Number of employees	Date	Job title	Professional background	
1	Independent	East of England	Specialist	<25	06/2017	Curator	Curatorial	Sarah
2		London	Specialist	50–100	05/2021	Director	Curatorial	Alexa
3		London	Specialist	<25	06/2017	Director	Curatorial	Vicky
4		London	Specialist	25–50	06/2021	Director	Curatorial	Matt
5		South West	Specialist	<25	08/2017	Curator	Curatorial	Paul
6		North West	Specialist/local interest	50–100	10/2017	Interim Director	Managerial	Denis
7		North West	Local interest	<25	09/2021	Chief Operating Officer	Managerial	Mark
8		Mid Scotland and Fife	Local interest	<25	10/2017	Head of Collections and Engagement	Curatorial	Paula
9		Yorkshire and the Humber	Generalist	<25	03/2018	Director	Curatorial	Samantha
10		West Midlands	Local interest	>100	05/2021	Head of Learning and Participation	Curatorial	Mary
11		Edinburgh	Specialist	<25	03/2018	Deputy Chief Executive	Managerial	Deborah
					03/2018	Curator	Curatorial	Andy
							Managerial	John

Appendix 1. (Continued)

Museum	Museum profiles				Interview information				Pseudonym
	Type of museum	Geographical area	Nature of collections	Number of employees	Date	Job title	Professional background		
12		North West	Generalist	<25	04/2018	Head of Collections and Engagement	Curatorial	Rachel	
13		South West	Specialist	<25	05/2021	Museum Developer	Managerial	Laura	
14		South West	Local interest	<25	05/2018	Visitor Services Manager	Managerial	Becky	
15		East of England	Specialist	<25	05/2021	Operations Manager	Curatorial	Ben	
16	Local authority	North East	Generalist	50–100	09/2017	Director	Curatorial	Liam	
17		South West	Specialist/local interest	<25	09/2021	Director	Managerial	James	
18		Glasgow	Local interest	25–50	02/2018	Programmes Officer	Curatorial	Emma	
19		Yorkshire and the Humber	Generalist	<25	11/2021	Museum manager	Curatorial	Sofia	
20		East Midlands	Local interest	<25	04/2018	Principal Keeper	Managerial	Monica	
21		North West	Specialist	<25	04/2018	Business Manager	Curatorial	Leo	
22		South East	Generalist	<25	05/2021	Museum Officer	Curatorial	Chloe	
23		Yorkshire and The Humber	Specialist	<25	04/2018	Development Manager	Managerial	Anita	
					06/2021	Senior Curator	Curatorial	Will	
					05/2018	Director of Cultural Services	Managerial	Lucas	

(continues)

Appendix 1. (Continued)

Museum	Museum profiles				Interview information			
	Type of museum	Geographical area	Nature of collections	Number of employees	Date	Job title	Professional background	Pseudonym
24		South West	Generalist	<25	05/2018	Museum Team Leader	Managerial	Michael
25	University	East of England	Specialist	50–100	05/2021	Collections Team Leader		
26		North East	Generalist	<25	07/2017	Director	Curatorial	Joseph
27		North East	Local interest	<25	05/2021	Director	Curatorial	Ethan
28	National	London	Generalist	>100	08/2017	Museum Manager	Curatorial	Judith
29		London	Specialist	>100	05/2021	Executive Manager		
					08/2018	Director	Curatorial	Simon
					06/2017	Head of Learning and National Partnerships	Curatorial	Jane
					08/2017	Director of Learning and Visitor Experience	Managerial	Olivia
30	Heritage Site	South West	Specialist	>100	09/2021	Head of Finance	Managerial	Tom
					05/2018	Senior Curator	Curatorial	Noah
					05/2021	Heritage Business Manager	Managerial	George

## APPENDIX 2

### Illustrative quotes

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*Second-order themes*     *Illustrative quotes*

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Overarching dimension: interpreting the past

- |                           |  |
|---------------------------|--|
| 1. Representing the past  | <p>1.a <i>'The value of museums is the real object, the real experience certainly. I've had that confirmed when I've been going to lots of webinars and virtual tours. First I was very excited but, after a few months, I just want to see a real thing, a real person I want that excitement, and I think that's what museums can do that other places can't. I mean why bother going to museum if you are not looking for artefacts, great history and interpretations that our curators you know made for the artefacts.'</i> (Sarah, Curator in an independent museum)</p> <p>1.b <i>'There have been many discussions about what a museum is. I mean there were discussions in the media but that's also something we talked about with our team here. For me, as a museum, we need to remember that our primary duty is to look after a wide range of artefacts (...) A lot of what we do has to do with collections, storing and curating.'</i> (Samantha, Director of an independent museum)</p>  |
| 2. Re-presenting the past | <p>2.a <i>'So it's part and parcel of that process of dragging the museum into the 21st century, basically, which prior to covid, we weren't we were still in the 20th century. So it's quite yet quite a steep learning curve, but I can't give you much detail about what income generating ideas there are, I can only sort of talk about a little sphere that I work in which is collections, essentially saying we're looking at different collections related events so we'll be doing the talks tours and things like that, but will also probably be doing some online and delivery as well object handling sessions, etc. (...) All this with the view of adapting to how things are changing.'</i> (Michael, Team leader in a local authority museum)</p> <p>2.b <i>'There's a real tension between government's current policy and the need for museums, to preserve that independence so there's a real misconception amongst a lot of the mainstream media that, and you know, museums are just stuffed full of sort of woke lefties that want to remove statues and that's not the case. The whole point of museum collections is using them to explain and to contextualize and have discussion and debate so for instance, in our organization we had a bit of an online backlash when we support it, you know, very strong support for the black lives matter movement and we had to kind of explain, you know we're not taking things off display, we're just saying that we want to make our collections future proof, we want to collect better and more diverse stories, so that in 100 years time you won't have this awful you know void in our collection and so yeah I think the pandemic made people more aware of this and they've had more time on their hands, and I think it made people more emotionally invested, and I think the pandemic is also made people quicker to call you out on social media.'</i> (Rachel, Head of collections and engagement in an independent museum)</p> |
| 3. Producing the past     | <p>3.a <i>'It's more the part of how we fund what we do and we've been I think quite good organizationally at finding ways of making more money. You know through our exhibition programs and through retail licensing various other things like that. I think, you know the pressure has been on us as a sector over the last decade to be more efficient and to make more money ourselves so that we're less dependent on public money. (...) there's no low hanging fruit left and you're having to make difficult decisions and you're having to you know think why don't we do this thing a bit more efficiently, we'll just have to stop doing this, etc.'</i> (Tom, Head of Finance in a national museum)</p> <p>3.b <i>'When I took over operation and I decided to devote, divert some of the marketing spent on Organization A to Organization B so it became a ticketed entry. The ability to generate much more money for this is a way to offset the cost of the running the service. What we saw with that was the actually the site was getting closer to a break even point because we changed the branding of it into much more of a visitor attraction.'</i> (Anita, Development manager in a local authority museum)</p>  |

(continues)

## Appendix 2. (Continued)

Second-order themes	Illustrative quotes
Overarching dimension: enacting the past	
4. Memory work as an occupational skill	<p>4.a <i>'That's basically what we have in terms of collections but yeah obviously you know, there could be, I mean our collections could be reinterpreted a bit differently in the context of what is happening, like with so much has been bounced around about sort of mental health, yes. (...) There is so much potential around how the museum us can interpret our collections'</i>. (Laura, Museum developer in an independent museum)</p> <p>4.b <i>'A lot of our content whether it is exhibitions on a particular topic or content in the galleries was digitized and again moved online, so there was a lot more videos and activities accessible online. All sorts of stuff, all kind of moved online really just to try and keep the museum going and keep it in people's minds and (...) this was essentially thanks to the skills of our staff. I mean not all are good with technologies, I'm not, but with technical staff support they made it work. (...) they did a great job adapting what he had and creating content that made sense you know'</i>. (Mark, Chief Operating Officer in an independent museum)</p>
5. Memory work through narrativization	<p>5.a <i>'We've organized different events with people and communities and it's gone well. I mean mostly thanks to our curators. They tell stories about our collections (...) and it speaks to people in different ways you think. I mean we had an exhibit on and it was told differently based on our audience. We had something for the elderly and then it was spined for schools and younger audiences. For me, it's fascinating to see how the stories are told (...) it's the same story but a different one at the same time'</i>. (Becky, Operations manager in an independent museum)</p> <p>5.b <i>'I think there are quite a few things you can explore in the world but I would always go back to a museum myself because it's not just an incredible collection but it's a different narrative and to almost invisible worlds, you know you're in the rooms, where something happened or someone lived (...) on top of that, you're able to add different elements of interpretation to weave a narrative and make things come to life in a sense'</i>. (Vicky, Director of an independent museum)</p>
6. Technological mediations in memory work	<p>6.a <i>'I think that's right, I think whether or not we will be working at the level at which we have worked in the past few months is unsure. We're still researching still because I think actually many people misunderstand the concept of the digital offer. The digital offer isn't just about taking the physical stuff and putting images or texts online. A digital exhibition has to be curated in the same way that a regular exhibition would be. I think, from our perspective, we will probably scale it back to some extent, but I think it will remain at a higher level. It's important for an organization like ours, you know, to think about different streams of income. Physical attendance of buildings is important for us not only from the perspective of fundraising but also from the expense of allowing people to properly appreciate the collections and the displays'</i>. (Lucas, Director of cultural services in a local authority museum)</p> <p>6.b <i>'We are much more aware now of the need for more digital programming. The audience that is out there is available to attend things and the fact is that we can reach more people. (...) Before, we didn't rely on technology, except for you know the usual suspects Facebook, Twitter for advertising, you know. Now going into the future opened up a new space for us to explore more online programming with different audiences maybe with young people next you know about and content creation from younger people. (...) we can curate online exhibitions from our collections online'</i>. (Mary, Director of an independent museum)</p>