

Children of Atrocity:
Survivor Movement Strategies and Public Commemoration Conflicts

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Abstract:

This paper examines the formulaic socio-cognitive strategies employed by a diverse set of *survivor movements*: a particular type of social movement existing in the wake of an experience they work to define as traumatic. Drawing on the narratives of adult survivors of child sex abuse, Vietnam Veterans Against War, and the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America, I explore the ways in which survivor movements attribute new meaning to past events, developing *alternative mnemonic traditions* and alternative forms of commemoration. These movements engage in a *posttraumatic political process*, typifying and indicting certain experiences in order to contest traditional power relations. Survivor movements structure history, memory, and personal biography to change the ways that past spaces of violence are officially remembered and their legacies conceived. Further, survivor movements emphasize the shared characteristics of both past experience and present symptomatology, laying the foundation for a common culture of *survivorhood*. These socio-cognitive strategies allow survivor movements to subvert traditional *asymmetries of cognitive authority* in order to contest the moral and political legitimacy of particular experiences. Public commemoration thus becomes a contentious political act. In the public realm, reactive counter-movements employ a set of formulaic socio-cognitive strategies designed to delegitimize the collective foundations of survivorhood and undermine the survivor movement drive to usurp cognitive authority. The official commemorative record of events such as child sex abuse, the Vietnam War, and American slavery is thus highly disputed in the *public commemoration conflicts* between survivor movements and their conservative opponents.